

The Restless God of Moses!

By Dr. Dave Neale

Behind the Text

Having come the full 3-year cycle on the lectionary readings, we arrive at the same text upon which I spoke on Oct 18, 2020. I find this to be a lovely place to be, because we now get to reread the text from the point of view of our new setting these three years later. We are constantly rereading the Bible, to ask again, today, what does God want to teach us about our lives, given where we are now.

Three years ago, our message was ***Of Nephilim and Grasshoppers***, and we talked about how the scouts went into the Promised Land (Numbers 13:33) found it a daunting prospect because of the strong occupants of the land into which they were called. You may recall they recoiled from that call, and then spent 40 years in the wilderness as a result of their lack of faith to go forward.

Now we stand at the foot of the Holy Mountain, and it is time to leave for the Promised Land.

Consider the motif of *forward movement* in the narrative of Israel's deliverance. I want to reflect on this for what it teaches us about God, and also for what it teaches us about our journey through life with ***The Restless God of Moses***.

- After seeing the burning bush (Ex 3), Moses *goes forward* from Horeb (Mt. Sinai) to undertake a battle with Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. Did you catch that the burning bush where Moses first encountered God, was at Horeb, or Mt Sinai?



- After the contest with Pharaoh (Ex 5-12), Moses and the People of Israel *go forward* from the land of Goshen through the Red Sea (Ex 14).
- After the Red Sea they *go forward* to Rephidim in the Wilderness of Sin (17).
- They *go forward*, or actually return, to Horeb and receive the 10 Commandments (Ex 20)
- And here the people fail their God and suffer the terrible consequences; the ***Golden Calf File*** of last week.

In the Text

And now we come to our text for the week, where we find again this relentless motif of *going forward, going forward*.

It's Time to Leave Mt Sinai!

It's time to leave Horeb and go to the Promised Land. God says:

Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people. (Ex 33:3)

We observe, that the journey of the people goes from the wilderness into the lion's den. You have to go through the lion's den! And from the lion's den back to the wilderness. You have to go through the wilderness! And suffer the discipline of God for being so stiff-necked. You have to be held to account!

It seems to me that we are in the lion's den of war. We are in the wilderness of human depravity in the "hideous war," as one person wrote this week.

But still we go forward.

What I have seen in this passage as I have "reread" the story once again is this macro-story. This great sweep of events from the burning bush to the Passover to the Red Sea to Mount Sinai, to the departure.

And then, today, we come to this intimate moment, not macro but micro, where God, seemingly exasperated, almost broken by his peoples' infidelity, refuses to go with them personally.

Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people. (Ex 33:3)

But... ***I will not go up among you.***

We find it moving that Moses is God's intimate, so much so that he reasons with God in the hour of exasperation. Moses says, 'You've said go up but who will go with me? I need you to show me your ways. Who are you, really?' What one commentator called a request for a "sensuous manifestation."

'You have to go God, because your people need you and the world needs to know that you are among us. If we are without your presence, we are just another troop of nomads, lost in the world.'¹

If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. (Ex 33:15) We cannot leave this holy mountain without you.

There is an impasse. And in 33 and 34 there is a reconciliation between God, Moses and his people. In response to Moses' plea, God does reveal himself, sort of, in a very Yahweh-ish fashion.

... while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; and then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen. (Ex 33:22-23)

And then, on the mountain again, the first true revealing of God in the whole of the Torah occurs. It is the first time in Scripture that God truly self-reveals, in the humble words of humankind.

This is what we are to know in one sentence...

The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed,

"The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

***keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to
the third and fourth generation.*** (Ex 34:6-7; cf Num 14:13-19)

This is a difficult verse to understand. It is not that God's judgment extends to the innocent future children of a people who sin, but that just as mercy is in God's nature, so is justice. Perhaps we ought to take it to mean, 'flee then to the mercy.'

We see that the God we know so well from the life of Jesus, from the heart of the Christian faith, is the same God who self-revealed on the mountain to Moses.

From the Text

Well, what can we take from this passage for our lives today?

We aren't here in this sanctuary for therapeutic purposes. We aren't here because we just need community. We are here because it is the call to forward motion that *defines* our relationship with the restless God of Moses and his people.

God only reveals himself along the journey. *Through* the journey.

We may say, 'Oh Lord! we just want it to be over, we want to dwell in the presence and have it be over!'

But God isn't revealed at the foot of the Holy Mountain. He is revealed *on* the journey. And so also with us!

I've asked Christine if she would share an insight about the journey from our days in Sheffield as post-graduates there.

The Restless God of Moses. Before they do set out... after God has self-revealed his nature to Moses, one more important moment follows.

Moses says:

"If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance. (Ex 34:9)

The Lord responded and said: I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will perform marvels, such as have not been performed in all the earth or in any nation; for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you. (Ex 34:10)

Last week I left us with a question. 'By what means will we show the great I AM that we will walk forward into the new life before us, and not fall back into the old familiar, comfortable ways?'

This week I leave you with another question to reflect upon. 'Are you prepared to go forward on your journey, even if you can't see your destination from where you are at this moment? Can you do one more day?'

Thanks be to God,

Amen

Benediction

And now, may the Lord of the Great Covenant Promise, the God of ‘You ain’t seen nuthin yet!’ inspire you to go *forward* this week, with all the confidence of Heaven come down. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen

¹ See Num 14:13-19.