

Wilderness Covenants in Columbia, MD

Series: What Is the Gospel?

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That is one of my favorite hymns. “This is my father's world. Why should my heart be sad? The Lord is king--Let the heavens ring.”

All right. Well, let's get right down to it. For those who don't know me, my name is John Song. I am the Director of Youth Ministries here at Columbia Presbyterian Church. If you could turn in your Bibles to Exodus 19. Exodus 19. We are continuing our sermon series on “What Is the Gospel?” by way of covenant, and we've arrived in the wilderness. Exodus 19:1-6.

¹On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. ²They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, ³while 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: ⁴You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now 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; ⁶and 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.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let me pray for us. God, we long for you in the wilderness—with hurricanes that have affected a great number of people in Haiti; with the country in America has been divided by so many racial, political, social lines; the circumstances in our life, every day in our relationships in our work, in our families. Lord, we often lose sight in the wilderness of your great promises to us. It's often hard to see how your words, even your law, can provide us comfort. Father, I pray that today as we explore these themes and scriptures we can walk away encouraged, refreshed, renewed, reminded again that you are faithful and that your law, your words never change and that you have sent Christ to redeem us. Lord, may that be the thing that encourages us here. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Well, I want to start off by sharing a little bit of a game with you all: “Name That TV Show.” All right, here's the premise of the show. It couldn't be more predictable, right? Now a person enters onto a stage, relatively unknown, filled with fear or anxiety over what they're about to do. Three judges stand waiting in front of them—one preferably with a British accent—awaiting to hear his story where he has overcome adversity in his early life and is now living a normal life, but not really following their true passion. So the judges briefly tell them to perform, and suddenly something magical happens that causes everyone in the audience, the judges, the viewers on television, to see this person completely differently. This normal person becomes something extraordinary right before our eyes. And when this person finishes, the audience erupts, right, and suddenly this person on stage realizes—maybe for the first time—that his passion in life is valued by others around him. Each of the judges confirm and they, you know, give praises, and at the end of the conclusion, the judges say, “I want you to be on here.” And

the drama unfolds, everyone rejoices, and then we hit a commercial break. During the commercial break chatter happens. You're all *Oh, my gosh, that was so amazing!* And suddenly this person who was once nameless becomes international news, Internet memes, Facebook fodder.

Now what show did I just describe? Many of you have your reality television competition show of choice in your mind right now. If you're familiar at all, you know I've just described the premises of "American Idol" "The Voice" "X Factor" "America's Got Talent" "Britain's Got Talent" "Master Chef" and maybe to a lesser degree, shows aren't so popular, "America's Next Top Model" "So You Think You Can Dance" "The Biggest Loser" "Last Comic Standing" "H.D.T.V. Design Star" "Cupcake Wars" and maybe to a more deplorable degree "Who Wants to Marry a Multimillionaire?" and the all too unfortunate "Paris Hilton is my new B.F. F." So. Why is this theme so played out on television? Why do we continually have all of these? Why are we drawn to this kind of story? And perhaps the bigger question you're having right now is: What in the world does this have to do with Exodus 19? Well, I'll get there.

You see, the past couple weeks we've been going over this question of: "What is the gospel?" A question that on the surface we've covered is a four chapter gospel of creation, fall, redemption, new creation. And now we've been exploring this theme of the four chapter gospel through the story of covenant through Scripture. And how this plays out in the story is God continually coming into human history to rescue and redeem a people whom he created to love and worship him, a people that continually reject him, that continually spurn his favor. And despite that, God's disposition is one of grace. And throughout this narrative God himself continues to enter into this story by way of covenant and reveals more layers of what his promises mean to his people. And here in this story in Exodus 19 we see these covenant promises being given to a people in the wilderness of despair.

So for those of you who aren't familiar with the Exodus narrative let me just set the scene here a little bit to the eighteen chapters prior. The Israelites are in the midst of a massive exodus—freedom from the political, racial, religious, humanitarian oppression from Pharaoh in Egypt. They were crying out for a savior, and prior to their exit they experienced some of the most unbelievable things of God's power mightily at work. I mean, you know: water turning into blood, thunderstorms of hail and fire, disease, livestock and boils, locusts, frogs, [everybody's sees opening], God turns off the electricity for a couple of days. Right? Like divine stuff, right? God finally takes them out of slavery in such a dramatic fashion that we see the people of Israel rejoicing and they're resting in the promise that God made to them and they're resting in the truth that God would lead them to the promised land. I mean, they finally think: *This is it! The Abrahamic covenant is going to be fulfilled. We are going to finally get that redemption that we have always waited for!* It's like seeing that Christmas gift underneath the tree; it's in the exact box outline of that thing that you wanted, right. You were just waiting for that day to come. (I know it's too early to talk about Christmas, but who cares, right?) You are simply waiting for the day to be able to open your gift. And that is precisely what the Israelites are feeling right now as they're going on this exodus. They're like: *Finally the covenant will be fulfilled. Finally we will see the redemption we were waiting for.*

And then unexpectedly God does something a little bit interesting. He sends the Israelites into the wilderness. For forty four days they travel from the home town of Goshen to Sinai, traveling

with all their families, property, animals, complaining kids—going about a pace of nine miles a day with all of their...everything, carrying everything with them. They traveled about 400 miles to get to Sinai, which by the way is nowhere near the promised land that God was going to send them to. It's at this point the Israelites suddenly don't have a rosy picture of God's promises anymore, do they. They start to doubt: *Did God really promise to bring us here? What's happening here?* The wilderness of despair for them brings primarily a theological doubt amongst the people of God of Israel which leads, then, to their response that you see here.

In the first eighteen chapters we see all different kinds of complaining and grumbling, which I'll get into it a little bit. But you've got to understand here, you've got to be able to make a connection with what's happening in the Exodus narrative is that that's the realities and the struggles and the doubts of every generation of believers. The Exodus is a type of exodus for all parts of redemptive history, in every part of the covenant, in every part of our lives. This is why the Old Testament matters. This is far from just being a history with strange names that no one can pronounce. This is more than just the stuff that happened before Jesus came. The Old Testament matters to us. The wilderness wandering for all of us can cause us to doubt God's covenantal promises because there is much surrounding our lives as distractions, both in the selfishness of the heart and in the lies of Satan which are telling you not to trust in God. There are wildernesses that we run into and then there are wildernesses that we create for ourselves through our sin. And every day you are being continually told by the world that your life isn't as fulfilling as it could possibly be, that your life isn't as joyful, or as fruitful, as it could be right now.

And we feel that no matter where you live. I mean, do you realize that the very fact that you attend this church means that you are in the relative proximity of "The #1 Ranked City in America"? Right? In America, supposedly the greatest country on God's green earth. And now even as I say that your mind is creating reasons to dispute that claim. *Columbia, #1? Come on. Right? Our snow removal is terrible. Right? We have to pay a Columbia Association tax. I mean, have you seen the parking on the mall on the weekends? I can't find a spot anywhere. Right? The Chick fil A on Route 100—always packed. Can't ever get my chicken sandwich on time. We sort of come up with these reasons of why even living here is "a wilderness."*

Now those are superficial, I'll acknowledge that. But even in the fact that we live in all this comfort, let me get down to some real wilderness wanderings, wildernesses of despair that you might be entering into right now, that no amount of money, comfort, possessions, or a perfect family situation, perfect schooling, can assuage. There exists a tragedy in this world. And you have to look no further than the devastation of, let's say, last week to confirm that, right. There is death that exists, and it's inescapable. There's our lives, lives filled with regret, missed opportunities, broken relationships, failure—whether it comes from inward (that you condemn and blame yourself) to maybe the failure that you feel from others around you (that you haven't lived up to the expectations of the people that you care about the most.) This is constant in each and every single one of our lives. And you might be facing these realities here today, and you might just be like these Israelite in the exodus, in the wilderness, wondering, *God, what's going on here? What's happening?* We will always be in a wilderness of despair, whether real, superficial or not. And wilderness wondering doesn't necessarily mean that hard times have befallen you, but rather that you have lost your way in living in the faith that God is faithful to his covenant promises. Wilderness wandering can sometimes just be the echo of

Exodus 17:7: Is the Lord among us or not?

Well, God steps in to this picture in Exodus 19 with the reassurance and a revelation. The reassurance is what we read here when he says to them—look at this with me in verse 3. “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.’” How does God reassure people who are in the wilderness of despair? He's calling them to remember that he has been faithful to his promises. Remember that promise that he gave to Moses in Exodus 3:12? Right? He would take the people out of the land of Egypt and serve God on this mountain. Where they again? Oh, Mount Sinai. Out of Egypt. God has done what he said that he would do. God is reassuring the Israelites that his promises are assured and amen. That they will be redeemed and restored because they have already been redeemed and restored from the slavery of their circumstances. These reassurances are there to remind them of the promise of the past. Like, you know, when you listen to your favorite song and it just comforts you or that food that you always go to when times are difficult or maybe the sight of a familiar mentor or a teacher or a friend. It's like all of those things wrapped up into one. But when God comforts and reassures us and tells us that he is faithful because he has been faithful, it's reminding ourselves again that yes, he is in control no matter what wilderness we're in. Think about it. So how has he done this in your life last year, two years, five years ago? How has he redeemed you? How has he restored you? How has he brought peace and comfort into your life? And again, you may not be feeling that way today, but how has he done it for you in the past?

God isn't done there in providing reassurances of his faithfulness. But not only there, he gives not just reassurances but revelation. The covenant maker makes covenant promises because he desires the undesirable. And here we see in verses 5 and 6 the institution of the next chapter of the covenant, one very different from the covenant that he made with Abraham. Whereas the Abrahamic Covenant was thin on details, the Mosaic Covenant is filled with them. Whereas the Abrahamic Covenant is broad, the Mosaic Covenant—I mean, if you've ever read Deuteronomy and the subsequent chapters of Exodus, it's just a tad bit more precise, right? Just a tad bit. The revealing of God's law is what happens here in the Mosaic Covenant. It's the beginning of the newest part of the Gospel story. It's calling for the people of Israel to obey the voice of God in the institution of new laws that have now been presented to this nation state. Now, it's not like God's law didn't exist before this, right? It's not like: *Surprise! Murder is bad now*. Right? That's not what this means and what it's about. This is rather just a progression of God's will moving from the person of Abraham (as we learned about last week) to a people to a nation Israel. And with it will come the expectations of what it means to live in relationship and covenant with God.

And before he gives the Ten Commandments, which we just read in Exodus 20—before he gives the law, which we find detailed in Deuteronomy and all throughout, in fact, the Torah, this prelude in verse 5 and 6 is his promise to the people of Israel. Look at it with me here. “If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be a treasured possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Now that verse will make some people in this room who have read, you know, Galatians, parts of Romans and Ephesians, the teaching of Christ in the Gospels—perhaps an alarm bell just went off in your head for all of you theologians in the room. And for those of you

who don't understand that discomfort of those who are a little bit nervous right now, let me explain. The question. Some of you may be thinking, *What is God doing here in verse 5. What is he doing here when he says that he telling them that they must obey his voice and keep God's covenant. I mean, does he really intend and expect for them to do that? I mean, did you hear about what they did next to this chapter in chapter 16 and 17? I mean, did God not see that? I mean, I thought God knew everything. Why would God give the Israelites a law that he knew very well that they could not keep?* What is the purpose of God saying that he wants them to be completely obedient when there is no way—both in their history and Lord knows in their projected future—that they can keep God's law.

The debate over Exodus 19:5 has flamed many theological lightsaber fights over what God's intention really is here—probably lost a couple of hands as well. The question that God is clearly demonstrating here and the question that we have to answer is how do we make sense out of all of this. Is God really saying to the people of Israel: *I'm giving you a works-based righteousness to keep, that if you obey my commands then you'll be a royal priesthood.* Then how does that make us any different from any other religion? What we have to discern here is whether or not this covenant made with Moses and Israel is one that is just purely a work-based covenant, sort of like the one made with Adam, or is this the covenant of grace? Is this the covenant that is really gracious to the people of Israel? If it's a work-based covenant then one could easily see why Israel would have to be kicked out of the promised land, why they would have to go into exile. But is that really the reason why, or something else going on here.

I don't have enough time to go on with the nuance of this debate, fortunately, but in short, I believe the answer in response that we can give to this question is this: There are very compelling arguments that here God is a covenant maker telling undesirable people that he desires to be in relationship with them, and he desires to be in relationship by the giving of his law. And the revealing of his law here is actually a grace; it is a loving act that he is doing this—not because he believes that they have the ability to fulfill the covenant apart from him, but rather that through the law they understand the heart and the character of God and that they can walk faithfully with him. This is a loving act given by the God of the universe. This revelation of God's law—far from being something that we just flippantly skip through in pages of scripture and say well, this doesn't matter or apply to me anymore—every single law that God gives is a revelation of who he is: his love, his mercy, his tenderness, his compassion, his steadfastness. It's a means to give undesirable people here a heart to desire God.

Now there are some of us who would say that the giving of the law seems antithetical to grace. And I'll give you two responses: one short, one long. The short response is: How would you ever know that you needed grace without the law? How would you ever know? If you had no context to understand what you have done is wrong, how would you ever know that you could have received grace? The more lengthy answer that I would give is one of analogy. I think one of the better analogies I've heard on this is simply that of a teacher. On the first day in any class that you go to the teacher hands you a sheet of paper, and what is that sheet of paper? It's your syllabus. (And the skip day for a lot of college students...Don't do that, right?) It's a list, of what? Expectations, rules, law for you to follow to demonstrate what it will mean to do well in that class, to demonstrate the relationship between the teacher and the student. Now no one looks at the teacher when they're passing out the syllabus and says, *How dare you give me a syllabus to follow? This is ungracious. Do you know how unloving the syllabus is?* (Now some of

you might say that, because there's a lot of work on that syllabus. But regardless of that, right?) No person is going to say, *Why would you reveal specific things about this class? How dare you!* Right? *Why not just leave it a divine mystery? That is so unloving that you would hand me your law just to show what this relationship is going to be like.* Rather the opposite, right? In fact, if anything what do students often most complain about? *Oh, the teacher was so unclear.* Right? *I had no idea what they were expecting. I mean, if only the teacher were more explicit, I wouldn't have failed that exam.* Right? They always, you know, they always say that. You see, the law is here, and the law is given in the Mosaic Covenant for the Israelites to best understand how they can please, serve, and worship God through his commandments.

Now some of us would say *Well, that's all well and dandy, but what about these laws? Do they apply to us today?* And we answer: Yes, absolutely. I mean, sure, the sacrificial and the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament—they're gone. Christ has fulfilled that. But the moral laws in the Old Testament—far from being something that's just archaic and old, still hold weight for us here. They're still the best of what God has desired out of us here today. Again, just simply because it's an Old Testament command doesn't mean that it's not valid. Guess what? Killing someone today is probably just as bad as killing someone back then. Our sexual ethics still matter. Our devotion and love for the Lord matters. Our keeping of the Sabbath does matter. Being in community matters. All of this matters. They don't disappear because of Christ's finished work, but they are a response of the fullness of the finished work of Christ that he has given to us. So the law, far from being something that we can just simply gloss over, is something that is valuable to the church and to the community, and it is valuable and necessary in our worship to God. They cannot be divorced from each other.

So why do the Israelites need this? Why did the Israelites need the law? Well, we have to understand the Israelites as a people. Remember what I said of the Israelites, why they needed the law? I mean, you have to understand how the story goes. So let's go back to the Exodus story here. Exodus 15. The Red Sea has opened, miraculously. The people of God have gone through there; they are now saved. And they now realize that they are completely free from the grip of Pharaoh. They start singing songs, beautiful poetic songs in Exodus 15 saying, "Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power, your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy...Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness?" [Exodus 15: 6, 11]. Beautiful language, poetic, so devotional. What an incredible people, so thoughtful, right? What happens in the next chapter? They go on from singing this beautiful worship song to the Lord, in Exodus 16 saying to God's chosen leader, Moses, *We should have died in the land of Egypt. Why have you brought us out to hunger?* Right? In Exodus 17: *Why are you bringing us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our livestock? Why? Are you serious?*

How quickly the wilderness of despair brings out our real thoughts, doesn't it? And it's so easy to laugh at the Israelites here because we know where God is leading them. But the reality is again—this is the nature of our hearts. We far too often wallow in the misery of the wilderness and fail to remember the faithfulness of that which we have been redeemed. We find it so easy to boast about our inconveniences to anyone who would listen, to put the blame on God, on other people, for putting us in a place that we wouldn't like to be in. We even go as far as to echo the cry of the Israelites: *You know what, God? It was so much easier when I was not a Christian. Let me go back to Egypt. Why is this so difficult?* Always forgetting, always doubting, always fretting, always blaming, always ungrateful, always unfaithful. That's the very definition

of someone who's undesirable, and that is each and every single one of us apart from the loving grace of God.

How would you respond? If you were God in this scenario how would you respond to the Israelites? You have done everything for them and all that you have received is anger, complaining, rebuke, challenge of your divinity. How would you act if you were God?

I often go camping with youth students, and I remember the story of when I was at one particular campsite in Elk Neck State Park, which is about forty five minutes to an hour drive away from here. And taking Howard County kids camping is always an interesting experience because there are certain questions that are asked by Howard County kids in camping that not many other kids in a different context would ask. Things like: *Where can I plug in my i Phone charger?* Right? You know, things like, you know, just all sorts of conveniences and things like that. But I remember this one story because I think it speaks to this situation here, of a student who will go unnamed. So we had decided that on one of the days of our camping that we would go hiking. Now this particular student, she was not a big fan of anything that involved walking. And so immediately when I said let's go hiking, right, immediately the complaints started coming. And all the things with the Israelites that you saw in the complaining, you saw here. *Why are we doing this? What are you doing? You are so unloving. I could get hurt.* And then the classic Howard County line: *You know, I could sue you.* Right. *I'm going to get hurt. My mom is going to get so upset.* Right? And *You are going to be in a lot of trouble.* So I say to her don't worry about it. See, and I was laughing and I was smiling, and the reason why is because I knew what was on the end of this trail. As we were hiking and as she was just shouting *It's not too late to turn back. It's not too late to turn back. You're going to be in a lot of trouble.* Right. Singing, like, a song about it. I just kept on laughing and smiling. Just you wait. We're almost there. Just you wait. At the end of this trail, see, what she didn't know was that there was this beautiful, like, just lighthouse looking over this view of the river. I think it's the Chesapeake. And it's this gorgeous view. You can see for miles. The cities and there's this huge field that you can play on. And sure enough, when we arrive there what happened to the complaining? Nothing but silence. She's laughing, having a good time. And at the end of our time there, when we were there at the lighthouse and the field, and we said we needed to walk back, the response was predictable. Parents, you will know the response, right? *Do we have to go now?* You see, I think this is what God does with us in the wilderness when he gives us his covenant and gives us his law and he is desiring undesirable people, what he's doing is he's just walking us along this trail. Yeah, I know it's hard. Yeah. Just keep on going. A couple more steps. You won't believe what's at the end of this journey.

Every covenant people is an undesirable one. As we'll read about and learn about and have already read about in Scripture, there is no covenant people who isn't in some way undesirable. I mean, Noah was a drunkard, Abraham was a liar, David was a murderer and an adulterer, Israel was unfaithful, the church delves into division and chaos and sin. Every single one of us in here—we do the unthinkable, we speak the unsayable. We do horrible things to one another in the name of success and idolatry, and we hurt each other profoundly in ways that we can't even begin to comprehend. So what's left for this covenant people to do? What can they do? What can they do? Nothing. The covenant people need to look for a covenant keeper. They can't keep it. They in no way can keep the Law of Moses, the laws that God has set. So you know what this most holy, most awesome, most wonderful God does? He gives them a

covenant keeper. He gives them himself, his one and only Son, Jesus Christ. He looks at us standing on that stage, nervous, unknown, undesirable, and he looks at us and he says, *I want you. And I will reach out to you. And I will love you. I will die the death that you should have died. I will give you my righteousness. I will turn you into a perfect law keeper before the sight of God the Father. I will declare you to be holy, to be clean.*

Think about that reality. That is the treasure that we have in the Gospel, that our God would send Christ to die so that we can inherit this promised kingdom—Exodus 19:5—that we could be called the people of God. The covenant law here is not just a list for our condemnation, not just a law to show us how we can live according to God's will, but it is here in this passage to point to us the one who has come, who would come, to fulfill the law in all of its entirety. Jesus comes and says *I will stand in your place, I will stand for your failures and your punishments,* and he gives us his perfect, redeeming righteousness. The blessings of the law come from Christ, the perfect man, and here in this story we see the shadow things to come.

Now next week the story is going to continue on: The covenant of David. And as we unfold this story even further the law is going to play a very critical role in all of this. But before we get into the story that's in here, let's talk about the story of your life here. Do you stand here today feeling like you can be a covenant keeper on your own apart from God? Are you failing to trust in his faithful promises? Are you clouded by distractions in the wilderness of despair? We want to invite each and every single one of you here to rest again in the Treasure that is our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ and his work on the cross, to worship him, to pray to him, and say, *Lord, let me remember again. Help me to walk through this resting in the truth of your promises.*

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your word to remind us again that the law is a grace. The law is here to remind us of how much we need Christ. The law is here to show us how we can see the character of who you are: loving, gracious, merciful, the one who keeps his promises, the one who desires undesirable people, the one who keeps the promises that we could not. God, you are amazing and glorious. And Lord, may that just draw us into a time now of singing and praise and worship to you. And for those in this room that have yet to trust in the Lord for their salvation, I pray that they would know that the gift of the Gospel is freely given, that they could talk to somebody about the truth of this amazing Gospel, and accept and believe. Father, we thank you for this time together. We pray all these things in your Son's name. Amen.