

# Mount Horeb: Beginnings

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Deuteronomy 5: 1 - 7

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The last time I spoke with you Mount Pisgah defined our narrative. At the end of Moses' life, while Moses pleads to be let into the promised land, God says "no" and instead sends Moses to the top of the Mount Pisgah. When Moses reached the top, God was there, and God showed him the land to the West, the East, the North, and the South. I suggested that Mount Pisgah metaphorically is the place where we go when there is an ending in our life. A loved one dies, a job ends, a friend leaves town, and so on. It is the place to meet God and to see clearly what our faithfulness has left behind.

Today we travel to a different mountain, to Mount Horeb. This mountain, also known as Mount Sinai, is symbolic to beginnings. Twice, in our scripture, we are brought to this mountain. And twice the 10 commandments are given there. Both times the mountain stands at the entrance of a new life.

The first time, in Exodus 20, Moses goes up the mountain and talks with God. The occasion is that the people have been brought out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, into the wilderness. They are free, free to follow a way of life not defined by Pharaoh. The Ten Commandments is the first set of laws, but the laws will continue to be given for the twelve chapters that follow; they spell out the dimensions of a new life. Moses is on the mountain a long time.

He is away long enough that the "free" people wonder where Moses has gone. Not used to time on their hands, they get busy, showing their skill in crafting for themselves a calf out of their gold, which they then worship. God gets wind of what is going on and sends Moses back down Mount Sinai. And when Moses gets to the bottom, seeing what has been wrought, in anger Moses

breaks the tablets. The covenant, even before the law has been given to the people, is broken.

One might imagine that God rewrote the commandments after that experience. The first 4 commandments written in Exodus and Deuteronomy are all about our making God first and foremost in our lives. Don't make an idol, don't use God's name in vain, keep the Sabbath, and the very first commandment, the one that is our focus today...you shall have no other gods before me. God might just have mumbled to himself, "Dumb golden calf. Don't they know that I am their God, the one who brought them out of slavery? Better put it into the first commandment and move that respect your mother and father farther down the list." Sorry Moms and Dads.

The first commandment...you shall have no other...

Wait. Don't summarize it. It loses its effect. The force of the commandments rests with how God introduces himself, otherwise they are just another set of laws.

Like the Commandments do in Exodus, these ten laws will be followed by many detailed statutes and ordinances. Like the Israelites who found something to do after awhile, we too will want to get busy with our own projects before we finish the reading of all of them. Why pay attention? Why care about what follows? Why try to live in such a circumscribed way? Why is so much ink spilled on interpretation of these laws over the centuries?

It all has to do with God's greeting.

But first we better set the scene. The time depicted in Deuteronomy is the time before the crossing over the Jordan into the promised land. It is a new beginning. Moses gives the people

final instructions, ways of living with God in the land. Like a prophet Moses speaks for God to the people, except here.

Listen, Moses says, “The LORD spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire.”

For a moment, forget about the priestly parenthetical addition which you’ll find if you check on me when you get home. I hope you will check on me. But it doesn’t take a trained psychotherapist to suggest that those words were added by those who wanted to make sure priests had a job in future generations.

Here is a truth. The theophany, the vision of God, is not just limited to Moses. God’s voice isn’t left for Moses alone to interpret or any other priest, minister, or learned scholar. Oh, I know people of this sort have value. I would stake my livelihood on that. But for whatever we of this vocation say, for you to make any sense of our words, you have to be willing to hear this voice of God, the one in the scripture, speak to you.

Yes, you.

Verse 3: “Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. The LORD spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire.”

So use your imaginations and travel back to that moment when you metaphorically stood before mount Horeb, stood before God, knowing there was something to the fire and smoke. Curious, you drew close to that which we can never fully know, that which burns the chaff of our unsettled dreams and yet sustains our souls. Something in you recognized that this God was not simply the Creator of the universe watching us from afar, but one who knows you, not only knows you, but wants you to know...

“I am the LORD your God.”

That’s how God says “Hello.”

And here it helps to play one of my favorite scripture games. Let’s think about what God

could have said....

“I am the force behind all that is and will be.”

“I am the artist who fashioned all that you see.”

“I am the one who created the Okapi.”

You could get really creative here.

But God didn’t utter any of these things. Instead God intentionally said “hello” in this way: “I am the LORD your God.”

Whoa...didn’t we just meet?

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery....”

If you haven’t figured it out yet, I’ve no intention of getting any farther than the first commandment because I want you to recognize God’s “hello.”

God speaks out of the fire that we might know God as the one who led us out of the house of slavery. That is, God is defined Biblically not only as the creator in Genesis, but as the one who sets us free. Christ will later come into the middle of all this, incarnate as a type of intercessor. Indeed Christ plays a part but we haven’t reached Christmas yet so you’ll have to wait for that journey. But certainly note that God’s work in the Old Testament matches what the apostle Paul in the New Testament, who was once a Jew, will call the work of God through Christ...for freedom Christ has set you free. (That’s for all of you studying Galatians with Laura).

Back to God’s “Hello.”

“I am the Lord \_\_\_\_\_ God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery....”

The beginning is the knowledge that God has and will continue to set you free from that which seeks to be your master in this life.

Pay attention to the “house of slavery” image. The nature of our slavery affects ourselves, our household, our children, our friends, our parents,

our colleagues, even our church.

Oh, what a difficult thing to admit. It is difficult because when we admit to being “enslaved” we have to do something about it, like leaving behind the life patterns that have brought comfort for many years. We remember that the free Israelites grumbled a whole lot about not having what they once had in Egypt.

It is difficult to admit we have a master that is not God because it points to our sin. We don’t like sin. At least we agree with God on that one. But somehow, in our culture, sin is that which by all means we should not have. I would argue it is the human condition. The reason Jesus put it in the Lord’s prayer “forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us” is that sin is part of our daily life. We are not diminished by looking at our sins in order to figure out which master has the puppeteer’s strings.

Which leads to the final reason...it is hard to admit we are enslaved because it means standing up to that puppet master, refusing to allow that thing to animate our lives anymore. It means standing up to that which holds you in its power.

What is it that holds you in its power these days? I don’t care where you are on life’s journey, there is an answer. Stop thinking you got through it all when you had that year of therapy ten years ago. That just allows whatever it is to work underground. And don’t believe your ego when it says you are perfectly healthy and well and beyond any need for self reflection. It’s child’s play to knock that one down. Some of you won’t be able to answer today. That’s okay. No one is going to stand over you and force an answer. But if you want to know God, if you are a pilgrim on a journey to know God more, it is a question you need to ask from time to time, a question you need to allow God to answer.

What is it that holds me in its power these days?

As hard as it is to face the puppeteer--as impossible as it is for you to break such power

when the puppeteer holds all the strings—when you answer you create the door for God to enter into your story.

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of \_\_\_\_\_, out of the house of slavery....”

What God has done once, God will do again and again and again.

In relationships we understand that after a fight, when peace has returned beyond all odds, “making up” can lead to a wonderful night.

We are not as often led to rejoice when we’ve got it all together. Maybe we give thanks, but outright rejoicing? Probably we aren’t that moved. That which creates our soul’s song comes out of the fire. Rejoicing is a more than a litany of thanksgiving, it is an uninhibited wrapping of our arms around the one we love, the God who loves us.

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, you shall have no other gods before me.”

Finally, we have arrived at the first commandment--thou shall have no other gods before me. Somehow, after spending so much time on the introduction, the commandment itself seems almost trite. Of course we do not want to wrap our arms around another God. There is only one God who seeks to make us free.

I am the Lord your God.