

“Smoke and Fire”

A Sermon for Lake Shore Baptist Church based on Exodus 20:1-21

By Claire Helton; October 8, 2017

One of the many places I find joy in my work here at the church is in observing our Godly Play class, which uses language in such thoughtful and sometimes unusual ways that convey deep meanings to our children. In Godly Play, when we extinguish the Christ candle that has been lit to remind us of Christ’s presence among us, we talk about how we aren’t really putting it out, we’re just “changing the light.” We remain still after the flame has been snuffed and watch as the smoke drifts and fills the room, just like the presence of Christ. Sometimes, if the sunlight streams through the window just right, you can even see the shadows of the smoke dancing in a flurry on the opposite wall. Godly Play has taught me something about taking a contemplative stance toward the world.

Many of you know our family is living in an intentional Christian community, and one element of that intentionality is that we gather for prayer as a community each morning, often before my 1 ½-year old, James, is awake. We light a candle during this time of prayer and I had mentioned to the group the way Godly Play had affected my experience of this simple act of extinguishing a candle, so for several days we had been appreciating the grace and beauty of the drifting smoke at the end of prayer each morning, enjoying the symbolism of the presence of Christ filling the room and filling our days. Then one morning, recently, James woke up early and joined us for prayer. As we closed our prayers and extinguished the candle, the rest of us sat silently in the quiet morning stillness and watched as the smoke danced toward the window, right toward James and me. I turned to look at his face expecting to see the same kind of wonder and appreciation that he greets so much of the world with, but before I could even turn my head I heard him starting to say, “No...no...no...” as the smoke came his way – this look of pure fear covering his tiny face.

And maybe he's right to have a healthy dose of fear when it comes to both smoke – and to the presence of God. In our text the people of Israel have reached the mountain of God after months of what felt like endless wandering through the wilderness, learning the hard way to trust God to provide food for each day, water for each day. At the mountain of God, Moses has given them instructions for three days of preparation: he's set up a perimeter around the mountain – no one was to go up the mountain or even touch the edge of it, or they would die. I'm not sure how you determine where exactly the edge of a mountain is – so I imagine they kept a wide berth just to be safe. He's told them to wash themselves and their clothes, to abstain sexually for three days – this is serious purification. And now, on the morning of the third day, the people have awoken not knowing what to expect, but it won't take them long to begin to have an idea.

Thunder shakes the tents and wakes the children in the early, gray morning – but there is no rain in sight. The people make their way toward the meeting place, trembling with each lightning bolt and clap of thunder, some of them transfixed on the mountain before them wrapped in a thick smoky haze, others too afraid to look up from the ground, eyes glued to the sandals of the person in front of them. They follow Moses out of the camp until they've reached the foot of the mountain, where they take their stand and wait for God to speak. The ground is shaking and so are the people as the trumpet blasts and God begins to speak to Moses, calling him up the mountain.

God speaks, offering ten words, words of instruction and warning, words of wisdom that begin with the hope of remembering God's action in the past: "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. You shall not make for yourself an idol. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God. Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Honor your father and your mother. You shall not murder. You shall not commit

adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

There are ten sermons to be preached – and many more – on these ten commandments, these ten words of wisdom and life. What are the idols in our lives? What does it really mean to “make wrongful use” of God’s name? How do we learn to remember that the Sabbath was made for humanity, and not humanity for the Sabbath?

But what fascinates me about this passage is what happens after the commandments are given. “When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and they said to Moses – ‘You speak to us, and we’ll listen; but don’t let God speak to us, or we will die.’” Moses tells them not to be afraid, that God’s intention is simply to give them enough holy fear that they won’t fall into sin. But then “the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.”

It’s that image of the thick darkness where God is that captivates me. How could the people pass up the opportunity to see behind the curtain of smoke, to press through the darkness to witness the light that produced it? Didn’t they know that where there’s smoke, there’s fire? Hadn’t they heard the story of the bush that burned and wasn’t consumed – and how could they not want to lay eyes on whatever was burning on this mountain? I find myself struggling to get into their heads; struggling to understand why they would back away from this opportunity, pushing it off on Moses – “You go witness God for us, and we’ll take our cues from you.” This is so counter to my religious experience. I’m a Baptist, emphasizing the priesthood of all believers, the role we each take in curating our own relationship to the divine. And, as we approach the 500th anniversary of the Reformation here in a few weeks I can’t help but remember and celebrate Martin Luther’s influence on this cherished Baptist principle. So where the

people tremble, “Do not let God speak to us, or we will die,” I find myself reacting – “No, no, no – if God doesn’t speak to me, connect personally to me – how will I live?”

Of course, the careful reader might point out that the people weren’t actually invited up the mountain, weren’t invited behind that curtain of smoke. In fact, God warned Moses again and again that the people were not to break through the perimeter. That’s the language God uses – “Don’t let them break through – at least, not in a thoughtless, unworthy way. Don’t let them treat me like a circus act. Even the priests who come near must be consecrated, set apart – prepared.”

But still, as I read the story I want them to at least push back. I want there to be some resistance to this hierarchical model of religion. And I find myself wanting to echo most loudly Moses’ own words: “Don’t be afraid.” Don’t be afraid to draw near to the thick darkness where God is, because God is *for* you. Don’t be afraid to push through it, to feel your way toward the fire whose flame is never consumed, for that fire is the light of the world. It’s a beautiful contrast that what emerges out of this dark, smoky haze on the mountain is the law, which the psalmist will paint as the lamp for our feet and the light for our path. But of course scripture is full of examples of darkness turned to light: in the first moments of creation God speaks and the darkness of the void is illuminated, brought to life; in the prophets we read of the people who walked in great darkness but have seen the light of life; and in the gospels out of the silence of centuries the light of the world emerges into the darkness of a stable one night, and the light shined in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

When the encounter on the mountaintop was over, when the smoke had cleared, the light behind it not extinguished but changed, moving on in a pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night, what was left for the people at the top of Mt. Sinai was more than just ashes. The fiery presence of God had offered them instructions, a place to begin – a shared experience around which to form their identity as a people, a story and a code of

ethics to carry with them – literally carry with them – and around which to shape the life of their community.

We live with these stories like so many ashes on a mountaintop. We scoop them up and sift through them, running the stories of the people of God between our fingers over and over again, but we too have more than ashes to guide us. This story, these commandments – they give us something to pick up and carry with us as we move forward through our own wilderness wanderings – a code around which we can shape our own ethical life. And in many ways, ten commandments aren't enough. Think of the hundreds of smaller laws that were needed to spell out how to live out these ten – and the thousands of rules and interpretations of rules that have been added on in the intervening centuries by one group or another of the faithful. I wonder what our Lake Shore commandments might be – thou shalt not use a male pronoun for God thoughtlessly; thou shalt not even think about suggesting a projector in the sanctuary.

And in other ways even having ten commandments really makes things more complicated than they need to be – aren't the first four really about living in right relationship with God, and the last six really about living in right relationship with our neighbors? Even Jesus, when he was asked the most important commandment, affirmed that all we really need to remember is to love God with our whole hearts, souls, minds, and with all our strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

As the people of God moved onward from that day at the mountain, now carrying with them the ark of the covenant – inside it, the tablets with God's commands – they certainly were not finished with experiences of walking through darkness, through days of wondering and wandering, of confusion and brokenness and fear.

But along with those ten "words," I like to think that Moses' words also echoed in their minds: "Do not be afraid." Which is not to say that there is not much to fear. Even when

we are prepared – consecrated, set apart – entering the thickness and deepness of God’s presence is risky business. God is light and life, yes, but if we really allow that light to illuminate our lives, what is it that we will see? What is it that God’s presence will ask of us? What will it ask of you? If we really consider what the way of the cross demands, what will we be forced to examine, and will we have to become willing to loosen our grip on our comforts and security, the privileges and benefits we have grown accustomed to? What difficult choices will we have to make? The psalmist says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom – I think this is true, as long as it isn’t the kind of fear that keeps us from being willing to draw near to God in the first place. As long as it’s the kind of fear that helps us to walk forward with our eyes wide open. May we walk forward with courage *and* the fear of the Lord, braving the smoke, braving the darkness, willing to see where this lamp for our feet, this light for our path, is leading us next.

Amen.