

“Setting the Table for a God Visit”

Exodus 19:4-11, 16-18



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January 21, 2007

Good morning to all of you. Over the last few months, we at St. Andrew's have been getting ready for a very special event called 40 Days of Community, which launches next weekend. This morning I'd like to begin by asking you to imagine that the queen of England is coming to Portland. The queen has decided that she wants to really get a feel for American life, so she has asked to have dinner with a typical American family, and you get the call. The queen is coming to your house. Now you wouldn't think of having the queen of England in your home without cleaning it from top to bottom, without getting the kids bathed and prepared and probably buying some new clothes. You pull out the recipes that are your family favorites. You spend all day in the kitchen preparing a meal that would be fit for a queen. Then you set the table, using the finest dishes you have. You gather the family and wait for the guest of honor.

Well, in a way our church has been preparing over the last several months for a sort of spiritual meal. We have been setting the table, so to speak, for a special occasion. Every one of you has been invited to participate in this special occasion called 40 Days of Community. I am sure that we are going to enjoy what's been prepared, and it's going to be fun doing it together. But I also want us to be prepared for the guest of honor. Because even more important than us meeting together and enjoying one another is that

we also have a time that we meet with God. We have been setting the table for a God visit.

To set the framework I want to take you back to a story in the Old Testament that happened around 3500 year ago. It's a spectacular God encounter. The book of Exodus is the story of the people of Israel leaving the tyranny and bondage of Egypt and making their way to the promised land. God through Moses delivers the nation of Israel, and they are confidently marching toward the promised land. They have been on the road for 60 days when Exodus chapter 19 opens with the nation of Israel, 2 million people strong, standing at the foot of this imposing mountain called Mount Sinai. And Moses climbs the mountain in order to appear before God. This begins one of the most intriguing God encounters found anywhere in the Bible. From this story I want to draw out five steps that you and I can use to think about how we can spiritually get ready for what's going to happen during 40 Days of Community. So let's jump in.

Here's number one: Look back and remember God's **faithfulness**. As we think about where we are headed in the next 40 days I want to suggest that we start by stopping for a moment and remembering what God has already done. In fact that is what the Lord tells Moses to do in Exodus 19:4, "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." When a young eagle learns to fly the mother eagle often flies just underneath the baby eagle with her wings spread out to support and to catch the him if needed. What a great picture of God's faithfulness. Always ready to be there in a time of need to support us when we are in trouble.

In Colossians 1:17 we hear, "He (Christ) existed before all things and in him all things hold together." Christ is the glue of the universe and were it not for his faithfulness the world in which we live would come unraveled at the seams. But God is not only faithful and controlling the world, God is also faithful to our church and has held our church together for over fifty years. God has been the glue that has held many of our Mariner groups together...some who have modeled the meaning of a loving, supportive Christian fellowship for over fifty years. You and I are part of something pretty special and God has been faithful to this church down through the years.

But when I think about God's faithfulness, it becomes really personal for me. I think back to a time when I was in high school, listening to the story of the prodigal son, and suddenly I understood the life changing power of the promise of God's unconditional love in Christ, and that love touched my heart in a very personal and profound way, and has never left me. I hope that when you look back over your life journey that you will see God's faithful-

ness and that your heart will be filled with gratitude. As we think about what God has in store for us in the next 40 days I want us to remember how faithful God has been in the past and how that same God will be faithful to us in the future.

And that is the second step I want you to take: 2. Look ahead and celebrate your FUTURE. Again the Lord says in Exodus 19: 5, "If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you will 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." Now again remember who God says this to. This was a vagabond group of nomads. Sixty days ago they were slaves. They were nobodies. They were poor, and they had no influence and no political clout. But God looks at them and says, "You are my special treasure." What I want to share with you today is that "You are a treasured possession." But the truth is that some of us here today really have a hard time believing that God thinks about us in that way. Some of you may be looking around at others here today saying: "I can understand how God thinks about them in that way. You know, they're gifted, they're talented, they're put together. They even look like a special treasure. But God couldn't feel that way about me. If God really knows what's in my past and what's in my world there's no way God could feel that way about me." My friends, the truth is: God does. Each of you is valuable to God. When God looks at you God sees a treasured possession. Because God thinks so highly of you, over the next 40 days God wants to do something wonderful in your life. God wants to continue to work in your life to make you more like Jesus.

But God doesn't stop there. God goes on to tell the people that they are chosen priests. "You will be a priestly kingdom." God's not just saying this to the clergy, not just to those who have been to seminary. God's saying it to the entire nation. Some of you may be thinking. There is no way I am a priest. The priesthood is reserved for people who are a lot more holy than me. But look at these words from I Peter 2:9. They are written to average Christians like you and me. "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people in order that you may declare the mighty works of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." So you have been called by God to be a priest.

What does a priest do? Number one, priests have direct access to God. That's part of what the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is about. You don't have to go through anyone else in order to get to God. You have direct access to God. Number two, priests represent God to people. A priest speaks on behalf of God. He or she represents God. Do you realize this morning if you are a Christ follower you carry the reputation of God around with you. What some people think about God is directly shaped by how you

live as someone who represents God. If you are compassionate and patient and forgiving and loving, then people are going to know that that's what God is like. You see in 40 Days of Community it's not going to be just about us getting together as a church family. It's about us serving our local community. You and I have the wonderful privilege and responsibility out there to represent God, to our neighbors and co-workers, to people in need.

So as a priest you have direct access to God, and as a priest you represent God, and third, as a priest you have dedicated yourself to a life of serving God. In the story that we are looking at today the priesthood is not just about a vocational choice. It's a calling given to every believer. You see your strongest devotion in life is not to be to your career, but rather to your calling, to your priesthood. Your job is to stay faithful and serve God as a priest all the days of your life. Sometimes it will be the most rewarding and fulfilling thing you will ever do, and sometimes it is hard and sometimes it is lonely. But you have been called to give a lifetime of serving God as one who represents God.

Now the third step I want to encourage you to take today as you set the table for a God visit is to look around and commit with the community. Here's what I mean by that. After God challenges the nation to obey him completely and follow him wholeheartedly the people respond. In Exodus 19:8 we hear their words, "Then the people all answered together, 'Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.'" The word I want you to zero in on is the word "together." As a community of God followers they unanimously responded to God in one voice.

This is important. We are more than just a collection of individual Christians who happen to come together for worship at the same time on the same day. We are a community, a family. We are a church, the body of Christ. During this 40 Days of Community we are asking for a kind of corporate commitment. We are hoping to have every small group study the same 40 Days of Community curriculum. Our children and youth and our adults are all going to be studying and talking about the same theme. We are all going to be in this together. That's why it is not an exaggeration to say we are hopeful that every single person who considers St. Andrew's their church family will say, "I'm in." And that invitation is extended to any of you who are visiting with us this morning. And I hope that there is something inside your heart that when you hear, hey, this is what our church family is doing, that your response is, "I'll do it." Because I am a part of a community. It's not just about me. I am part of a family. If the family is doing it, then I want to be a part of it, because I belong here. So commit with the community.

The fourth step is to look inward and prepare yourself spiritually. As we think about starting 40 Days of Community next week

what does it look like to get ready spiritually? Listen to the words of God again in Exodus 19: 10-11. "The Lord said to Moses: 'Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and prepare for the third day, because on the third day the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.'" Tucked in these verses are 3 very practical steps you and I can take, to get ready spiritually for what God wants to do in these next few weeks.

Here's number one. Set aside time. God gives the people of Israel three days to get ready to meet him. Remember these people are just like us. They have jobs and responsibilities and they have families to take care of. They have tasks that are on their lists. And yet God says: this is important. I want you to carve out time to be involved with meeting me. So again, just to be very up front, if you are going to get the most out of 40 Days of Community you will have to set aside time. In your sermon outline are 4 very specific commitments we are asking every single one of us to make throughout these 40 days. The first thing is to get in a small group. Try it for just seven weeks. We will have groups meeting in various areas and at a variety of times during the week and on Sundays. In the brochure in your bulletin is information on how you can get into a group. Second, we are asking you to commit to being here for 7 consecutive Sundays in a row. I know your lives are busy. I know you have a lot of things going on. But each Sunday will build on the last. Third, we will be providing a daily devotional for you to read every day for 40 days. We are going to start it on the same day, so literally our whole church will be on the same page each day. Finally, we are going to ask you with your group to participate in a very exciting mission project of feeding the hungry in southwest Portland. We will be letting you know more about this project in a couple of weeks. Our goal is to provide emergency food for all the hungry people in SW Portland for four months. To do that we will need to collect 50,000 pounds of food or the cash equivalent. We are calling this project SW HOPE: Feed the Hungry.

The second thing you can do to spiritually prepare is to take inventory. You know, when a business does an inventory, it's a reality check. It's saying here's what we have and here's what we don't have. I want to ask you to do the same thing spiritually—take a spiritual inventory and make an honest assessment right now and begin by asking the hard question, "Where am I right now in my relationship with God?" If we want God to do a great work in our lives we need to have an honest assessment of our relationship with God. It is so easy to get busy and involved in the church and find that our hearts have drifted in our relationship with God. This is a time for us to just stop and ask if there is anything block-

ing our relationship with God. I hope that your heart's cry is the cry of David in Psalm 51, "Create in me a pure heart, O God and renew a right spirit within me."

Then the number three way to prepare spiritually is to pray diligently, and this may be the most important. Nothing will draw our heart to God's heart like prayer. Nothing will remove the spiritual obstacles and roadblocks like prayer. Nothing will reignite our relationship with God like time alone just talking and listening to God. Nothing will invite the presence of God into 40 Days of Community like a congregation who is committed to praying, and nothing will set the table for a God visit like prayer.

So we want to ask you to do that...to pray.

Finally, the final step in getting ready for a God visit is to look up and get ready for a God ENCOUNTER. In Exodus 19:17 we hear, "Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain." That verse speaks of a very important spiritual truth. It reminds us that often the most life altering encounters with God require us to leave the routine, the comfortable, and the familiar. So what does it look like practically to get ready and to leave that which is comfortable? Well, for some of us it might be trying this small group thing, just making room in your world for new and deeper relationships—to do life together with a few people. For some of you it will mean moving outside your comfort zone and beginning to serve people in our community who are in desperate need.

But I want you to again imagine the scene happening at the base of Mount Sinai where 2 million people are gathered. In Exodus 20:18 we hear that God came down. "When the people heard the thunder and loud blast of the horn they saw the lightning and smoke billowing from the mountain, they stood at a distance trembling with fear." I just wonder that when those two million people left Mount Sinai that and went home if they didn't go home with the smell of smoke on them, with the smell of God on them. Because the presence of God had marked them. Wouldn't it be great if during 40 Days of Community that people would say about us, "They smell like God." That when they look at what we do and how we live and what we are like, they might just say, "Maybe that is what God is like." I have a hunch that we may be in for a wonderful ride in this journey with God. God might just show up and maybe some lives will be changed and maybe our community will be touched in a special way, and maybe we will be forever different because of some things that only God can do. I hope that over the next few days you will be praying that there will be that kind of God visit with us as we start together with 40 Days of Community. To God be the glory. Amen.