

Exodus 19:1-9 + Goodsoil Worship, Churchwide Assembly + Chicago, IL + August 8, 2007
Pastor Bradley Schmeling

I don't think I ever noticed this story in the nineteenth chapter of Exodus. Usually I'm rushing ahead to help the confirmation class to find chapter twenty and the Ten Commandments. But chapter 19 seems to be the transition from liberation to covenant, from the quintessential experience of salvation to the structuring of life as God's chosen people. They had been journeying for three months through the wilderness. And now they find themselves camped, gathered in assembly, at the base of Mt. Sinai. As they prepared for the sealing of the covenant, they must have wondered, "What would chosenness look like when codified into real-life human community?"

Moses reminded them of God's words: "You have seen how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 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, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation."

Being "borne on eagle's wings" actually sounds like an understatement when you think back to all that had happened; when Moses strode into Pharaoh's palace and demanded, "Let my people go! God has heard their cries!"; when they remembered Pharaoh's first reaction to the request with his attempts to delay, to say yes and then to say no. Oh, how that response would plague Egypt.

On that day, at the base of the mountain, did they remember the walls of water piled up on either side of the sea when they walked dryshod into freedom? If they closed their eyes could they still see the glint of the sun on Miriam's hair, she with her tambourine, twirling, her robes ballooning around her, her hair flowing back, this woman, once a slave, now free and, thank God almighty, now on the other side.

I feel like tonight, this liturgy, with its Vigil of Pentecost texts, is like Exodus 19; standing at the base of the mountain, a hinge moment between promise and covenant; liberation and the construction of authentic God-human community.

It's been twenty years since the constitution convention of our church. I was in seminary, preparing to head off to Junction City, Ohio—New Lebanon Lutheran Church—for my internship. Before I left, I served as one of the sacristans for the constitution convention in Columbus, Ohio. My job for the final Eucharist was to soak big jugs of White Zinfandel to remove their labels for the presentation of the gifts.

I filled glass bowls with 5000 wafers, and I felt like I was part of setting the table for a new Lutheran church. When it came time for communion, the servers surrounded the altar as the new bishop, Hebert Chilstrom, lifted his wide arms and prayed the Great Thanksgiving.

After breaking the bread, he took his plate and turned to commune the servers. And he headed right toward me! I was the first in the line, and, in my heart, I was the first to commune in the ELCA.

That's not really true, since the ELCA didn't actually form until January 1st of the new year, but, for me, who had left the Missouri Synod in college because I discovered in one of those "other" Lutheran churches a community of saints who welcomed everyone to the table; a church that held the Scriptures firmly, but with grace and creativity, who saw in the Bible the living and merciful heart of Christ; a church that called woman to preside at the meal, a church that saw a living connection between the reign of God and the liberation of the whole world.

Even though I joined the ELCA, it didn't quite feel like it was my home. But at that closing Eucharist, first to commune, it seemed that this, this Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, could be my church, the body of Christ, birthed before my very eyes, and placed in my hands by a man who, in the end, I could finally trust to testify on my behalf.

I'll never forget a sermon that Walter Wangerin preached at one of the morning Eucharist services, one of those early services that only the committed attend. He told a story of a 90-year old woman that he came to know when he was young and assisting a pastor with ministry. She invited him to her home because she knew he was a writer. And she told him that she was a writer, too; that she would be his mentor, if he wished.

Emily Dichter had been compelled to write, but in the last decade of the nineteenth century, it was not seemly for the wife of the school principal to engage in such pursuits. Her duty was to marriage and family. But she wrote, anyway, when the children were sleeping, in the afternoons when her husband was away, behind drawn drapes where no one could see her.

She began helplessly, devoutly to write a biography of Katherine Luther. When it was finished, she mailed it to the only publisher she knew, a Lutheran press.

The publisher answered.

"Emily Dichter waited until she was alone. And then she took the letter into her dining room, slit the envelope, unfolded the single sheet of paper, and devoured three lines of print, "Congratulations...." She told him, "I laughed aloud. I twirled me around the dining room like any child. My skirts ballooned, my arms went up, my hair flew backward. I cried for joy to God in heaven—and I danced. I danced. Oh, how I danced that day."

"But before she danced her joy, Emily Dichter went to the window and shut the drapes. The community must not see such vanity. The community would despise the sin in her. Therefore, Emily Dichter, writer, splendor, God's bright eye—she danced in the dark. Alone.

After he told the story, he looked at the gathered community and gave to the church, the advice that she had given him.

“O ELCA,” he began, “Never! You should never, never sentence anyone to dance in the dark. No one should. Not ever.”¹

In that assembly, in that beginning of a new chapter for the people God, at the base of the mountain of work that it would be done to create a new church, *that* Word proclaimed, that story of grace; *that* bread broken, placed in the hand of an insecure, shame-filled, closeted seminarian, became the bedrock upon our church was intended to stand, and it would become the window through which resurrection would come.

Once again, we find ourselves at the base of the mountain. And let’s just acknowledge, that we’ve been here before.. Someone told me this week that his congregation began a discussion in 1967. That’s forty years! That’s as long as it took those Hebrews to get from Egypt to the Promised Land. I don’t think it’s out of line for some to say, “Can we cross the Jordan tomorrow? Can we pull up the shades tomorrow?”

But before the people could move to the next chapter, Exodus 20, and the giving of the law, God said, “Before you start, I want you to trust the words that I gave to Moses; that you really are treasured possession, a holy and priestly nation.” And to demonstrate that your liberation can be trusted, I will come among you in a dense fog.

This is always God’s work, to remind us over and over again that our salvation, our liberation, our forgiveness is not to come in the future but has already been accomplished for us. For us, in the cross of Christ. In the empty tomb. Baptism is our Red Sea.

Did anyone notice that the tops of the buildings began to disappear in the fog when the assembly started on Monday? The heavens descended. Maybe some of you were in the hall. but I saw it with my own eyes. The entire skyline began to disappear and the edge of the lake was blurred off to the horizon. I saw the buses, filled with voting members headed off into the cloud. (I was going to say “off into the fog,” but that didn’t seem quite right—I’m not sure we want to be the church in the fog.)

This is my prayer for this assembly; for any gathering of saints, that God will again descend upon us in a thick cloud; that the mountains of pain that many of us bring to this gathering, that the fear of future horizons will begin to be blurred and eased in the presence of the Divine One. I went hiking with friends recently in the North Georgia mountains. We walked into a cloud, and everything receded. All I could see was the person in front of me leading the way.

¹ Story reprinted in *The Manger is Empty: Stories in Time*, San Francisco: Harper, 1989, pp. 98-102.

I want us to be left with one another, without being able to see too far back across the desert or too far toward the horizon. Being able to see too far often just leaves us with our demons or with our overactive imaginations. We need this moment to be with our beloved, with Jesus to be guided by his sure-footedness. I want the cloud of his presence to erase the contours between “us” and “them.” I want the presence of Christ to create sacred distance from our culture’s clashing. I want us to be a little fuzzy about who won and who lost. And in the dense cloud, I want us to lose track of our need for power and our fear of lack.

In this assembly, as in any gathering of two or three, we need Jesus, and we need one another.

In my first parish, one of our little ones had a streak of wildness that ran deeper than most. One Sunday, just before the presentation of money, bread and wine, he snatched the bread off the plate at the back of the church, tucked it under his arm, put one hand out and made the center aisle his own football field. The chancel was the end zone, and his mother chased him like she was a whoever it is on that football team that chases the man with the ball--up around the altar, around me, before she caught him. This time she put him under her arm as if he were now the football, and with his legs kicking wildly, she carried him to the back of the church. While the service went on, I saw her in the back put her hands on both sides of his face, so that he was forced to look right into her eyes, and she talked to him, directly, her full presence holding him, mothering him, loving him, guiding him.

She was in the image of God; the Christ enfleshed, mothering, present, who holds both his hands to our faces, no cloudiness in his eyes, only a direct and clear gaze, telling us not to be afraid, but to live boldly and with courage in this moment, trusting that it’s in our lives, in our assembling, in our listening and in our eating, that transfiguration occurs. When Desmond Tutu taught at Emory University, I ran into him in the hallway right before I needed to preach on Transfiguration. I asked him what I should say. He giggled, winked, and said “Everything is transfigurable.”

Everything is transfigurable

Each one of us, and this whole church, stands at the base of the cross, where sadness begins to turn toward dancing, where death turns toward resurrection, and where salvation turns toward community, transfigured by the leading presence of Christ’s light.

There may well be one among us tonight, young and hoping, who has come to this assembly praying for a Word that can become a life story; who is yearning for the body of Christ to come through this church; who is still unsure how to name the deep calling that flows like a living stream from God’s love.

Let us be the church now for that one, and let us be in the ones who can finally be trusted to speak on her behalf in the name of Christ. Amen