

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors on staff at North Shore Alliance; whether you've been coming for a long time or a short time, I'm glad you're here.

When you walked into the foyer no doubt you noticed that our building project has begun; when you walked into the sanctuary no doubt you noticed the decorations—the first Sunday of Advent is here. As a good Canadian, for me, the smell of pine trees brings with it the smell of anticipation; Christmas is coming, and as Christians we begin to reflect on the birth of Jesus.

This morning's sermon will bring to conclusion our *Out Of Egypt* sermon series—next week I will begin a five part Christmas series that will include our Christmas Eve services and a Christmas Day service. As you may know, Christmas Day falls on a Sunday this year, and while many of you may be away, or travelling to see family, Paul and I will be leading one Christmas Day service at 10 a.m.; if you are in town, you are more than welcome to join us.

This morning we are going to be looking at Exodus 19, and I'd encourage you to join me in turning there right now; Bible Apps are welcome, and if you are using the Blue Bible from the seat rack in front of you, you can find our text on page_____.

Israel's final destination was a new country of their own, but they had one important, nation-alternating-stop to make first. It's here at Mount Sinai that God would reveal the 10 Commandments and the rest of the Law; in Exodus 19 God prepares Moses and the people for what they are about to receive.

On the first day of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on

that very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. 2 After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

3 Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 4 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, 6 you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites." 7 So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the Lord had commanded him to speak. 8 The people all responded together, "We will do everything the Lord has said."

So Moses brought their answer back to the Lord. 9 The Lord said to Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you." Then Moses told the Lord what the people had said.

10 And the Lord said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes 11 and be ready by the third day, because on that day the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. 12 Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, 'Be careful that you do not approach the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain is to be put to death. 13 They are to be stoned or shot with arrows; not a hand is to be laid on them. No person or animal

shall be permitted to live. ' Only when the ram's horn sounds a long blast may they approach the mountain.'

14 After Moses had gone down the mountain to the people, he consecrated them, and they washed their clothes. 15 Then he said to the people, "Prepare yourselves for the third day. Abstain from sexual relations."

16 On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. 17 Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. 18 Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. 19 As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

20 The Lord descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up 21 and the Lord said to him, "Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the Lord and many of them perish. 22 Even the priests, who approach the Lord, must consecrate themselves, or the Lord will break out against them."

23 Moses said to the Lord, "The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, because you yourself warned us, 'Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy.'" 24 The Lord replied, "Go down and bring Aaron up with you. But the priests and the people must not force their way through to come up to the Lord, or he will break out against them." 25 So Moses went down to the people and told them.

There's a lot of movement going on in this text—three times Moses ascended Mount Sinai, and three times he descended with a word from God. Here's a few fun facts for you:

- the **Grouse Grind** trail is 2.9 kilometres long, has 2830 steps, gains 853 metres (2,800 feet) in elevation, with the summit standing at 1,127 metres (3,700 feet).
- by comparison, the path up **Mount Sinai** has 3750 steps, gaining 685 metres (2500 feet), with a summit reaching 2285 metres (7500 feet).

Three times Moses ascended, and three times he descended with a word from God. Here's how my sermon is going to unfold this morning—in the spirit of climbing, we're going to walk through each of the three ascents (and what God revealed), and then I'm going to take you up to 30,000 feet so you can see how Exodus 19 fits in the grand story of the Old and New Testament. Let's take a look at Ascent #1.

1. Ascent One (vs. 3-8a): in vs. 4-6, God spoke a word that would set the agenda for His relationship with Israel.

- What the Lord has done (vs. 4)
- What the Lord requires (vs. 5a)
- What the Lord promises (vs. 5b-6a)

Vs. 4, What had the Lord done? He dealt with Egypt, confronting their power and pride. Israel watched Pharaoh's futile attempt to resist God; they watched as plagues broke out against Egypt—God's acts of judgment. God rescued Israel from slavery, He led them out, He carried them out *on eagle's wings*. They experienced firsthand the

Lord's providential care in the escape from Egypt and provision in the desert—eagles' wings is a metaphor for God as Guardian. *Where do you need God to carry and comfort you?*

Vs. 5b-6a, What had the Lord promised? God rescued Israel, leading them out into the desert so that He had them all to Himself—His promise was that Israel would be His treasured possession, His covenant people, a nation of holy priests.

I'm going to say more about this when we get up to 30,000 feet, but for now let me say a few words. In choosing Israel, God wasn't playing favourites—He chose one nation for the sake of the many. He made Israel the recipient of His love, blessing, and glory, so that He might be on display for all nations to see—the one for the many.

Think for a moment about God's two-fold promise:

(a) *you will be my treasured possession*—this is the language of election, covenant relationship, and communion; and

(b) *you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*. A priest is someone who has access to God, and because of this access they hold a two-fold role. On the one hand, they stand in the Lord's presence and receive His word, His love, His blessing, and then mediate this word/love/blessing to the people—the priest represents God to the people. On the other hand, the priest stands in the Lord's presence and represents the people to God. A priest stands in the Lord's presence bearing the pain, disappointment, and need of the people.

God called a kingdom of priests in order to reach the kingdoms of the world—through Israel, God intended to bless the world, and through Israel the need of the world would be brought before God. I'll say more about this later.

What the Lord requires (vs. 5a): Now let's look at vs. 5a— *Now **if** you obey me fully and keep my covenant, **then** out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.*

There is a chasm between what God has done and what He has promised—the bridge is built on the word *if*—*if you obey Me fully and keep my covenant*. It's important that we understand what this *if* is referring to and what it is not.

illus: What does the word “unconditional” mean? It simply means “without conditions”. If you saw a house for sale and put in an offer that was subject to inspection or financing, you've placed conditions in your offer. *If* the house is structurally sound, *if* your financing goes through, you commit to buying the house. *When it comes to God's relationship to Israel (or us), is it based conditions, or is it unconditional?*

illus: The first thing I want to say is that a covenant is very different from a contract—by its very nature a contract is conditional, while a covenant is not. When I go to a coffee shop to order a drink, I'm entering into a contractual relationship—I promise to pay, if they promise to bring me the drink. If they don't bring me a drink, I won't pay; if I don't pay, they won't bring me a drink—that's how a contract works. A covenant is very different.

illus: When a man and woman get married, they enter into a mutual covenant and the promises they make are unconditional. The man does not say, *I take you to be my wedded wife, as long as you don't ask too much of me, let me prioritize my career over our relationship, and remain healthy and beautiful as you get older.* Nor does the women say, *I take you to be my husband, as long as you are change to suit my fancy, continue to look young and handsome, and meet all of my emotional needs.*

That's not a covenant, that's a contract—an arrangement filled with “ifs”—a wedding covenant sounds more like this: *I take you to be my wedded wife/husband, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.*

There are no **ifs** in God's love, no conditions; God calls sinful and broken people like us into relationship, knowing full well that we will turn away from Him. The Apostle Paul, in speaking of God's covenant with Israel, wrote the following: “*What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness? Not at all!*”

So, getting back to Exodus 19, what is the **if** all about? In God's economy, grace, covenant, and promise always precedes obedience. God's covenant with Israel had been ratified 400 years earlier, through their ancestor Abraham. One author writes, “It was not, therefore, that they were ordered to obey in order that they might enter the covenant, but that, already being within the covenant, they were called to obey so that they might enjoy the benefits and privileges of God's people.”¹

Obedience isn't the price tag of relationship with God—it's not our part in a two-sided contract—but there is a blessing that only obedience brings. The obedience of faith leads to the enjoyment of what God has promised, for all that God has promised is an extension of life with Him. How can we enjoy God—how do we enjoy God's enjoyment of us—if we are perpetually running from His love or spurning our calling? The **if** of Exodus 19 has to do with enjoyment, and this **if** is entirely up to us.

Now let's briefly look at Moses' second and third Ascents.

2. Ascent Two (8b-15): the call to holiness

After hearing what the Lord had done, what He required, and promised, Moses brought this word to the people and they responded saying, “*We will do everything the Lord has said.*” It was a fine response, but they haven't yet heard what the Lord required—obedience, yes, but to what? Exodus 20 and following outlines the covenant responsibilities of Israel.

The call to holiness began with an understanding of God's holiness. We tend to think of holiness in terms of moral purity, and while this is certainly true of God, the more basic category of God's holiness is His otherness—He is completely other—in a fundamental way, He is not like us and we are not like Him.

God's otherness implies a distance—God's holiness is such that we cannot get too close. In preparation for God's descent, and the

¹ J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 200.

receiving of the law, they were told to stand back from the mountain, to wash their clothes, and abstain from sexual relations. Let me explain what's going on.

The washing of the clothes was symbolic of cleansed minds and hearts. One scholar offers the following analogy. "If we were to stop a wedding car and ask the girl in white, 'Why are you dressed like a bride?' She would reply, 'Because I am a bride and I am on my way to get married.' Exactly! Clothes point to the nature and intentions of the wearer".² Israel was to wash their clothes as a symbol of the inner washing of mind and heart—a holy God was drawing near and they needed to be cleansed.

Why abstinence from sex? The Bible never speaks of sex as something inherently sinful, but it does recognize that sex between a husband and wife involves the whole person—body, mind, and soul; they were to abstain because God wanted to have their whole person fixed upon Him.

3. Ascent Three (vs 16-25): further precautions about God's holiness

The Lord asked Moses to firm up the instructions to protect the people from His holiness—when God descended on the mountain, creation was responded: thunder, lightening, thick cloud, smoke and fire; we're told the mountain trembled, and I suspect the people trembled too. God is someone to be taken seriously, not casually; no one stands in God's presence on their own merit—we need God's grace in order to stand in God's presence.

² Motyer, 203-204.

At this time, let's get up to 30,000 feet and see how Exodus 19 fits into the rest of the biblical story. One could summarize the grand story of the Bible with the following four words: **creation**, **fall**, **redemption**, and **restoration**.

God created a world free from pain and loss; humanity was created for perfect relationship with God and others. When humanity rebelled against God, it was more than a fall from grace—they cut themselves off from His life and blessing. As a good Father and Creator, how would God act to redeem a world ravaged by sin and death?

God's solution was, in a real sense, a very human solution; He chose Abraham and Sarah, made a covenant with them, promising to bless them, and through them to bless the entire world. God chose one couple for the sake of the world. Exodus 19:4-6 is a continuation of this covenant—Abraham and Sarah's family grew into the nation of Israel, and God chose Israel to be a kingdom of priests, mediating God's blessing to the world.

Throughout the Scriptures, God implored Israel to fulfil its calling to bless the nations. In Isaiah 49:6, God said, "*It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.*"

God's desire was for Israel to enjoy relationship with Him, showcasing His love, His mercy, His justice, and glory to the world—that the world might know Him, that the nations might turn to

Him. The problem was that all too often, Israel failed in its calling, turning away from God into darkness. In order for Israel to be a light for the nations, God needed to redeem and restore Israel first! And that's exactly what God did.

What God required of Israel was summed up in the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus entered into Israel's story as the faithful Son—He perfectly fulfilled the life of worship, obedience, and love that God required. Not only so, but He also summed up Israel's vocation—He perfectly fulfilled the two-fold role of a priest: He represented God to the people, and the people to God—because Jesus shared in our humanity He could stand in God's presence as Man, bearing our sin, pain, and need.

James Torrance writes, “Christ does not heal us as an ordinary doctor might, by...diagnosing our sickness, prescribing medicine for us to take and then going away leaving us to get better as we follow his/her instructions. No, [Jesus] becomes the patient!”³ God the Son became human—He shared in our flesh and blood, our weaknesses, our temptations, difficulties, and losses. Jesus assumed the very humanity that needed to be redeemed, and through His death and resurrection our humanity is healed.

In and through Jesus, God came down—the One for the Many—He stands in for us to complete what we could not for ourselves. Those who entrust their lives to Jesus, are adopted into God's family. We are now graced with a privilege that Israel in Exodus could not fathom—we are united to Jesus, we partake in His righteous status, we are welcomed by a holy God because Jesus is worthy. God is still

other, but in Jesus Christ, God and humanity has been brought together.

Israel was invited into communion with God—to be His treasured people—and, Israel was given a calling—to be a kingdom of priests. In Jesus, communion and calling was fulfilled, and we are now invited by the Spirit to participate in the Son's communion with the Father, and in His priestly ministry to the world.

Listen to the words of 1 Peter 2:9-12, echoing what was said in Exodus 19, “*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you...to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*”

From time to time, you may have wondered to yourself, *Why did God include me in His family? Why should I be the special recipient of His love? Why me and not others?*

I hope you can see that your life is a part of a much larger story—we participate in the same calling given to Abraham and Sarah, and to Israel. Though this calling has been perfectly summed up in Jesus, it has not yet come to an end—God's mission continues.

³ James Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*, 53.

Why did God reach out to you? Because He loves you! What are we to do with this love? Receive it! Enjoy it! Celebrate it! And share this love with others! We have been given a high and holy calling to represent God to the world, beginning with family, friends, and neighbours. By the grace of God, it is my prayer that many will come to know God's love through you, and me.

Starting next Sunday, leading to Christmas Eve and on Christmas Day, we are going to be reflecting on and responding to the implications of the Incarnation. Over the next three weeks we are going to be addressing the question of *why God became human*. I trust that as we do, the good news concerning Jesus Christ will be even sweeter, richer, and deeper.

At this time I'd like to invite our worship team to come and lead us in a time of response through singing.

Worship

Benediction