

Gracious Creator,
Send your Spirit into our hearts
that we might receive these ancient words
as daily bread,
as living truth.

Have your way with us.
make us faithful; make us new—
for we pray in the name of the Christ,
who still feeds us with his life. Amen.

According to the Book of Exodus, the people of Israel spend about eleven months camped out at the bottom of Mt. Sinai, after they are brought out from slavery in Egypt. It is a season of disorientation for God's people. They are no longer slaves, yet they do not know how to live any other way; they have not yet claimed a new identity. And so God gives them a gift. God says this is how we will live together. These words will guide you; they will teach you what it means to be my people. These commandments will make a space within which you may learn to live with me and with each other.

As you hear the reading, you may notice that the first commandments have to do with who God is to the people and the latter commandments have to do with who the people are to each other. And in the middle, in the heart of God's gift, is Sabbath.

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-17

Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your

towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

As we move to our gospel reading, we find ourselves on a different mountain.

In what is commonly known as "The Sermon on the Mount", Jesus, like Moses before him, is teaching the people what it means to live in holy relationship with God and with each other.

Matthew 5:14-18

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished."

A New Beginning

What does it mean to make a new beginning, when we carry old identities with us?

Once someone has internalized a message that he or she is “less-than”—once someone has come to believe that he or she is stupid, or awkward, or unattractive, or not acceptable for whatever reason—it is hard to leave that message behind and move into a new future. We do so only by the grace of God.

The people of Israel, camped at the bottom of Mt. Sinai, still see themselves as slaves: as a people whose identity and value and agency are dictated by others. They don't know how to imagine any other future. So they hold fast to the only identity that they know; they grieve that they are no longer slaves in Egypt.

But God wants something more for them.

So God says, in effect, let me tell you about myself. Let me tell you about the one who came after you, and freed you, and intends to be in relationship with you. Let me tell you who I am. I am a God of liberation—a free God who longs to be in relationship with a free people, and I choose you to be those people. But I will not be manipulated by you or anyone, as if I weren't alive, as if I weren't free. You won't be able to adequately describe or imagine me—and you mustn't ever say my name as though it doesn't matter, because my name has power.

You will come to know who you are by knowing who I am, for you are my creation.

The most important thing you will ever do is be in relationship with me. Like me, you are made to be part of the creative process, to be at work in the world, but you must live in a rhythm of work and rest, and when you rest you will be reminded of who we are to each other. You will remember that you are no longer a slave who must work ceaselessly, for you are able to depend on my provision even when you stop working. You are free to rest and to revel in who we are to each other, without fear. And you are free to live with each other in the very same way.

As you come to know who I am, as you let go of the mindset of slavery, you must be careful to respect the freedom of others. As we form a community not based on exploitation, there are certain practices you must avoid, in order to make space for new relationships. Honor the ones who have come before you, whose understanding may be different than your own; do not steal the life of others, do not be unfaithful in relationship, do not speak untruthfully, do not long for what another holds. Trust that I am enough for you. Choose the life I offer.

What does it look like to make a new beginning, when we carry old identities with us? It's an ancient story, but by the grace of God, it still comes alive today.

A few of us gather each week on Wednesdays at 11:00 to talk about the scripture passage that will be read in worship on the upcoming Sunday. Everyone's welcome and we all feel free to come and go as we need to, but Frank and Faith Davison are regulars, and this past week, following the class, Frank and I had a chance to talk for a few minutes in the hall. He told me then, and he has given me permission to tell you now, that there have been two miracles in his life—two times when God's grace broke in in such a palpable way that the course of his life was changed. Both of these grace-filled encounters had to do with new beginnings; I'd like to tell you today about the first one.

Frank grew up in a secular Jewish family in the Northeast. His parents divorced when he was a boy, and he was sent to boarding school. His parents had hoped that the school would be a good environment for him, but it was not. He was bullied endlessly; the other boys called him "Horseface".

When Frank was old enough for college, he made a courageous decision. He was invited to attend Davis Elkins in West Virginia, beginning mid-year, in the dead of winter. It was a long way from anything he knew. When it came time for him to make the trip, the snow was so thick that the only way he could get there was by a torturously long bus ride. When he finally arrived, exhausted, he found the campus nearly deserted. Eventually he came upon a student who greeted him and asked his name. When Frank offered his first-name, the other student followed by asking if he had a nickname. It was a moment of crisis for Frank—would he never escape his past? When Frank responded honestly that others sometimes called him "Horseface," his new schoolmate immediately replied, "That is not a good name. Here we are going to call you Frank."

On that campus Frank discovered a new kind of community—a place where he was welcomed and invited to grow. He made friends with other young men whose faith in God's goodness animated their lives. He was invited to a Student Christian Organization; he became a member of a local church. He says they invited him to sing with them, not caring how his voice sounded. He experienced a welcoming, inclusive kind of love; he came to know agape. Those

encounters changed the course of Frank's life. They helped him live into a new identity, and to discover a new purpose.

Jesus says that when God has God's way with us, we begin to shine. We get lit up in ways we wouldn't have thought possible. We have a chance to radiate the love we have come to know.

Jesus says that light makes a difference in the world.

All over the world today, people who have been drawn to that light are gathering around tables for another taste of that love. It's a love that stretches our hearts to look past our own self-interest; it's a love that sends us beyond these walls; it's a love filled with new beginnings.

Here in this room we gather around a table that has a very particular inscription. If you don't sit close to the front you may never have realized that this table asks a question. Engraved on the front are the words "Has Everyone Been Fed?"

In the middle of August I learned the story of how this table came to be. I want to share that story with you now. Members of Bill Hollins family gave this table as a gift in honor of Bill's parents, and the artist who created it was inspired by a story once told here by Tom Long. Here, in Tom's words, is that story:

"Many years ago, I was invited to lead a retreat for your congregation. The theme was worship, and at one point, I told this story:

When I was a boy, we went to church in a small, wood-frame Presbyterian church in Doraville, GA, then a country village on the outskirts of Atlanta. We had no air-conditioning in those days, so on hot summer Sundays we would raise the windows of the church as high as possible. We also had in the pews "funeral home fans" which we would wave back and forth to move the still air.

One terribly hot August Sunday, we had the windows high and the funeral home fans going, and we were observing the Lord's Supper. When the elders had served the bread to the people in the pews, they marched back to the table with the trays. Our minister took the trays, set them on the table, and was about to put the lids on them, when he suddenly looked up and said something he had never said before, "Has everyone been fed?" The congregation grew quiet, wondering if someone might call out, "You missed a whole pew back here!" But no one said a

thing. The minister moved his hand again as if to put the lid on a bread tray, but then he said again, this time in a very urgent voice, "Has everyone been fed?"

We got very quiet then, and in the stillness we could hear sounds coming through the open windows – a baby cried somewhere in the distance, the sound of muffled conversation, cars traveling on the road outside, a dog barked far away – these were the sounds of the world coming into our worship, a very hungry and needy world, and we knew in that moment that this communion meal we were sharing that Sunday was not over until everyone had been fed.

That's the story I told at the retreat. How it got to Mr. Thompson [the maker of the table] or how it became a part of the inscription on the table, I don't know."

That's the way it is with the light we shine, the stories we tell, the questions we ask, the food we offer, the evil we resist. We never know when our small gesture might be manna in someone's wilderness, or a new beginning we never imagined that our neighbor needs.

As we come today to the table, then go to spread tables in the world, let us remember not only the brothers and sisters who share the feast with us this day, but also all the kin who still are longing for their first taste.