

After leaving Egypt, the children of Israel camped at the base of Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:1). There God promised to make a covenant with the Israelites: *Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, 'Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You 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 obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites'* (Ex. 19:3-6).

God promises that Israel will be “a priestly kingdom” and a “holy nation,” which are some pretty significant promises. A kingdom assumes a king to lead it: God promises to be Israel's King, a condition that would remain until the Israelites begged God to give them a king *like all the other nations* (1 Sam. 8:20) and Saul is chosen as the first human King of Israel. So, Israel will be a kingdom, with God as its King.

But Israel will also be a “priestly” kingdom. There were priests associated with foreign gods in both Egypt and Mesopotamia, but there had never been a group within Israel selected to be priests. Here God chooses the entire nation to be God's priests, acting as God's representatives, a light to the nations of the world, and the means by which God's blessing – as promised through Abraham – will reach all peoples. Israel, then, is both a kingdom consisting of priests (people set apart to God for a special purpose) and also “royal priests” (people who belong to God, the King). Such a role gives Israel unprecedented privilege and access to God. This idea is echoed in the New Testament and is the basis for the Reformation teaching that all Christians are a “priesthood of believers.” *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light* (1 Peter 2:9).

God also promises that Israel will be a “holy nation.” The term “nation” refers to “a body of people associated with a particular territory who are sufficiently conscious of their unity to seek or to possess a government peculiarly their own.”<sup>1</sup> Israel would become this kind of nation in time; but Israel is more than just a group of people who govern themselves, Israel is a “holy” nation, a people innately sacred because they are chosen by a sacred God. Those who are holy are set apart from the common or the ordinary to be sacred, devoted to and belonging exclusively to the Holy God. As God's holy people, Israel is to refrain from worshipping other gods and to keep faithful to God. Later, Jesus includes the Gentiles in this holy nation when he says: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* (Matt. 28:18-19).

God promises Israel special status among the nations, and the people get so excited that even before they even know the exact conditions of the contract, they agree to abide by whatever God

said: *The people all answered as one: 'Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do.'* Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD (Ex. 19:8). The condition of the covenant was adherence to the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1-17), a series of rules governing the God-to-human relationships (#1-4), and human-to-human relationships (#5-10). God intended that these commandments would mold the Israelites into a “priestly kingdom” and a “holy nation.” God wrote them on stone tablets to help Israel remember them.

Now, I know you all know the Ten Commandments and I know you follow them to the letter, so I don't need to review them; but I will share with you the Ten Commandments that were written especially for God's super-special people in Minnesota: 1) Der's only one God, ya know; 2) Don't make dat fish on yer mantle an idol; 3) Cussing ain't Minnesota nice; 4) Go to church - even when yer up nort; 5) Honor yer folks; 6) Don't kill. Catch and release; 7) No cheatin! Der's only one Lena fer every Ole; 8) If it ain't yer Lutefisk, don't take it; 9) Don't be braggin' about how much snow ya shoveled; 10) Keep yer mind off yer neighbor's hotdish.

After giving the Commandments, the people asked God to speak no more (Ex. 20:18-20), preferring to have Moses as their mediator. Moses then drew near to the presence of God to hear the rest of the covenant (Ex. 20:21), which included laws about worship, economics, and civil government (Ex. 21-24). After receiving the Law, Moses spoke the words of the covenant to the people, and the people again agreed to obey (Ex. 24:4). The Israelites proved a stiff-necked people (unwilling to bow their heads before God) and stubbornly disobedient (Ex. 32:9). God sought to destroy the Israelites for their disobedience, but Moses, acting as mediator, asked God for mercy (Ex. 32: 10-11, 31-32) which God granted. Later, when Moses saw the people's idolatry and their golden calf, he too, became angry: he broke the stone tablets and destroyed their idol (Ex. 32:19-20).

The Mosaic Covenant (sometimes called the Sinai Covenant) is centered on God giving the divine Law to the Israelites. The people are to obey God's Law in order to be a “priestly kingdom” and a “holy nation.” The Mosaic Covenant differs significantly from other biblical covenants because it is conditional: the blessings that God promises are directly related to Israel's obedience to the Mosaic Law. If Israel is obedient, then God will bless them; but if they disobey, God will punish them. (See the blessings and curses in Deut. 28.) This is a bilateral agreement, which specifies the obligations of both parties to the covenant, and to which Israel agreed, saying: *Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do'* (Ex. 19:18).

The Mosaic Covenant is significant because in it God promises to make Israel “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” ( Ex.19:6). Israel was to be God's light to the dark world around them. They were to be a separate and called-out nation so that everyone around them would know that they worshiped Yahweh, the covenant-keeping God. The Mosaic Covenant is especially significant

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<sup>1</sup> The American College Dictionary

because it is here that Israel received the Mosaic Law that pointed the way towards the coming of Christ (Gal. 3:24-25). The Mosaic Law revealed to people their sinfulness and their need for a Savior, and it is the Mosaic Law that Christ Himself said that He did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.

This is an important point because some people get confused by thinking that keeping the Law saves people. The Bible is very clear that salvation is by faith alone, and the promise of salvation by faith that God made to Abraham still remained in effect (Gal. 3:16-18). The system of sacrifices and offerings in the Mosaic Covenant did not take away sins either (Heb. 10:1-4); it simply foreshadowed the bearing of our sins by Christ, the perfect high priest who was also the perfect sacrifice (Heb. 9:11-28).

The Mosaic Covenant anchored the people of Israel to God for more than 1,500 years. But even while it was in effect, God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah and its replacement: *The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt — a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the LORD’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more* (Jer. 31:31-34).

The final covenant, the New Covenant brought about by Jesus, is the fulfillment of God's plans to redeem creation. Jesus made this New Covenant, not by *the blood of bulls and goats* which could not take away sins (Heb. 10:4), but with his own life given for us, by *the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect* (1 Peter 1:19). We remember this New Covenant today, with Christians around the world, as we celebrate World Communion Sunday. The Israelites had the Ten Commandments on stone tables to remember God's Law and God's faithfulness; we have bread and the cup to remind us of the New Covenant. In Christ's body broken to atone for our sins and by his blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins, we remember God's love and faithfulness, and we renew our claim as God's people according to the New Covenant.

Prayer: Father God, thank you for the immense privilege of being called to know you and walk with you as your special and holy agents and priests. We are not qualified in ourselves, but you have made us holy and worthy through the everlasting covenant in Jesus Christ. Help us to be a light to the nations for the sake of your Kingdom. In his name, we thank and praise you. Amen

# The Covenant with Moses

**World Communion Sunday, October 2, 2016**

**The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN**

## Exodus 19:1-8

Covenants are promises: specifically promises made by God to God's people. We've noted that there are eight characteristics common to biblical covenants. A Covenant is: 1) initiated by God; 2) Made to a faithful person, not a perfect person; 3) given to multiple generations; 4) universal in scope, they are for all people who hear and obey God's Word; 5) unconditional, for it relies on God's Word and power and not ours; 6) always fulfilled, even if it takes a long time; 7) accompanied by a sign to help us remember God's faithfulness; and 8) a foreshadow of the New Covenant we have in Jesus Christ.

So far we've studied the covenants God made with Noah (a promise not to flood the world again) and with Abraham (a promise of land, nation, and blessing), and we've noted how God renewed the covenant with Abraham's heirs, Isaac and to Jacob. It was Jacob, later renamed Israel, who's twelve sons later became the patriarchs of the nation of Israel. But before that happened, Jacob's most famous son, Joseph, was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, where he interpreted dreams for Pharaoh and saved Egypt from a famine. Joseph moved his father and brothers and their families to Egypt to live, saving God's people from starvation.

But a new leader rose up in Egypt, a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph, and this Pharaoh turned the Israelites into slaves. The people cried out to God, and *God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob* (Ex. 2:24). So, God raised up a leader to free them: Moses, a Hebrew slave raised in Pharaoh's household. Moses was not a perfect person – God found Moses hiding in the wilderness because he had killed an Egyptian man – but Moses was faithful to God's call. Moses returned and confronted Pharaoh with the famous words of God: “Let my people go!” (Ex. 9:1)

After a series of ten plagues upon the land of Egypt, God brought the Israelites out *of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand* (Ex. 32:11). God divided the Red Sea and brought the people to safety and set them on the road to the Promised Land. But the people grumbled (Ex. 15:24) about the food and the living conditions, and they grumbled about Moses and his leadership. For their griping bellyaching, God ordained that they should wander in the wilderness for 40 years, during which time – God hoped – they would learn how to be a people worthy of a great God.