

## *Remember the Lord*

Exodus 20:1-2

1/10/2021

Randy Lovelace

I begin this week with a new series titled *Renewal in the Wilderness*. Before I go further, let me explain the title. The title comes from the reality that wilderness in the Bible should not first and foremost bring to mind what we think of, or at least what I think of, with regard to wilderness. This is not a wilderness that is full of beautiful trees and flowering forests as we think of with the Pacific Northwest or the Blue Ridge Mountains. This is speaking of the wilderness as they would have understood it in and around Israel which is pictured here in the announcement of this new series. It would have been a place of caves and desert, of very difficult places to survive with very little water and very little vegetation and ways to find refuge.

Yet, it would be in the wilderness that the Lord would lead His people. Although the wilderness seems to them while in the midst of it to be a place that they need to escape, a place to wonder whether the Lord is with them or has simply led them into the wilderness to die, it was in the wilderness that the Lord would remind them that He is their God. It was in the wilderness that He would bring them into a relationship, and in that relationship, He would seek to renew them and to give them a way of life within that relationship that would be for them a way of blessing, a way to move forward particularly in a place that is not hospitable with a seemingly unending horizon. And He says to them in the midst of this wilderness, "I am the Lord your God."

While we find ourselves, sometimes emotionally and sometimes very physically, in what feels to us to be a wilderness of a horizon that we cannot see, of an uncertain future, we begin to wonder, is the Lord with us? Will we make it through? And I felt and believed in my time of preparation at the end of 2020 that the Lord was leading me to find and encamp myself on these truths and to lead us in a series over these next 12 weeks as we look at this *Renewal in the Wilderness* as God gives to them Himself and as He invites them into relationship, but as He gives them a rule of life which is what we know as the Ten Commandments. He gives them a rule of what life looks like and how they are to live inside of this relationship.

We begin this morning in Exodus 20. I'll begin this morning with the prologue in Exodus 20:1-2. Hear now God's word to us.

And God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Lord, by your grace and mercy, through the power of your Holy Spirit together with your eternal word, may you feed us, renew us, lead us, strengthen us that we would rejoice in your love and know how to live. Renew us, O Lord. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

This morning as we look at these two verses which are short in length but full of power, I want you to see three things. The Lord has spoken. The Lord has redeemed. The Lord has directed.

As the Lord has given to His people this call and reminder, it would be a phrase that the Lord would repeat over and over again and does throughout the scriptures. But first and foremost, we must understand that what Exodus 20:1 says is something that seems to be simply and introductory announcement for Moses of what he reports in this word, that "God spoke." But it has more in it than merely describing an action of the Lord. It is to be greeted not merely by words, but it is together with His character, His power, His authority, His holiness. It is no less an event. It is an event so powerful that it is described here as so momentous that in verse 18 of Chapter 20, the people of God would respond this way to God speaking.

Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin." The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was. [ESV]

It is very clear that God speaking here is for us to be something that causes us to be awakened. What is it that the Lord is saying? And the way that He is saying it, it is all bound up in His character because when God is speaking here, when the Lord has spoken, He first speaks with His faithfulness. Notice what he says. "And God spoke all these words, saying, 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.'" This comes on the heel of God speaking through Moses in Exodus 19:3,

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." [ESV]

When God speaks, even when He speaks His faithfulness, the earth trembles because to speak of His faithfulness is to speak of the power of His redemption. He is faithful to uphold His promises. He redeemed them from slavery. He utterly crushed their enemies.

But more than the Lord speaking His faithfulness in these two verses, He also speaks His mission. When He says, "I am the Lord your God," He is repeating something that is to them an expression of His mission to redeem them and for them to recognize that He is their redeemer God, but He does so in the echoing of what He says in Exodus 19. "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." Then verse 5, "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my commandments, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine." This is a picture that as the Lord speaks of His faithfulness, in His mission to redeem Israel, Israel then is to be a picture of what He wants to do with the entire world. "The earth is mine."

The Lord is speaking His mission. This is repeated throughout the book of Exodus in so many words. He says it in Exodus 8, in Exodus 9. He repeats over and over again that the world belongs to me, that He means for the whole world to know of His faithful promise, that what He has done for this nation He means to do for the entire world. I will redeem. For the Lord has spoken.

But then He says, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." The Lord doesn't just speak His faithfulness or His mission. He does so in what theologians call a covenant relationship. And I think that is right. But what they mean by "covenant" is it is a unilateral work of God to bring them into a covenant and, dare I say it, legal relationship. But to begin with legality or even to end with legality is to rob it of its power. Yes, He's doing something that is very legal, and He's doing it in a way that the people of Israel would have understood relationships between a king and a people. But the reality is it is suffused. It is bookended. It is filled with the love of God speaking. This is a covenant like no other, that any nation throughout the world and no nation in the ancient near east would have understood for nothing like it had ever been seen for God speaks His love covenantally on this people.

As one theologian wrote,

"What Yahweh, the Lord, had done for Israel was truly outstanding, not the least because of its uniqueness. What other God had ever rescued an entire people from bondage, leading them out of a superpower's oppression through miraculous means? If any ancient people believed that there existed even a remote parallel to the Israelite exodus, it is utterly unknown in any existing literature."

God has spoken His faithfulness, His mission, and His love to take a people and to rescue them from slavery because He loved them. This is what God is doing. And it is for us as a people, as the church of Jesus Christ who are recipients of the word that tell of this story, we speak of the Lord's speaking of His faithfulness, of His mission, of His love because the fulfillment of what God speaks here is seen when He speaks through His Son the Lord, our savior Jesus Christ who sets His love on us and calls us into a relationship with Himself.

And so I say to you, remember the Lord has spoken to you. I invite you if you are a believer, and I especially invite you if you are a member or regular part of this communion of believers. I ask you have we grown so accustomed that we become immune to God speaking His faithfulness, His mission, His love over us in Jesus Christ that we do not tremble with joy, that we do not erupt in worship? Have we taken the Lord for granted? The Lord has spoken to us. And He is speaking to you today, that in Christ Jesus He is faithful to us. His mission is to renew and redeem us and to restore all things. And His love is what animates it.

But these verses not only tell us that the Lord has spoken. They say also that the Lord has redeemed. When He says, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery," it is to be another reminder that when the Lord says He has brought them out of the land of slavery, the Lord has redeemed first with unmerited favor.

Israel was a small nation. They did nothing. They did not call on the Lord. They did not ask Him to visit them. The Lord set His love on them, and it was a unilateral act of God's choosing to redeem Israel. Again, the accentuation of the verbs is on God's direct action first. It is yet another reminder that the Lord says when He redeems, thanks be to God, it has nothing to do with Israel and nothing to do with you or me. We do not merit it.

For on this promise and on this reality, Paul reminds us when he writes to the church at Ephesus,

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. [ESV]

Where would Paul have first learned of God's unilateral redemption? It was based on His unmerited favor. It is grounded in the great miraculous act of God redeeming Israel from its slavery in Egypt. This is the biblical pattern of God's redemption. It is first, it is in the middle, and it is in the end, God's unmerited favor.

But it is even more than unmerited favor as if God is doing us a favor which we did not ask. He does it also with His loving kindness. And I want us, as I've said before, to use God's guided Spirit to allow our imagination to hear the words when God speaks through Moses to the nation of Israel, and He says, "And God spoke all these words, saying, 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,'" God is speaking His loving kindness in this. He's showing us who He is, but He's also showing us who we are.

In reminding Israel of their enslavement and of their condition, when Paul speaks of our condition and our nature being dead in sin, God is speaking His loving kindness. And this loving kindness enables you and me to finally come and to have a place where we can say in utter powerlessness, I am undone. I can do nothing. Who am I that you would love me? Who am I? Who are we that you would demonstrate your loving kindness that you would tell the truth about our brokenness and powerlessness and then pour out your love?

Friends, if you think this is some obscure notion or theologizing, let me just encourage you to watch a 2019 film documentary *The Painter and the Thief*. It's not a Christian story, but it tells of just this kind of loving kindness. The story is of a Czech painter Barbora Kysilkova who moved to Norway with her boyfriend to continue in her craft as a painting artist. After her first gallery exposition where all of her painstakingly painted masterpieces were on display with the cheers and accolades of others, two men, of whom one of them had been on a four-day bender on heroine, broke into the gallery and stole two of her most prized pieces. They did so under the watchful eye of security camera. The men were picked up and arrested and brought to court.

For the one, whose name is Karl, the very first day sitting in court, Barbora Kysilkova would be in court that day, and she would see him sitting on the other side of the courtroom. The audio of the court case was carried that day, and we are able to listen in to what happened. She turns to her friends, she says, "I'm going to go over and speak to him." She goes over and speaks to Carl, acknowledges who she is. He acknowledges who he is, and he immediately says that he is sorry. She then in a crazy act turns to him and says, "Would you be willing to let me paint a portrait of you?"

What would follow would be hours and hours of him sitting in her studio, and her first drawing him and photographing him. After weeks and months, she would finish a beautifully oiled painting of him. She brought him back to her studio after he had been incarcerated, and she would unveil the painting. And he sat there in stunned silence looking back at himself lovingly painted, and it was as if he had never seen himself lovingly painted before. And he began to weep. He then embraced her, and he wept.

I believe it is because a man so broken on whom no one had showed love but only shame and embarrassment, including himself, finally saw himself through the eyes of one who would righteously be angry at him but instead lovingly painted a portrait of him. Friends, when God says to Israel, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of slavery," is a loving kind God who says you were broken in sin and slavery, and I have brought you out. He is a God so loving that He's willing to show us the truth but also reveal the greater truth of His redeeming grace, His unmerited favor.

Not only do these verses announce God speaking and His redeeming, but they also show us that the Lord has directed. While we will not get into it this particular week, He then begins to announce ten words as understood in the Hebrew, ten commandments. Here, I want you to remember that the Lord does not announce His commandments, His rule of life for His people, prior to redeeming them. He only does so on the other side of redemption.

Hear this, God's people. The Lord does not require obedience of us that He does not first give us the strength and redeeming grace to do. He does not expect Israel to do these things and then get into His love. Rather, it only comes as a result of Him setting His redeeming gracious love. And He does speak this rule of life.

When He speaks this rule of life, He intends that all the things that we will unpack over the next several weeks to be the center of gravity, for what the relationship between the Lord and His people should look like, how the people are to live in this covenant relationship with their God. And we must understand that while God's covenant has a relational undergirding infrastructure protection, it also has moral claims. It has ethical behaviors that come with being in this relationship.

Friends, do you know we celebrate this all the time even though we look at God and say, oh, here

we go again, we're going to talk about what God commands? But if we start with the commandments, we fail to see that they only come as the result of and in the middle of a loving relationship. You see, we celebrate this all the time.

I brought with me this morning the notebook that I use when I conduct weddings. Let me read the vow that I then call the husband to when I announce it. "Do you have this woman to be your wife, and will you pledge your life to her and all love and honor, in all duty and service, in all faith and tenderness, to live with her and cherish her according to the ordinance of God and in the holy bond of marriage, do you?" Then after they've made this commitment, I again turn first to the husband, and I say, "Do you take this woman to be your wedded wife, and do you promise and covenant before God and these witnesses to be her loving and faithful husband in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health as long as you both shall live?"

This is what is announced to every husband and every wife as they come together. And we rejoice in it. We tear up at it. We applaud for it. Why? Because we inherently understand that when such a precious relationship is inaugurated, it has within it, all around it, undergirding it, empowering it the love of two people, but that love has moral claims, ethical boundaries so much so that we would be enraged if a newly wedded husband or wife were to leave that ceremony and live unfaithfully to their spouse that very day. Why? Because there are now legal claims. There's relational love. There are moral obligations.

What is happening here is that the Lord has said, I have married you. And this is what He says to His church. The church of Jesus Christ is the bride of Christ of which He is the groom. And He gives us a rule of life, but it is also a blessing. The Lord shows us in this rule of life the blessed way to live and to enjoy His loving kindness because even in the Lord showing us how to live, He is pouring out His grace.

This is what the Lord has done and how He desires to renew His people in the midst of the wilderness. And He calls His people, and He calls us in this new year, remember the Lord. Remember the Lord for He has spoken. He has redeemed. He has directed. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we ask that you by your grace and mercy and loving kindness would renew us for you have rescued us out of sin and death by your unmerited favor, by the promises of your loving kindness, and you have set our feet upon a rock, and you have shown us how to live. Thank you, Lord, for telling us the truth about ourselves, our need of forgiveness and redemption, but your mission to restore us and to restore all things. Now, Lord, we ask as you show us the way to live that we would receive it as a blessing and that we would rejoice as the bride of Christ, as the church of God, as your nation Israel in the world, the church of Christ, may we rejoice that you have redeemed us and shown us how to live. Lord, help us not to take you for granted but to be renewed, restored, forgiven, and strengthened for your ways in the world. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.