

Commentary 17:8-20:21

When I am wrapping something up, be it a preaching series, a chapter in a book or even a paragraph in an article, I oftentimes pose the question, “Where do we go from here?”

It’s a question that continues the conversation. It invites readers and listeners to take ownership and become active participants.

Of course, Where Do We Go from Here is also the title of Martin Luther King, Jr’s last book before his assassination in 1968. A collection of essays that invites Americans to choose between chaos and community, readers are invited to take ownership and become active participants in issues of racial and social justice.

Because King is a preacher through and through, you can’t *not* read the essays without hearing the swell and syncopation of his voice, the justice-filled heartbeat of his words. Even if the content is more political than theological, power is still there.

God is still present.

As we wrap up this series on the first half of Exodus, I believe we’re asked the same question on multiple levels. Where do we go from here, not only when it comes to reading the Bible, but also to finishing the book of Exodus? Where do we go from here, as we respond to the many invitations present in the book? Where do we go from here, in ultimately choosing between chaos and community?

If the past seven weeks have taught me anything, I am reminded that our story isn’t all that different from this story of the people of God. Still, God chases after us with wild abandon. Still, we don’t always know how to respond. Still, God invites us in. Still, we can be a most wishy-washy kind of people, even if we know, deep down in our heart of hearts that there’s nowhere we’d rather be—which is to say, than with God.

As I sat with this week’s reading, I couldn’t help but notice the many present themes of community, including of the God who intentions a “maximally responsive,” dynamic kind of relationship.

Take for example, the scene when the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai, the beginning place. One commentator writes that “the promise has come full circle, and

yet, the true journey is just beginning: the covenant relationship between Israel and God.” Although the relationship already existed, we are dared to cast a vision of a kind of life that could be—a kind of life, one might say, that can only happen “when we devote ourselves to the relationships we share with God and with each other.”

Soon thereafter, Exodus 20 introduces us to one of the most well-known passages in the Bible, the Ten Commandments. While the Decalogue is often merely seen as a set of rules to follow, many theologians remind readers to view the ten in light of relationship.

Theologian Cory Driver reminds readers of the oratorical nature, both of the Hebrew people but also of scripture’s history. Ancient Jewish commentators pay particular attention to the first verse in chapter 20, “When God spoke all these words.” The phrase “to say” prompts a response: “The people responded to every commandment that followed, saying ‘Yes’ to all the affirmative commandments and ‘No’ to all the negative commandments.”

I don’t know about you, but that visual changes the way I view this scene: no longer are these revelations of law merely a monologue performed but a one-sided God. Instead, imagining the people of God speaking a distinct “yes” or “no” after each law, points us back to relationship. This, Driver surmises, means that “these commandments are at their heart, all aimed to prevent a breakdown in relationship between humans on the one hand, and between God and the beloved community on the other hand.”

When we then ask ourselves King’s question, “Where do we go from here?” the answer is clear. The answer when we have to choose between chaos and community, is always, clearly community. But this, of course, is tricky, when belonging to a community sometimes feels like it comes with a whole lot of rules and regulations, with rigid lists of rights and responsibilities.

And what does it mean to belong to one another when we no longer know how to *be* community anymore?

A couple of weeks ago, I reflected on one loss of the pandemic: I didn’t feel like I knew how to be a good friend anymore. The same, certainly, can be said of community, when two years of masks and stay-at-home orders, social-distancing regulations and a plethora of Zoom and Google Meet calls, have impeded some of us from knowing how to interact with one another in person.

Sometimes, it's easier to hide behind my yoga pants and computer screen. Sometimes, it's easier to avoid conversation, instead of stumbling my way through several awkward minutes of small talk.

But these chapters remind us of treasuredness.

When God says, "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" (19:5), the language of being treasured is clear. God accords the Israelites a "place of honor among the nations ... the people are to guard with God above all." Their identity secured, the nation of Israel would come to be known by this relationship, "a treasured possession and a priestly kingdom," one commentator writes.

Through Christ, the same treasuredness is extended to us—even in all of our awkwardness, when we've forgotten how to be with one another.

Instead, we are dared to go out and believe our treasuredness. Go out and choose community. Go out and live the identity that is already ours.

Perhaps that is the answer to the question, "Where do we go from here?"

Friends, it has been an honor to journey with you over the last seven weeks. Though this is my last reflection, it's not the end of the Good Book Club. Stay tuned next week as we wrap up the first half of Exodus and offer suggestions for reading the second half during Lent.