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March 12th: Exodus 19 & Matthew 19:16—20:16

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Preparing for the establishment of the covenant at Sinai. The Rich Young Ruler and the Parable of the Workers on the Vineyard.

Some passages referenced:

Deuteronomy 4:32-34 (Israel's uniqueness as a nation); Exodus 3:1-6 (Moses' earlier visit to the mountain of the Lord); Leviticus 23:15-22 (the Feast of Pentecost).

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Exodus chapter 19. On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They set out from Raphidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness.

There Israel encamped before the mountain, while Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying, Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel, You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed

obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel. So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. All the people answered together and said, All that the Lord has spoken we will do.

And Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord. And the Lord said to Moses, Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever. When Moses told the words of the people to the Lord, the Lord said to Moses, Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments and be ready for the third day.

For on the third day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death.

No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot, whether beast or man, he shall not live. When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain. So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people, and they washed their garments.

And he said to the people, Be ready for the third day. Do not go near a woman. On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled.

Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.

And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. The Lord came down on Mount Sinai to the top of the mountain, and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. And the Lord said to Moses, Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the Lord, to look, and many of them perish.

Also let the priests who come near to the Lord consecrate themselves, lest the Lord break out against them. And Moses said to the Lord, The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, Set limits around the mountain and consecrate it. And the Lord said to him, Go down and come up, bringing Aaron with you,

but do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest he break out against them.

So Moses went down to the people and told them. In Exodus chapter 19, God establishes a covenant bond with his people. This is a sort of marriage as some have seen it.

The bond established between God and his people here has been described as a suzerain vassal treaty. It's where a higher ruler establishes a covenant with a lower party. And these were common within the ancient world of the Near East.

And yet there is something unique about this, even if it's following a familiar pattern in certain respects. God is speaking to individuals and to the social body, not just to another king or the rulers of the social body. It's a new covenant order that's established in the life of the covenant people of Abraham.

It's not building something new that's unrelated to what's gone before. Rather, it's building upon a relationship that already exists between God and his people. It establishes the people on a different and a greater footing.

They are being set up as a new nation. And this chapter gives a context for the giving of the law that follows. The law comes from heaven, but it comes at a very specific juncture in history, in a very specific time and place, and to a very specific people.

The events of this chapter begin on the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt. There are a number of ways in which this could be read. We could see this as the third month after the first month on the 15th.

Then there was the second month on the 15th, and now this is the third month on the 15th of the month. Or we could see it as the third month. So they left on the 15th of the first month, then there was a second month, and now this is the first day of the third month.

A further option is to see it exactly three months after they departed. So this would be the 15th day of the fourth month. Now of these positions I'm more inclined to accept the idea that this is the first day of the third month, a dating which helps us to understand some of the associations with the events here at Sinai and other dates that are given to us in scripture, which I'll discuss before long.

Israel is here constituted as a people. Sinai is the place where they receive their founding charter and where the new structures of their life are established. They need to camp in front of the mountain, and Moses had already been at the mountain of God in chapters three and four.

He's been here, he's been told that they will worship God at this mountain, so this is a fulfillment of things that he has already been told. This is, among other things, a

confirmation to Moses and to others of the validity of his calling. God announces that he has chosen Israel in particular to relate to him.

There is an open-ended commitment between God and his people that is being called for here. They must ascent to his law and to his rule within their life. God describes how he has already related to them and he declares how he will relate to them in the future if they hear his voice and commit themselves to him.

First of all, he has brought them on eagle's wings to himself, even though he judged the Egyptians. The image of the eagle that we have here is the image of a mother eagle taking care for its young and rushing to protect them and to bring them to a particular place with swiftness and care, and that's how God has related to his people. He has brought them to this point.

He has brought Egypt to its knees. He has judged Egypt, but he has shown the most remarkable kindness to his people Israel, bringing them to this place to form them as his own. And he promises that beyond this great deliverance that distinguishes them from all these other peoples, he is going to take Israel as his special possession.

All the earth belongs to the Lord and all the peoples, but among all the peoples of the world, God will take this one particular people. They'll be his special possession, his own, his holy possession. What it means to be holy to the Lord is an important part of this chapter.

It requires a form of behavior that corresponds to it, a priestly purity. God establishes a holy nation and Israel is established in this way before it has all of the other distinguishing marks of a They don't have their own land, they don't have their own ruler, they're established in a wilderness and as such they are unique. In Deuteronomy chapter 4 verses 32 to 34, Moses says, speaking out of the midst of the fire as you have heard and still live.

Or has any God ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation by trials, by signs, by wonders and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and by great deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? Israel's origin is unique, it's strange, it's not something that has ever been seen in any other nation. Their identity rests upon God's promise. They don't have a land, they don't have a king, they don't have all these other marks of nationhood but what they do have is a promise and a God who is committed to them, a God who is their king, a God who establishes and guarantees their identity.

Israel's identity does not arise from imminent realities, they're formed in a wilderness. Israel is a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Their identity will be represented by specific parties within the nation.

Israel has Levites and it has kings later on in its history and its identity is particularly borne by these parties, they represent Israel to itself in much the same way as the Queen might represent what it means for the United Kingdom to be the United Kingdom. When Israel has priests and when it has kings it will discover its identity as a kingdom of priests in a fuller way. Their identity at the moment is precarious, they're a release group of slaves, they don't have a land in which to reside, they don't really have a full ruler.

Moses is a prophet who's leading them through the wilderness but he's not a political ruler in quite the same way as a king would be. As a nation their identity very much lies in the future but it rests upon a promise, God has committed to establishing them as a kingdom of priests. But this statement of them being a kingdom of priests seems to me more than just that they will be a kingdom with priests.

In some way the Levites represent to Israel what Israel is in relationship to the nations and what the Levites are within the life of Israel is something that declares Israel's own destiny. The Levites are scattered throughout the land, they establish God's law within the people, they teach it and they have mastered it themselves, they've understood it and they can pass it on to others. And Israel's destiny is to be that within the world more generally.

As Israel's history develops this is what happens in many ways, they are scattered among the nations and among the nations they serve as a sort of priestly people, a people that point beyond the particularity of a specific nation to the God behind all nations. There are people that have a defining absence at the heart of their life, they're not defined by a king primarily, they're not defined even by a land primarily, they're defined by the God who's over all peoples, over all lands and as they're scattered abroad they do not lose their nationhood, rather their nationhood serves to testify to something beyond all the parochial structures of nationhood that exists in other lands. And as God gives them the law over time something else happens, it's no longer a kingdom with a priestly caste at its heart, a people who study and teach the law to people who do not know it, rather it's a people who have more generally studied and learned God's law and can teach it to others.

God has revealed his word to the nation of Israel in a unique way and Israel would grow into a more and more general knowledge of this as the knowledge of God's law spread not just to a particular caste of priests at its heart but to all people that all of them would know the law and the Lord that gave the law and through that knowledge that they would express that priestly character as people that teach and uphold the law in their own house, the house of Israel that is maintained by the priests and by each individual Israelite, extending that priestly vocation both internally in their own lives and then externally out towards the nations. What happens at Sinai is not just an event for individuals, it's the constitution of a people, it's a political event, this is the founding event of a whole nation. The nation is founded upon a divine covenant which points

forward to and places limits upon everything else.

This people is not primarily formed upon the consent of the governed. There is an event of consent here but it's not primarily that which establishes the government, rather God's government is recognised and submitted to. That divine government places limits upon all human government.

It also places limits upon nationhood tied to land. They do not yet have a land. God will give them a land but they do not yet have a land.

Their identity as a people rests upon what God is doing with them primarily, not upon any imminent factor. The people accept Moses's expression of God's message and then Moses reports this to God. We should note the way that Moses is playing the role of the intermediary here, it's emphasised.

God clearly knows what the people said but Moses still formally has to declare it to him as a sort of go-between. Moses is the one who's arranging this covenant, who's establishing the two parties in relationship with each other. With this expression of covenant the time is ready for the formal establishment and ratification of the covenant, the covenant ceremony itself and the declaration of the covenant that occurs in the following chapter.

The covenant will also ratify Moses's place as the mediator of the covenant and they must prepare themselves by maintaining their purity and washing their clothes. On the third day God will come and these three days can be associated with trial, with something like Abraham going to Mount Moriah and at that point God will come down in a theophany and speak to his people. Thinking about the number of days here we might notice that there are a lot of similarities with the story of the flood.

If you trace the number of days it would seem that there are two periods of seven days after they first arrive and then there's a period of 40 days as Moses goes up the mountain. These are periods that we see in the story of the flood. Maybe we should see a connection between the flood narrative and the establishment of a covenant on this mountain.

It's not Mount Ararat, it's the Mount of Sinai and God is establishing something that has cosmic significance again. In Moses and the people of Israel we see the seeds of a new world. At this point God demarcates different realms of Sinai and says that certain places should not be approached.

God's presence is in the cloud, the holy of holies as it were, and Moses can ascend into that. And then there's the lower levels of the mountain, the holy place, where the priests and the elders could ascend but not the people. And the people are gathered around the base of the mountain as the people gather around in the courtyard of the tabernacle.

The seeming association between this ordering of the mountain and the ordering of the tabernacle should alert us to the fact that the tabernacle is in many ways a portable mountain. When the tabernacle is built they leave Sinai and they can have this portable Sinai that they take with them. The same sort of regulations are established for that.

God's presence in the holy of holies of the tabernacle is similar to God's presence at the very peak of the mountain. And many of the images that we associate with the mountain also come to be associated with the tabernacle. Smoke ascending from the sacrifices, the cloud, the cloud of the glory that enters the tabernacle, and the cloud that is also the cloud of smoke and other things, the fire that ascends, the trumpets that are blown, all these sorts of things.

These are signs of God's presence and they're elements of the tabernacle worship too. The strict laws against trespass apply in both cases. God's holiness requires a need for barriers and boundaries.

Not everything is holy. Much in the world is not holy. There are certain things however that are set apart.

There's one day in seven that is set apart as the Sabbath. And there is this particular realm of the Mount of Sinai that is set apart and later on the tabernacle. Holiness establishes, among other things, space for God's otherness in the course of human affairs.

If everything were holy, human beings could not exist. If no place or time were holy however, there would be no way for God to be present with human beings in the course of their lives. We should maybe think back also to the story of the burning bush.

Moses here is bringing a flock to the mountain of God and meeting with God there. There are restrictions of holy ground, there's burning and things not being consumed. There's an encounter with and a speaking with God in this theophanic event.

This is what happened at the burning bush and it's happening again on a grander scale. Now the shepherd Moses is not bringing sheep, he's bringing the flock of Israel, the people of Israel and forming a new covenant with God at this place. A question to consider.

Tracing the chronology of the events of Exodus chapter 19, many have noted an association between the event of Pentecost, the feast of Pentecost established in Leviticus chapter 23 verses 15 following and the event of Sinai and the covenant given at Sinai. What are some of the associations that you might see between the feast that's given to us in Leviticus 23 and the events of this chapter and those that follow? Matthew 19 verse 16 to chapter 20 verse 16. Jesus said to him, if you would be perfect go sell what you possess and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven and come

follow me.

When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful for he had great possessions and Jesus said to his disciples, truly I say to you only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. When the disciples heard this they were greatly astonished saying, who then can be saved? But Jesus looked at them and said, with man this is impossible but with God all things are possible.

Then Peter said in reply, see we have left everything and followed you what then will we have? Jesus said to them, truly I say to you in the new world when the son of man will sit on his glorious throne you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel and anyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for my name's sake will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life but many who are first will be last and the last first. For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for a denarius a day he sent them into his vineyard and going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace and to them he said you go into the vineyard too and whatever is right I will give you.

So they went going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour he did the same and about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing and he said to them why do you stand here idle all day they said to him because no one has hired us he said to them you go into the vineyard too and when evening came the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman call the labourers and pay them their wages beginning with the last up to the first and when those hired about the eleventh hour came each of them received a denarius now when those hired first came they thought they would receive more but each of them also received a denarius and on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house saying these last worked only one hour and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat but he replied to one of them friend I am doing you no wrong did you not agree with me for a denarius take what belongs to you and go I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me or do you begrudge my generosity so the last will be first and the first last. The end of Matthew chapter 19 to the beginning of chapter 20 focuses upon Jesus's response to a young man asking what good thing he must do to obtain eternal life. This man is a rich man and he turns out to be unwilling to follow Christ at the expense of his riches.

Peter Lighthouse has observed that this passage is divided in two sections one beginning and ending with a reference to eternal life. In verse 16 the young man asks about what he must do to have eternal life and in verse 29 we're told that they will inherit eternal life. The second part involves a discussion of the first being last and the last first.

It begins with the statement in verse 30 of chapter 19 but many who are first will be last and the last first and then it ends with the statement in verse 16 of chapter 20 so the last will be first and the first last. Note that there is a reversal of the order there in the first one it's the first will be last and the last first and in the second it's the last will be first and the first last. It brackets that whole section it bookends it and stresses its unity.

The first half focuses upon wealth and rewards and the second half continues some of those themes to a degree. The first begins with Jesus questioning why the young man asks him about what is good saying that no one is good but God alone and then the complaining workers are asked literally is your eye bad because I am good. In both cases someone is being identified as good.

The parable answers in many respects the earlier question and addresses the issue of wealth. Many people have misread Jesus' discussion with the rich young ruler. The idea for many is that Jesus is highlighting the futility of seeking righteousness according to the law.

He's driving the man to despair of his righteousness of his good deeds and to get him to come to Christ for hope of salvation but this is not actually how the story goes. We would need to read a very great deal into the passage to see this particular connection. Rather Jesus teaches that keeping the commandments is necessary for entering into eternal life.

The twist is the way that this is understood. Jesus' initial response to the question is if you would enter life keep the commandments and then Jesus responds to the follow-up question which ones by highlighting the second table of the law in particular. You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, honour your father and mother and love your neighbour as yourself.

The young man's response is not to despair of his righteousness rather he says all these I have kept what do I still lack. Jesus' response to this is not so much a suggestion that it is impossible to keep the law but a challenge to a different kind of law keeping. Jesus did not mention a few key commandments the first time around.

He didn't mention commandments one to four and he didn't mention commandment ten. He didn't mention the commandments concerned with loving the Lord your God with all your heart soul mind and strength and he didn't mention the law concerning covetousness. What does the man lack? Whatever he lacks it would seem to rest with those other commandments that were not mentioned.

Jesus' statement to him should be seen against the background of those commandments. What must he do? He must sell what he possesses and give it to the poor and he must go and follow Christ. The first instruction is one that fulfills the tenth commandment.

How do you fulfill the commandment not to covet? Well in the book of Deuteronomy in chapter 26 that commandment is fleshed out and it's fulfilled not just in the negative act of not desiring or envying something that belongs to someone else rather it's fulfilled in something deeper than that. It's fulfilled in the act of celebrating what God has given to you being thankful of showing charity and generosity to others and of expressing contentment with what you have. And what Jesus is suggesting to the young man here is even more radical.

It's expressed in being willing to give up what you possess giving it in charity to others and having contentment in that fact and then he calls him to follow him. Now that commandment should be seen over against the other great commandment, the greatest commandment of all to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. What does it look like to fulfill that commandment? Well it looks like following Christ, relating to him as your Lord and Master.

As Jesus teaches throughout the book of Matthew the law is fulfilled in a deeper level by this following of him, by this obedience to him and by forms of practice that are not just negative practices of avoidance of not actually killing and not actually committing adultery but positive ones of resisting and establishing different forms of positive alternatives. It's seen in the way that rather than just avoiding covetousness the rich man fulfills the law concerning covetousness by being prepared to give up what he has by giving to others in charity. It's seen in the person who rather than just avoiding murdering the person he's angry with reconciles with them.

It's seen in the person who rather than just avoiding stealing gives and shows generosity. As this rich young man leaves Jesus expresses once again the danger of riches, those things that weigh us down, that tie us to something that prevents us from serving and following our true master. You cannot serve both God and mammon.

If you find yourself devoted to riches you will find yourself unable to follow Christ as he calls you to. This makes us uncomfortable and it really should. We want to be assured that Christ would never ask such a thing of us.

Now Christ does not ask this more generally. However if he did we would have to submit. Wealth is a power that can prevent us from entering the kingdom and Jesus teaches this in no uncertain terms.

Wealth is something that can master us and we living very prosperous lives for the most part should be very fearful. It's something that we can become enthralled by. It's something that can dictate the course of our lives, our values, our commitments.

Even if we are poor this can be something that drives our concern. That is something that prevents us from throwing ourselves wholeheartedly into the service of our saviour. It is only with great difficulty that those with riches can enter the kingdom of heaven.

As Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount where your treasure is there your heart will be also. If you want your heart to be invested in the kingdom of God then invest your treasure there as well. Be someone who's committed to that.

Now this is exactly what Jesus is teaching the rich young ruler. Invest his money in serving the poor and he will find as he invests his money in serving the poor that that's where his heart will go. But as long as that treasure lies elsewhere, as long as that treasure is caught within the affairs of this world that is where his heart will be.

And until he deals with that primary location of his heart by relocating his treasure he will not be able to enter the kingdom of God. After Jesus has taught this Peter pipes up and speaking for the rest of the disciples draws attention to the fact that they have given up everything. What is their reward going to be? They have done pretty much what the rich young ruler was asked to do and what is their reward? Jesus makes clear that there is a reward for them.

They will sit on 12 thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel. The 12 will exert authority within the kingdom. Now Judas is among them at this point but it's referring to the 12 as a group.

And Jesus extends the statement to say that everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for his name's sake will receive a hundredfold and inherit eternal life. Here Jesus presents something of an answer to the original question of the rich young ruler and it's seen in an act of renunciation. People must give up to enter the kingdom.

They must give up all these things that they were formerly attached to and that act of surrender is something that will lead to them inheriting eternal life. This is a terrifying teaching for us but it should not be sugar-coated. We are called to renounce things, to deny ourselves, to take up our cross, to be those who are willing to be stripped of all our possessions or attachments in order to enter into the kingdom.

This does not mean that we'll be permanently bereft of these things. They may be returned to us but they may be returned to us only after we have surrendered them, only after we have given them into God's hands. Those who want to save their lives will have to lose them.

And following on from this discussion of rewards, Jesus goes into a parable, a parable bracketed in statements about the first being last and the last first. This parable of the workers on the vineyard is one that has a number of different stages to it. As we're going through it we naturally sympathize with those who are called first and as they are being paid at the end of the day it starts with the last people to be called, the last people to be commissioned to work on the vineyard and then gradually moves to the payment of those who came to the vineyard first.

And they're scandalized because they do not get anything more than those who came last. And we can often feel scandalized for them too. One of our basic moral instincts is equal pay for equal work and yet they do not receive equal pay for equal work.

Those who worked for a long time receive much the same pay as the people who worked just for a couple of hours. How does this parable relate to what has gone before? Well perhaps we could relate it to the rich young ruler and the disciples. The rich young ruler is someone who observes the path of the law in many ways.

He is someone who probably has social standing and respectability. He's an observant law keeper, all these sorts of things. And the disciples are people who come along later.

They're people who are fishermen. They're a tax collector. They don't have the same social status but yet they will receive the same payment.

God will reward them as if they had been faithful law keepers throughout their whole lives. Perhaps that's something of what's going on. For me a more likely explanation is one that relates it to the story of Israel more generally.

Israel is the vineyard. The people being called to work on the vineyard are prophets and righteous men and all sorts of other people and the disciples come along at the end of the line of that in many ways, late on in the day. And yet they receive the same reward.

And then people called after them even though they may not suffer the heat of the day and the difficulties of the situations that martyrs and prophets that have gone before them experienced, they will receive the same reward. This payment that God gives as the owner of the vineyard is not according to the merit of the work that they have done. Rather everyone who works on the vineyard gets the same reward.

The disciples may have given up many things, renounced many things, but they remain continually concerned about pecking orders and the difficulty of self-denial and the desire to get what's due to us can persist even when we've given up many things. And Jesus' parable here challenges that at the root. There is a reward for following Christ.

There is a reward for going out into the vineyard. But that reward does not follow the same pattern that we are accustomed to in human wages. Rather it's given to every single person that serves on this vineyard.

Every single person receives that same payment. Someone like Peter might want to be assured that he's going to get special treatment. They've gone out, they've faced the heat of the day, they've faced the difficulties, they've stood with Christ in tough situations.

Shouldn't they be rewarded accordingly? And yet, out of the goodness of God, people who have not suffered in the same way, who have not experienced the same difficulties,

will experience the kindness and generosity of the owner of the vineyard. Everyone who renounces their possessions and their family and all these other things that attach them to this age will be rewarded. But they will be rewarded in a way that foregrounds the generosity of the owner of the vineyard, not the merit of their labours.

A question to consider. Jesus calls the rich young ruler to an act of great generosity. And the owner of the vineyard is later on defined by his generosity.

How does the practice of generosity enable us to overcome some of the issues that Jesus is highlighting and tackling here?