"Meeting God" October 5, 2025
Exodus 19:1-6, 16-25 Westminster, Greenville
World Communion Sunday Ben Dorr
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A number of years ago, the pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, Scott Black Johnston, received a phone call in his office.

The call came from a producer of a reality television show.
The show was "Kourtney & Kim Take New York."

Well, Kourtney and Kim are, of course, two of the three Kardashian sisters. And the producer of the show wanted to know if they could come to the church, and set up a bunch of cameras and lights, and film Kourtney and Kim taking New York by attending Fifth Avenue Presbyterian on a Sunday morning for their reality show."

And Scott Black Johnston said…no.
"I said it nicely," he recalls.

I said, "They are welcome to come to worship here,
but there will be absolutely no filming
tv shows during our services."

Well, the producer hung up…but then he called back.

"Listen, we really want to do this, and I'm not Christian, so I don't know how to phrase this, but couldn't we just film the two of them walking down to the front and lighting a candle or something?"

Again, Scott said, "No."
And then, remembering his Catholic Ethics professor, he muttered to himself:

"Sweet Mother of God, what is the world coming to?"[1]

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Now…that's a no-brainer, right?

I don't know any colleague of mine who would allow a tv show to swoop in and take over worship—your pastoral staff would certainly never go for that. And the number one reason, among many, is that there's something about this time together, and being here in this space, worshiping God with all of you…that's holy.

This time is holy time.
This space…is holy space.
Isn't that right?

Have you ever thought about what it is that makes something holy?

I ask the question because of our text.

We've been following the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness the past couple of weeks, and in today's text…they come to Mount Sinai.

According to the text, it's a holy place:

"When the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the Lord summoned Moses…and Moses went up. Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Go down and warn the people not to break through to the Lord to look…'

[1] I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for directing me to this story from Dr. Scott Black Johnston.

"Moses said to the Lord, 'The people are not permitted to come up to Mount Sinai; for you yourself warned us, saying, 'Set limits around the mountain and keep it holy.'"

What is it that makes something holy?

It sounds like a simple question.
But it's not always an easy question.

For example, in the summer of 2018, shortly after I ended my previous call in Dallas, we were in the process of getting ready to move to Greenville, when I received a phone call from my colleague at my former church.

She told me that Bob had died.
Bob was a long-time member of that church.
He was a WWII veteran.
Shot down over Europe on one of his missions…and survived!

My colleague was going to officiate at his funeral service.

She then went on to say that she had just had a meeting with Bob's children to discuss their father's funeral.

The children were not members of that church.
But they had some specific requests.

One of the requests was that the American flag be draped over Bob's coffin during the funeral.

They wanted his service to his country to be honored in that way.
They had always pictured their father's funeral in that way.

My colleague replied their father's service to the country in WWII will definitely be mentioned and given thanks for in the service….but placing an American flag over the coffin?

That wasn't the practice or policy of that church.
There were theological and liturgical reasons for this.

A white funeral pall always went over the coffin.
White symbolizes resurrection.
The new life that the person has in Christ.

But Bob's children…they weren't members of that church.
They wanted my colleague to reconsider that policy.

They even implied that if Ben were there, Ben would have allowed the flag to go over the coffin in the sanctuary…which was not true, and it was why she called me. My colleague wanted to make sure I hadn't promised the family anything that she did not know about.

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Have you ever thought about what it is that makes something holy?
That makes it sacred?

It's an important question in the book of Exodus.
Over and over again, the topic of holiness keeps coming up.

Do you remember what God said to Moses at the burning bush?

"Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

Do you recall our first scripture reading today?

God tells Moses to tell the Israelites:

"…if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession….you shall be for me…a holy nation."

And right after our text, in the 20th chapter of Exodus, God gives the Israelites the Ten Commandments.

Do you remember the fourth commandment?
"Remember the sabbath day, and keep it…"—what?
Holy.

Holiness is top priority in the Exodus story.
But why?

Perhaps a bit of history would be helpful.

Most scholars believe that the book of Exodus was not written in the days of Moses…but hundreds of years later, reaching its final form in the 6th century BCE.

Why is that important?
Because the 6th century was the time when Israel was in Exile.

After the Babylonians had conquered them.
After the Temple, their holiest site, had been taken from them!

Exile meant surviving in a foreign land.
No longer living in the Promised Land.

It was easy to wonder, when the Israelites were taken in captivity to Babylon, whether God had abandoned them.

Which brings us back to Exodus.

The book of Exodus was written, in part, to a people who were VULNERABLE. And the brilliance of Exodus is that it reminds us that God's holiness isn't just found during a holy day, or a holy ritual, or in a sacred space.

It's also found in people.
In how we love our neighbor.
In how we welcome the stranger.
In how we reach out to those who are vulnerable.

For example…going a few chapters ahead.
Listen to Exodus 22:25-27

It's part of a series of laws given after the Ten Commandments.

"If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep?"

This was one of the laws that Israel was to keep.
They had been vulnerable when they were slaves in Egypt.
They were vulnerable when they were taken into exile in Babylon.

Remember that, this law says to them.
Remember what it was like to be vulnerable…when you lend something to your neighbor.

If you lend to the poor, do not exact interest.
If you take your neighbor's cloak as collateral, you shall restore it by the end of the day.

It was a law that reminded them that how they treat their neighbors—especially their most vulnerable neighbors—was a holy thing, sacred to God.

The retired professor of preaching, Tom Long, tells of the time a number of years ago when he was teaching on this particular part of Exodus. And when the day was over, and when Dr. Long got home that evening, he looked through his mail, and discovered that he had received a letter from the company that had issued him one of his credit cards.

It was a two-page letter, tightly spaced…but the bottom line was something like this:

"Because you have been such a good customer, your annual percentage rate is only going up to 34%."

Well, he was about to throw the letter away, because he rarely used that card and whenever he did, he paid it off by the end of the month, so there was no need for him to worry about an interest rate of 34%....but then he thought about the class that he had taught earlier in the day.

And he thought about the text from Exodus, the one that said you don't charge interest to the poor. And he thought about the fact that there are plenty of other people receiving that same letter, people who don't have the financial security that he has…

So he called his credit card company, and he said, "I'd like to cancel my credit card."

The woman on the phone replied, "We're sorry to lose you as a customer, sir. I can handle your request. But if you don't mind, in order to provide better customer service in the future, could you tell us why you're canceling the card?"

"Certainly," Professor Long replied.

"I believe you're in violation of the book of Exodus."

Silence on the other end. Dr. Long could picture the woman looking at her computer screen: "Reason customer has canceled card…"

What in the world is she supposed to type?
"Could you repeat that?" she finally stammered.

"Look," replied Dr. Long, "the Bible shows us a God who has compassion for people trapped in economic circumstances. I'm not thinking of myself, I can afford to pay off my credit cards every month.

"I'm thinking of the single mom who goes into your store to buy her kids new clothes for the school year. She works a job that pays barely more than minimum wage. She can't afford the clothes that her kids need, so she puts it on this credit card that you have given her, and you're charging 34% interest.

"She'll never get out from under that."

"Sir," the woman replied, "you have to understand the high cost of doing business in an economic climate like this."

"I understand, but let me ask you something. What do you think God thinks about charging that 34% interest to someone who cannot afford clothes for her kids?"

The woman's voice got soft:
"Oh…yeah…."

Then it turned professional again:

"Sir, if you'd ever like to reapply for our credit card, you only need to contact our customer care center…"

And the phone call was over.[2]

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Now don't misunderstand.
I'm not telling you to go home and cancel your credit cards.
That's not my point.

My point is that you and I are also chosen by God, called by God to be a holy people.

Which means reaching out to the vulnerable.

I read something a while back by a woman named Deirdre Sullivan.

"In my humdrum life, the daily battle hasn't been good versus evil. It's hardly so epic. Most days, my real battle is doing good versus doing nothing."[3]

Do you know how Sullivan says she fights complacency?
By going to funerals.

"My father taught me that," she writes.
"Always go to the funeral."

"The first time he said it directly to me, I was sixteen and trying to get out of going to calling hours for Miss Emerson, my old fifth-grade math teacher.

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[2] This story comes from a sermon preached by Dr. Tom Long, "In Our Right Minds," during the Festival of Homiletics preaching conference, May, 2011, Minneapolis, MN.
[3] Deirdre Sullivan, "Always Go to the Funeral," from *This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*, edited by Jay Allison and Dan Gediman, New York: Henry Holt, 2006.

'Dee,' he said, 'you're going.'

"So my dad waited outside while I went in. It was worse than I thought it would be: I was the only kid there. When the condolence line deposited me in front of Miss Emerson's shell-shocked parents, I stammered out, 'Sorry about all this,' and stalked away.

And yet, because of "that deeply weird expression of sympathy delivered twenty years ago, Miss Emerson's mother still remembers me and always says hello with tearing eyes…"

"Always go to the funeral" [is about more than going to funerals.]

It "means that I have to do the right thing when I really, really don't feel like it…I'm talking about those things that represent only inconvenience to me, but the world to the other guy…the painfully underattended birthday party. The hospital visit during happy hour.

"In going to funerals, I've come to believe that while I wait to make a grand heroic gesture, I should just stick to the small inconveniences that let me share in life's inevitable, occasional calamity."

Sullivan goes on:

"On a cold April night…my father died a quiet death from cancer. His funeral was on a Wednesday, middle of the workweek. I had been numb for days when, for some reason, during the funeral, I turned and looked back at the folks in the church. The memory of it still takes my breath away. The most human, powerful, and humbling thing I've ever seen was a church at 3:00 on a Wednesday full of inconvenienced people who believe in going to the funeral."[4]

[4] Sullivan, "Always Go to the Funeral".

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May I put it like this?
That wasn't just a powerful moment for Ms. Sullivan.
It was a holy moment.

Do you know anyone who's vulnerable right now?
Someone who might need to hear from you right now?

If you do something this week that represents inconvenience to you, but might mean the world to the other person, who knows…it might not just be you who shows up for that person.

God Almighty, the Holy One, just might join you.

Amen.