



Roanoke, Virginia
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“Everyone”

Part V of the Lenten Sermon Series, “Into the Wild.”

Exodus 35:4-10, 20-29

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If you were here in worship last week, you’ll remember that Dr. Anderson offered a sermon on the *first* time Moses brings the ten commandments to the people. He reminded us that the book of Exodus often pairs two similar stories together to make a point by highlighting the differences between story A and story B. Today we’re going to lean into story B, the *second* time Moses comes down the mountain. But before we do, I’ll give a short recap of what happens the first time, and in the intervening chapters.

The first time, back in chapter 20, the people receive the commandments from God, but they see the thunder and lightning, the smoking mountain, and they are scared out of their minds. So, the people stand at a distance while Moses goes further into the thick darkness, where God is.

While Moses is with God in the darkness, the people are left to wait. And they wait, and they wait, and they wait. They wait for ten chapters while Moses and God are happily chatting away about the decorations and setup for the tabernacle, God’s house. It sounds like a design committee meeting. Something I learned when I first got to Second is that we have a design committee. I’d never heard of one of those before, but they’re great because they take the time to think about the details and design of our space. How you order your physical space communicates something to the people who walk into it, so the design committee has worked hard to help our building communicate welcome and offer glory to God.



So, Moses and God are having a long but important conversation and meanwhile, the people start to get restless. I think it's meant to be almost comical - regardless of the fact that they JUST received from GOD the commandment not to make idols or worship other gods, immediately the people beg Aaron to make another god for them. Aaron doesn't have the strongest backbone, so he says, "Sounds great!" and they make a golden calf to worship out of melted down earrings.

Moses returns to discover this scene, and in exasperation he smashes on the ground the two tablets that the Lord has written the commandments on. He burns up the golden calf, mixes the ashes in water, and makes the people drink them.

Moses is angry; the Lord is angry. But by chapter 34, amazingly they decide to try again. The Lord commands Moses to cut new tablets, they go over the laws again briefly together, and then Moses comes down the mountain for the second time, his face shining from being in the presence of God, and immediately he instructs the people to get to work. That's where our passage picks up today. Hear these words from Exodus, chapter 35:

⁴ Moses said to all the congregation of the Israelites: This is the thing that the Lord has commanded: ⁵ Take from among you an offering to the Lord; let whoever is of a generous heart bring the Lord's offering: gold, silver, and bronze; ⁶ blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine linen; goats' hair, ⁷ tanned rams' skins, and fine leather; acacia wood, ⁸ oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, ⁹ and onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and the breast piece.

¹⁰ All who are skillful among you shall come and make all that the Lord has commanded.

²⁰ Then all the congregation of the Israelites withdrew from the presence of Moses. ²¹ And they came, everyone whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing, and brought the Lord's offering to be used for the tent of meeting, and for all its service, and for the sacred vestments. ²² So they came, both men and women; all who were of a willing heart brought brooches and earrings and signet rings and pendants, all sorts of gold objects, everyone bringing an offering of gold to the Lord. ²³ And everyone who possessed blue or purple or crimson yarn or fine linen or goats' hair or tanned rams' skins or fine leather, brought them. ²⁴ Everyone who could make an offering of silver or bronze brought it as the Lord's offering; and everyone who possessed acacia wood of any use in the work, brought it. ²⁵ All the skillful women spun with their hands, and brought what they had spun in blue and purple and crimson yarns and fine linen; ²⁶ all the women whose hearts moved them to use their skill spun the goats' hair. ²⁷ And the leaders brought onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and the breast piece, ²⁸ and spices and oil for the light, and for the anointing oil, and for the fragrant incense. ²⁹ All the Israelite men and women whose hearts made them willing to bring anything for the work that the Lord had commanded by Moses to be done, brought it as a freewill offering to the Lord.



There's a saying attributed to Lau-Tzu that says something like, "If the leader is good, the people say: 'The leader did it.' If the leader is great, the people say: 'We did it ourselves.'"

In a few weeks, at the end of April, our church has the opportunity to participate in a build day for Habitat for Humanity's Apostles Build. Every other year, churches in Roanoke gather together and complete one Habitat house project that is funded and worked on by local churches. This year's Apostles Build house will be huge with 7 bedrooms because the family whose home it will be has eleven children. They're a beautiful family; we had the chance to meet some of them at a gathering this past fall, and I love that our church is such a strong supporter of this kind of work.

An important thing about how Habitat functions is that they never allow a home to be built entirely by outside volunteers. To qualify for a Habitat home, the family must be committed to participating in the project themselves, giving a certain number of hours to building the house alongside volunteers. Habitat has grasped a deep truth about human nature—that participating in the work together requires that people buy into the project, but more than that, participating in the work provides dignity.

This is the lesson that we learn from Story B of God's commandments to the Israelites.

And this is really the only point I plan to make today: Our communities are strengthened when *everyone* participates in God's good work. Joining a faith community where only a select few leaders are responsible for doing the work may look like a blessing for people who are overextended, exhausted, and stressed out. Our world demands a lot from us every day, and it's true that church can and should be a haven for those in need of rest.

But ultimately, Exodus wants us to see that simply listening to God's instructions, receiving God's word passively, waiting behind while someone else goes into the darkness to deal with a difficult God, that kind of life may feel easier, but it will not satisfy.

In that kind of life, we will find ourselves gone astray, worshipping anything that glitters while we wait for judgement from afar.

But that is not the life we're called to.

I am, as I've confessed on multiple occasions, a diehard UNC fan. This weekend was rough for me. I have this jersey, a lucky jersey, that I wear while watching nearly every game. If I'm ever not wearing it and we start losing, I run to find it and put it on. Anyone who was at dinner with the Trent Symposium participants on Friday night can vouch for that, I literally ran out to the car to get it in the middle of dinner, to no avail, but somehow wearing my lucky jersey makes me feel like I'm on the team, like I'm doing my part to bring about a victory. Of course, that's a ridiculous theory, but I'm human, so I like to feel like there's something I can do.

God made us that way. God could have chosen to make a world where people waited while God did all the work. But the world God actually made, even all the way back in Genesis chapter 1, is a world where people have to, get to, participate.



Did you hear how differently the Israelites respond when Moses comes down the mountain and gives them something to do?

Everyone whose heart was stirred, everyone whose spirit was willing—the men, the women, the people with gold, the people with goats—they all responded with joy. Everyone became so generous with their possessions and their time and their skill that eventually in the next chapter, Moses has to start turning donations away because together they have provided more than enough for the task.

When everyone is brought into the work of building a house for God to dwell, when Moses presents getting involved as the necessary immediate response to God’s self-revelation, the community thrives. Perhaps for the first time in the entire book of Exodus, they are not complaining. Think about it: plagues on the Egyptians, the parted sea, water from a rock, bread from the heavens... all are miraculous, but are never enough to convince the people that God will be faithful to them. But their doubt starts to turn into dignity when they understand that they are called to be partners with God.

Which is no different from our calling. We are called to be partners with God in creating space for God’s presence to inhabit this world.

Last Sunday, here in this sanctuary, we ordained our new class of Elders. Each year when we do this, the elders come up to the front and kneel, and then we invite everyone in the congregation who has at one time been an elder in this or any other Presbyterian church to come forward to lay hands on them as we pray. And Oh. My. Goodness. You would not believe how many people in this church stand up. I wish everyone could see what it looks like from up here in the front, it’s like a wave, there’s not nearly enough room in the front for everyone to fit, it is overwhelming to see the number of people who have faithfully served this church come forward.

And even that isn’t everyone. Because ordained elder or not, everyone in this community has the chance to participate in this work we’re doing, whether it’s volunteering at VBS or singing in the children’s choir or working on a medical clinic in the Dominican Republic or bringing a meal for Family Promise or sitting quietly with a grieving friend.

The real beauty of our church is not defined by this building. The beauty of the church, this one and the church universal, is found when her people, with generous hearts and willing spirits, work together to build a community where the indwelling presence of God is evident. Like John says, “No one has ever seen God; BUT if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”

I’ve watched that happen in this church. God lives here. And so many other places, too, but I know that God lives here. In this community, in the love that is present, tangible, in this place. God lives here.

We don’t always live up to that honor. The house we’re building is a work in progress. So easily we fall into the familiar rhythms of complaint and apathy and fear, we turn aside from the



God who made us, the God who invites us to be partners in making a holy dwelling in the world together. We fall so short of the partners we'd like to be.

But as Christians, we put our hope in the assurance that despite our half assembled house, God so deeply wanted to dwell with us, to partner with us in all things that this very same God of fire and cloud, this very same God who liberated and liberates the oppressed, this very same God whose glory thundered and blazed on the mountain, this God became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

So don't think for one second that we don't need you, your resources, or your skills, or your voice. Don't think for one second that you are too tired or too afraid to be of any use. All you need is a generous heart, and a willing spirit. God can work with that. Because God lives here, dwelling already in our midst, right in the middle of this work-in-progress, many-many-bedroomed house we're building together. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

