

THE TURKEY'S GIFT

Wild (Part 11) | Exodus 24

We live in something of a Fly-By Era. Do you know what I mean by that? The pace and practices of modern life often leave us flying past each other, exchanging pleasantries in the hall, saying we must get together, leaving just a little heart, a thumbs-up, a quick comment – maybe out of fear that if we said more we might get embroiled in a dialogue that demanded more. We're not bad or hard-hearted people. It's just that we are juggling so much these days. We've got places to go and things to do and kids to chase. It's only natural to look for limited liability, money-back, not-in-too-deep connections with activities and people. We need fast food, quick connections, bullet-point information. Involvement is OK. But commitment? I'll get back to you.

There is an old joke that is used to illustrate the difference between involvement and commitment. The joke goes that when someone puts a ham and eggs breakfast in front of you, you can see that a CHICKEN was involved, but a PIG was committed. If there is one headline for the message I want to share today it is that: ***We are most fulfilled not by fly-by involvements, but at the table of deep commitments.***

Think about that when you sit at some Thanksgiving table this week. Chances are that you'll see that a kind cook was involved but the turkey was committed. I'm speaking tongue-in-cheek here but seriously, think of what the sacrifice of that creature has done for people. The fact that that bird didn't just fly-by but laid down its life, makes a difference. It feeds people (and usually leaves them with leftovers). It slows them down (and that's not just the tryptophan in it)! The turkey creates an occasion for lingering fellowship with family or friends. It becomes the context where the sort of deep conversations and enduring connections that happen at banquet tables might just spring up. Alongside of all the other reasons for gratitude this season, I want to encourage you to give thanks this year for THE TURKEY'S GIFT and for anything else that reminds us that we are fulfilled not by fly-by involvements, but at the table of deep commitments.

This seems to be the message that emerges from the pages of the Bible, too. ***The story we read about in Exodus 24 is about the glory of deep commitments.*** As you may recall from last week, God's prophet, Moses, has just finished laying out for the children of Israel a set of precepts (or laws) designed to help their lives flourish and to protect the vulnerable against abuse. Chapter 24 opens up with God inviting Moses and a select guest list of others to climb up Mount Sinai for what will eventually culminate in a Thanksgiving meal of sorts.

The text says: **Then the Lord said to Moses, "Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu (those are Aaron's two oldest sons – great baby names, if you're looking), and seventy of the elders of Israel.** And then God speaks to the

whole crowd: **You are to worship at a distance, but Moses alone is to approach the Lord; the others must not come near. And the people may not come up with him” (Exo 24:1-2).** In other words: I’m inviting Moses alone into the kitchen with me and ask the rest of you to wait outside now.

Now, in-between this special invitation in verses 1-2 and the meal that will follow in verses 9-11, we’re told that Moses spends some time at the foot of the great mountain preparing himself and the children of Israel to encounter God. On a much lesser scale, I think back to the way that my mom and dad used to get us ready to drive up to my grandparents for the annual Thanksgiving banquet. They would make sure that we were recently bathed and wearing nice clothes. They would remind us of the manners Grannie and Granddaddy would expect to see us exercise. I don’t know if that pattern is familiar to any of you but, as head of the Hebrew Household, what Moses does here is like that -- only a lot bigger because God is a lot greater than any earthly authority.

The first thing Moses did was share with the Hebrew family the whole plan as God had given it to him – who was riding in his car, who would need to stay back and come later – the whole plan: **When Moses went and told the people all the Lord’s words and laws, they responded with one voice, “Everything the Lord has said we will do.”** Got it, Dad or Mom! Moses then wrote down everything the Lord had said (Exo 24:3-4), perhaps so that HE wouldn’t forget.

Then, **He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel.** It sort of sounds like a cross between constructing Stonehenge and setting up chairs in the dining room for everyone in the family. But what Moses is really doing is constructing an altar – a place of worship and sacrifice -- that will represent the commitment of all twelve branches of the Hebrew family to honoring and serving God.

Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the Lord. I know this concept of offering animals to build fellowship with God may sound pagan or weird but, if you think about it, we still do things like this. Not too long ago, Amy and I hosted some friends for dinner and decided to barbecue a beef tenderloin. The price of that bull was not small! But when we compared that cost to the value we feel for that group of friends. When we thought about tangibly expressing something of what our fellowship with them means to us, we were happy to make that offering. You make sacrifices to express your fellowship – your kinship commitment – to relationships you most value. What are some of the sacrifices you have made to signify your devotion to people in your life? Where are you sacrificing to express the value you feel for God?

The text goes on: **Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls** (we’ll learn what he does with that in a moment), **and the other half he splashed against the altar (Exo 24:5-6).** Again, this act can seem sort of gruesome, but the symbolism

here is that Moses is consecrating the altar by washing it with a symbol of the most valuable gift of all. Blood is LIFE! Today it might be like christening something with fine champagne or painting an altar with gold.

Then, before doing the next and most important part of the ritual of commitment, **[Moses] took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people.** The Book of the Covenant is shorthand for the instructions Moses had received from God and written down between Exodus 20:22 and Exodus 22:33. And for the second time: **They responded, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey."**

Now, let me pause the story here and make an observation. I recognize that some of us were raised in family or religious circles that were highly legalistic. We had a lot of burdens and obligations laid upon us. We sometimes felt controlled by others or shamed for our imperfections. So when we read this stuff in the Bible about Moses reading the law and the people saying, "**we will obey**," it understandably triggers us. It feels like the Israelites in their time or us in ours are signing up for something bad.

I get that. But that's not how the Hebrew people saw it. At least at this moment. Standing there at the great stone ALTAR table, the Twelve Tribes believe they are trading in the fly-by involvements they might have had with all the pagan gods out there and making a deep commitment to the greatest relationship of all. They are exchanging the anxiety of dating for the security of marriage. They are entering into what the Bible calls a COVENANT.

How much have you thought about what a covenant is? How clear are you about the difference between a COVENANT and a CONTRACT? The distinction is really important. Whether we think of ourselves as Covenant People or Contract Players will profoundly shape our lives. So let me briefly outline the difference.

A CONTRACT is a common, legal document. We make them in business all the time to establish and structure clear relationships. You do this and I'll do that. Contracts are regulated by the state, so if you aren't doing what you signed up for in the document, I take you to court. To some or even a great extent, contracts are based upon mistrust between two parties. They are embedded with opt out and termination clauses just in case the other side doesn't live up to the bargain. They contain fences to limit my risk and liability in this whole deal. A contract demands that satisfaction comes through the mutual benefit defined in the document. There is nothing wrong with a good contract.

A COVENANT, however, is something else. It's sacred as in special versus common. We don't make covenants that often. They are sacred, as in special. They are moral versus legal agreements, which is to say they depend far more on the character of the participants than the content of some document. They are based on the choice both sides make to deeply trust the other. Rather than being filled with escape clauses, covenants are intended to be highly enduring. And, unlike a contract, the failure of the

other side to live up to their commitment does not necessarily make the arrangement null and void because each side pledges to do their best to fulfill their commitment unilaterally. When I make a covenant, I embrace an unlimited opportunity to demonstrate my capacity for commitment and grow in my character and to let the other side make mistakes, learn and renew their character and commitment. Contracts aim at satisfaction through mutual benefit while covenants seek the joy that comes through mutual sacrifice.

I know this is a lot to take in. So let me try to summarize. In a world where people are permeated by sin and selfishness, contracts are absolutely necessary to minimize the spread of evil and injustice. But it is through the making and keeping of covenants that the life of the Kingdom of God gets expressed most beautifully. God makes and encourages covenants because they are the context where human beings are most challenged to behave more like him and experience the thriving that comes from that. Some of the covenantal relationships in your life may include your personal relationship with God, your marriage, your family life, and your citizenship in this constitutional republic. So, here's a helpful gut-check question for all of us: Where may I have slipped into being more of a Contract Player where God has called me to be a Covenant Person?

Moses reminded the Twelve Tribes of Israel that God had invited them into a special covenantal relationship with Him. *I will bless and preserve you and you will live out my commandments.* **Moses then took the blood** (of the fellowship offering from the bowls I mentioned earlier), **sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Exo 24:8).**

Like the sacraments of baptism and communion in the New Testament, this sprinkling of blood has multiple meanings but one above all. It supremely signifies the atoning sacrifice needed for the forgiveness and washing away of sin – the condition that dims our capacity for commitment to anyone but ourselves and even distorts our sense of what is good for us. The blood sacrifice system evidenced here and throughout the Old Testament was God's way of helping the people of that time take seriously the cost of sin. But it was also preparing future generations to understand how freedom from sin will be ultimately won. You see, neither Moses, the Israelites, nor you and I can approach a truly holy God without some life paying the price for our sin. And for the sin not just of Israel but of the whole world, it will take the blood of a LIFE even greater than this world to make us clean enough to come into the presence of God.

We must always remember, however, that forgiving our sin is not God's final agenda. God is far more ambitious than that. He wants to restore our life-giving communion with Him. He wants to establish an intimate relationship with Him for which a lesser but still helpful image is the sort of joyful fellowship we might experience at a Thanksgiving table. And so Exodus 24 pictures Moses and his closest compatriots climbing the

mountain and coming into the visible presence of God. The text says: **Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel.**

At this point, the account dissolves into the sort of language we find in the Book of Ezekiel or Revelation – the sort of poetry and analogy that human beings always use to describe something so transcendent and magnificent that it is indescribable. **Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli** (the strongest, most beautiful and precious stone known in ancient times), **as bright blue as the sky.** By that we can infer that they met a Being of crystal-clear purity, radiant beauty and glorious power. For a human to enter the presence of such holiness should be the end of life. Instead, it was apparently a beginning. As they were covered in the blood of the covenant, **God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank (Exo 24:9-11).**

There is more to the narrative that we don't have time to explore today. Suffice it to say that if you read on further you'll hear how God invites Moses to come up even higher on the mountain where he gives him the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone. While Moses is gone, however, the children of Israel forget their side of the Covenant and turn once again to worshipping and serving idols. Sounds like us, doesn't it? God out of sight, God out of mind. Our god, anything. More on that next week.

But let me ask you this in closing: Is there another story you've heard that is anything like this? After all, Moses himself once prophesied: **"The LORD your God will raise up a prophet like me"** (Deut 18:15). Could the parallels between this story and somebody else's story be a pointer aimed at helping us take THAT next person's story more seriously? Is it possible that God orchestrated the whole Old Testament Story to prime people to understand the New Testament Story so that you and I might start looking more intently for the presence and message of God in Our Story? In other words, could human problems across the ages and their answer be much the same?

I suspect that but this I know for sure. There's a table out there this week where you'll have a chance to talk about and give thanks for the beauty and impact of those who've sacrificed for you – people who didn't live a fly-by life but made deeper commitments and lived out covenants. Learn from them. And then, please join me next week as we close out this series with one final message. I've entitled it, THE TABERNACLE: Where God Makes His Dwelling. I promise you that this final installment will be nothing short of... what's the word for the amazing way God works in our lives? Oh, yeah... WILD.