

# OUT OF BONDAGE INTO INHERITANCE

A LENTEN JOURNEY WITH EXODUS

A GUIDE THROUGH LENT

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# A Guide Through Lent

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**noun** in the Christian religion, a forty day season of fasting and repentance leading up to Easter.

# What is Lent?

The first Christians observed the high holy days of Good Friday and Easter with zeal and devotion. Each year at the Easter celebration, new converts would be baptized before the entire congregation. It became the custom of the Church to prepare these new converts for their baptism with a season of repentance, fasting, and reflection. The congregation, in solidarity with the new converts, and as a renewal of their commitment to follow Jesus often joined in the practice that came to be known as Lent.

The season is meant to be an imitation of our Lord Jesus' wilderness temptation (Matt. 4:1-11). It was a season where Christians took seriously Jesus words to deny oneself and follow Him (Matt. 16:24-25). The practice allowed the community a regular, rhythm of embodying the redemption and forgiveness proclaimed in the Gospel, and of their continual need to turn to Jesus and follow His way of love.

# A Lenten Warning.

It would be easy for us to mistake religious rigor for faithfulness. But we must always hold before us, as the book of Exodus does, that the end of our salvation, the point of our redemption, is to be brought into very heart of God—becoming people of love.

We must never confuse religious observance with divine intimacy. During Lent we run the risk of adhering to strict fasts or other religious rites while ignoring our neighbor, or even God. Our goal in trodding the ancient path of Lent is nothing more than an awareness and experience of God's presence.

The unique way Lent will challenge us towards this is by asking us to reflect on things we have attempted to substitute for that presence. As such Lent is a season of fasting. Consider both what might be helpful to lay aside for the next forty days (social media, alcohol, TV, shopping, etc.) but also, and perhaps more importantly, consider what you might pick up (Bible reading, prayer, journaling, silence, etc.). Consider also how your fasting might be a means to solidarity with the poor. In what I give up, how

might I be able to reallocate my money, my appetite, my attention in love of God and love of neighbor?

The traditional practice is too fast for six days of the week (Mon-Sat) followed by a feast day in celebration of Jesus' work of redemption. But there is no right or wrong way to do it, nor is fasting the point. Above all I encourage you to spend the next seven weeks cultivating an awareness of God and neighbor, in prayer and in presence.

## How to use this guide.

We will be taking this journey through Lent with an unlikely traveling partner. The Book of Exodus is the ancient story of a liberating God. While at first it's relation to the work of Christ and our lives staked on His work and promises might seem unclear, we will quickly find what the Earliest followers of Jesus recognized quite easily—the Exodus story is in fact our story.

Every three days you will **read a section of Exodus**. Each reading has a writing meant to help your re-imagine this story as one that breaks into your world now.

Following each writing are reflection questions. These questions do not have right or wrong answers, they are not Bible trivia, but prompts meant to till the soil of your world, unearthing what the Spirit of God might be speaking to you in that given moment.

I strongly encourage you to **take this journey and to reflect on these questions with a friend or a group of friends**. God has made us for relationships, and following Jesus means following Jesus into a community of God's people. So grab a friend, or your small group, or your curious cousin and commit to this journey together. Commit to doing the hard and vulnerable thing of sharing your reflections, your doubts, your questions and struggles with a co-traveler.



ASH WEDNESDAY TO  
FIRST FRIDAY OF LENT

# The Cry of Our Hearts

*“They cried out for help, and their cry rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and he remembered his covenant promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He looked down on the people of Israel and knew it was time to act.”*

Exodus 2:23b-25 (NLT)

Read Exodus 1-2

photo by Martin Sanchez

We begin in ashes, and to ashes we will return. This simple fact reminds us of the state of things. As if we needed much reminding these days. The reign of our day is one of de-creation. We know this because we see its effect all around, death.

We are born in bondage under this regime—captives to the mechanism of decay, of chaos, that drives a world of violence, injustice, exploitation, and hate. Like Jacob's sons and daughters born in Egypt, we are trapped, unable to get out. No matter what we do, where we turn, how much we resist, the reign persists, and the world remains a world of ashes.

This is the world the Exodus introduces us to—a world where the meteoric rise of the people of Israel, God's little family, erodes and decays. In the first few short verses of our reading, we see a family once considered one of the most privileged families in all of Egypt (see the story of Joseph, Genesis 37 ff.) deteriorate into a nameless, faceless, Godless threat to the Egyptian empire it once propped up. Lost to who they were created to be, to the One they were created to serve, to live for, belong to. They now exist to serve the empire.

In the Exodus story, the empire of terror we all experience is

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given a face. Standing as the manifestation of the oppressive regime of sin and death is Pharaoh. Likely rooted in one or more historical figures, Exodus portrays Pharaoh as a larger-than-life representation of the evil attempting to take the seat of God in the world, a personification of the empire of empires. Defiance of Pharaoh is defiance of the empire, of the powers of sin and death.

Exodus opens with several of these acts of defiance. These small acts of justice undermine the rule of Pharaoh and, in most instances, serve as small pictures of God's breaking into the story. Shiprah and Puah (Ex. 1:15-21), Moses' mother and sister (Ex. 2:1-4; 7-9), Pharaoh's own daughter (2:5-10), and Moses himself (Ex. 3:11-12), all serve as pictures of what it looks like to stand against the empire of evil.

Yet, the empire continues its reign relatively unphased. In the face of these courageous and costly acts of justice, injustice remained firmly in place. Pharaoh continued to rule and oppression with him. Israel, stripped of their identity as the chosen people of Yahweh, were helplessly enslaved, left with nothing but their groans of suffering (Ex. 2:23). But God hears their groans and moves to intervene (Ex. 2:24-25).

And so Exodus prepares us for her lesson. We, like Israel, groan under the weight and burden of oppression. Weary and worn down by a world that does nothing but undo. We find ourselves enslaved to the empire of sin, all at once victim and perpetrator, oppressor and oppressed. Though meaningful and difference-making, our acts of justice cannot thwart the empire of chaos and darkness, not entirely.

We need help from outside ourselves. We need divine intervention. We need grace. We need divine justice to pour from the heavens and free us from oppression, injustice, and death.

We need God to act.

We need resurrection.

Reflect with a friend

1. Is it easy or difficult for you to be confronted with the bleak reality of Ash Wednesday?
2. In what ways do you find yourself complicit with the regime opposed to God?
3. What opportunities to stand in defiance of the regime opposed to God and live into the mission of justice (big or small) do you have right now?
4. Spend a moment in confession with Jesus and with one another.
5. Spend a moment reminding one another of this truth, “God has decided to act on your behalf, and God’s grace is sufficient for you.”

THE FIRST SATURDAY TO THE  
FIRST TUESDAY OF LENT

## The God Who Acts

*“And the people believed; and when they heard that the  
LORD had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen  
their affliction, they bowed their head and worshiped.”*

Exodus 4:31 (ESV)

Read Exodus 3-4

photo by Patrick Hendry

We need the presence of God. It is the goal for which and to which we are freed. God's presence is also the means of our freedom. Without it we are left to swim in the swirling currents of our oppressor. With it, everything changes.

Moses' feeble attempts at justice did nothing to stop the empire represented by Pharaoh (2:15). But now, God has entered the story.

Suddenly and somewhat unexpectedly, the Angel of the Lord bursts into history and into the life of Moses in a flaming bush that doesn't burn. The miraculous manifestation simultaneously depicts the consuming fire and lifegiving nature of God's presence. So powerful is this presence that the ground surrounding the bush is altered. It is no longer just dirt but holy fertile soil brought to life by the presence of its Creator. It is unworthy of being trampled on by sandals made by the skin of a dead animal (3:5). Death does not belong here.

This is a God who hears the groans of his people. One who truly sees them and truly cares. He must act (3:7-8).

This acting does not come in ways we would expect. This God is always other than what we thought, and the world He brings into

being, and His processes for bringing it into being are always other than we expect. His world is not like the empire. It is wholly other because He is wholly other. His name is Yahweh, "I AM."

And the means of Yahweh's deliverance is Yahweh's presence (3:12). Like the earth surrounding the burning bush, everything changes in the presence of Yahweh. God's assurance to Moses came in His proximity, "I will be with you" (3:12).

The presence of Yahweh changes everything. In an instant, the presence of Yahweh among the enslaved people shifts their allegiance (4:31). Pharaoh oppresses Israel by demanding they serve him. Yahweh will demand that Pharaoh allow Israel to come out of Egypt and serve Him.

There is a play on words here. Israel *serves* Pharaoh in enslaved labor. Yahweh demands Israel's freedom so they might *serve* (same Hebrew word) Yahweh in worship. When Yahweh arrives, freedom from serving the oppressive Pharaoh arrives with Him.

Everything changes when God shows up. And God's presence with us is both our intended destination (let them go out and worship me) and the means of getting to that destination (I will be with you). With this assurance, we, like Moses, have to relearn



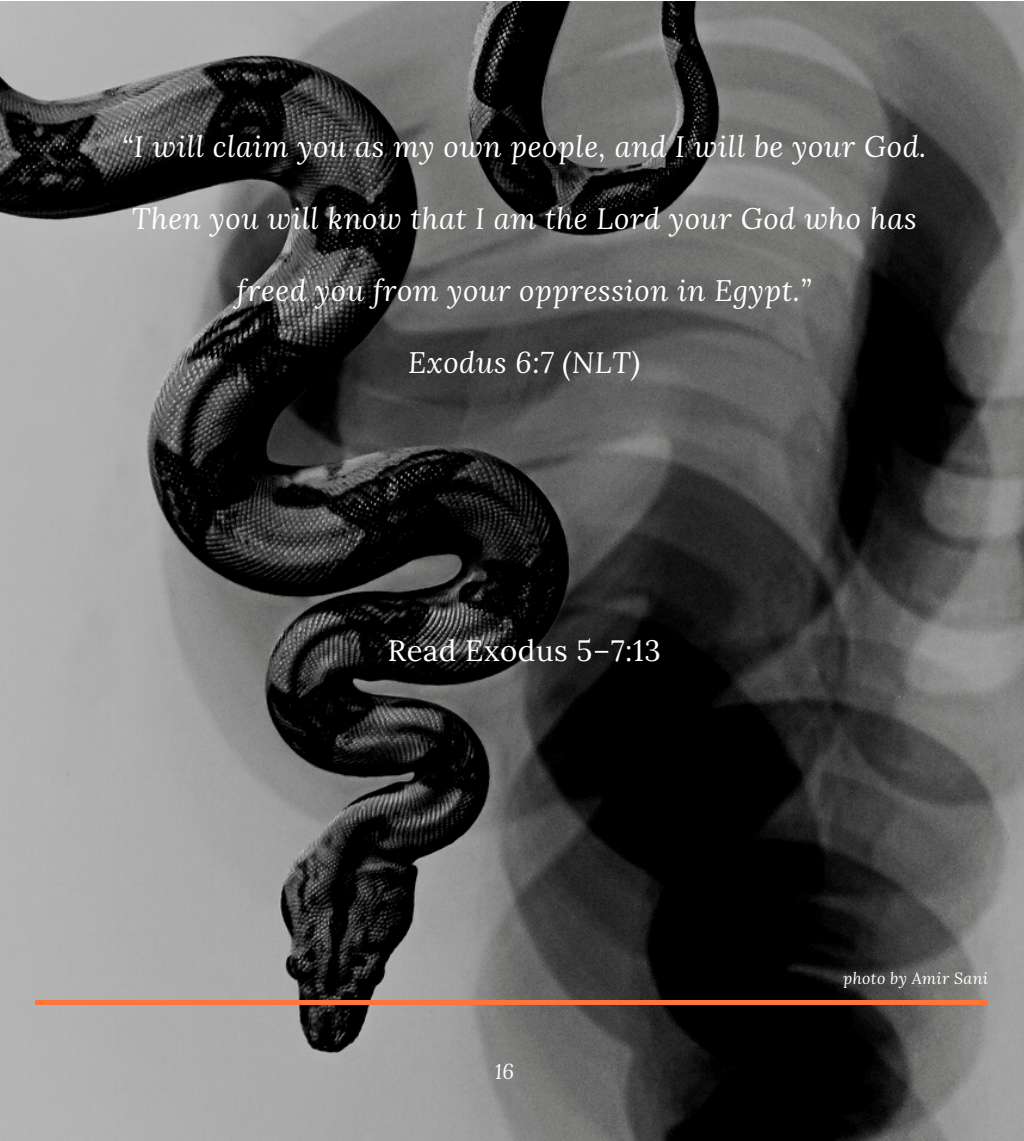
what it means to exist in God's presence (The likely point of the strange interlude depicting Yahweh's attempt on Moses' life (4:24-26)). We, like Moses, are being called to confront a tyrant of a world in which we have little power or influence. For us to taste freedom is for us to experience the presence of God. Only there, will things truly change.

Reflect with a friend

1. What does it mean to you that God goes with you? Do you struggle (like Moses) to believe that this is true or that it makes much of a difference?
2. What would change in your life if you truly began to believe that God was with you? What would you have the courage to take on or to leave behind?
3. Spend a moment praying together. Ask for the assurance, the courage, and the transformative power of God's presence.

THE SECOND WEDNESDAY TO THE  
SECOND FRIDAY OF LENT

## God's Impinging Reign



*"I will claim you as my own people, and I will be your God.  
Then you will know that I am the Lord your God who has  
freed you from your oppression in Egypt."*

Exodus 6:7 (NLT)

Read Exodus 5-7:13

photo by Amir Sani

Moses and Israel find themselves between the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Pharaoh. The God of the slaves has made it clear that Israel are His special possession, and that they will be free to offer their allegiance to Him. The stage is set for a showdown, one that points directly to the reality we find ourselves in today.

Yahweh's assurance of freedom is not only a freedom from, but a freedom to. From the outset, two things are clear, 1) Israel's time as slaves to Egypt has come to an end, and 2) this implies a necessary transfer of allegiance from Pharaoh to Yahweh. Throughout the contention between Moses and Pharaoh (which is really a contest between Yahweh and Pharaoh, (7:1)), Pharaoh understands this clearly. He will not let the people go. He will not let them leave his empire to worship. They belong to him, and so does their allegiance.

Yahweh's request, spoken through Moses, does not mince words. In Hebrew, it is grammatically an order given from a superior. Moses addresses Pharaoh as if he were a vassal to Yahweh's will. The tension of the moment cannot be overstated. The command is a clear and direct challenge to Pharaoh's

superiority and all he represents.

And why should he listen? Pharaoh doesn't know this God. How could he? Pharaoh doesn't concern himself with a God who keeps the company of slaves. He resides quite comfortably and confidently in the illusions of his power. An illusion that is about to come crashing down. And Pharaoh, Moses, Israel, and all of Egypt will soon come to know this God up close and personal.

But aside from pride, Pharaoh's resistance comes from the economic toll releasing a large number of the empire's forced labor would take. It makes little economic sense to cave to the demands of some unknown slave God.

Furthermore, Yahweh's order implies the establishment of new governance, a new world order. Pharaoh is no longer in charge, and the slaves are no longer his. These people whom Pharaoh has bent and broken for his gain belong to God. And God is now taking them from Pharaoh to make them his own. Freedom from Pharaoh is not freedom to do whatever one wants, but freedom into life with Yahweh. Loyalty is not abandoned, it is transferred. And Yahweh is not merely demanding allegiance via hollow religious ceremony. He is recapturing the heart and soul of Israel.

And this is the heart of the Gospel—the heart of the liberation offered by Yahweh. God establishes a new governance in the world. One free of dominating and oppressive empires of productivity and exploitation. God will erect a community of fidelity, neighborliness, and love in its place.

Yet we find ourselves torn. Like Israel, we see the evil done to us and around us and claim that God has not delivered us at all (5:23). We, like them, fear the power that is so close and obvious to us—the immediate, clear, and present danger. The might and power of Pharaoh seem too much to confront, and they are... for us.

God's presence assures us of God's power—a power that we do not coerce or control but that is potent and at work for us. We shouldn't seek to appease or call on those powers that perpetuate our oppression or the oppression of those around us. This is an obvious power, the power of the defeated regime, represented by a callous and uncaring Pharaoh. This type of power disadvantages and impoverishes others, and in so doing, disadvantages and impoverishes us.

Pharaoh's power is an illusion, one that God will consume (7:12). Yahweh's power is substantive and rooted in His insistence that He be present among us. We should entrust ourselves to Yahweh and not Pharaoh, to the liberator, not the oppressor. Even when doing so feels costly.

### Reflect with a friend

1. Where do you find yourself in this story? Do you feel like the powerlessly oppressed, or bought into an illusion of your own power?
2. In what ways does the escalating confrontation between God and Pharaoh speak to you?
3. How does the idea that God does not free you to do what you like, but frees you to live in intimacy and loyalty to Him strike you? What does this reveal about your view of God? Your view of yourself?
4. Spend a moment discussing how a transfer of allegiance to Yahweh could actually be quite freeing for you. What would this possibly look like for you today?



THE SECOND SATURDAY TO THE  
SECOND TUESDAY OF LENT

# The Crumbling Illusion

*“Pharaoh's magicians tried to do the same thing with their  
secret arts, but this time they failed. And the gnats covered  
everyone, people and animals alike.”*

Exodus 8:18 (NLT)

Read Exodus 7:14–10

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photo by Alexander Mills

In a confrontation of divine authority, Yahweh unleashes a barrage of nine plagues on the empire. Pharaoh, proves powerless to thwart the God he mocks. The Egyptians and Pharaoh now know this God.

The contest between Yahweh and Pharaoh is a confrontation over supremacy and ultimate authority. Pharaoh, the God-king, is fully vested with the authority of the Egyptian gods. In the most powerful nation on the planet, deemed to have the most powerful gods among the earth's gods, Pharaoh was the dominant divine presence of the world.

This divine battle is fought through mediators. Yahweh uses Moses and Aaron. Pharaoh uses his magicians. The contrast between the two is striking. The servants of Yahweh are slaves, nobodies, and despite Moses' upbringing several decades before, comparatively uneducated. They belong to a powerless people and sit at the bottom of the socio-economic structure of Egypt. The magicians, however, would have been the elite of the elite among the intelligentsia of Egypt. Aside from Pharaoh, there were very few who held the authority of these learned men. These were the advisors to Pharaoh and in the most powerful empire on the planet

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represented the most powerful entity. Because of this, they can go blow for blow with Moses and Aaron, but only for a while.

Things take a drastic turn during the third plague. The magicians reach the limits of their power, and thus the power of Pharaoh and all he represents. It is at this moment (8:18) Yahweh wins. It becomes evident to the reader, the Egyptians, and even the magicians that the power of Yahweh far exceeds that of Pharaoh. They have begun to "know Yahweh." The very thing Pharaoh refuses to do (5:2).

Pharaoh's refusal to concede to Yahweh's command is a refusal to acknowledge that the God of the slaves is the God of the cosmos. He will continue to refuse to recognize this for seven more disastrous plaques.

Instead, he chooses to continue living in his illusions of power. Yet Yahweh has exposed their limits and demonstrated that there is one far greater and far more powerful.

The reality is kingdoms, empires, and authorities come and go. They have, and they will until God's eternal kingdom is firmly and finally established in the earth. Yet we so often insist on fearing these kingdoms that threaten with their illusions of power. Or

worse yet, living into them hoping that we might gain from their so-called power.

This is the picture the New Testament paints of the world, and it's one the early Church, and brothers and sisters throughout the ages have readily adopted. The empires surrounding us that threaten or woo us with their power will have their day. The illusion will come crumbling down, and the only kingdom left standing will be one of righteousness and justice.

This understanding of the world led the early Church's brave stand against the cult empire of Rome, even in the face of martyrdom. This faith in the liberating God of power fed the souls of starving and brutalized enslaved peoples throughout the centuries. This is the confrontational faith that says to the oppressor, the exploiter, the tyrant, and abuser, "there is one God standing head and shoulders above the gods of all the earth, and you are not Him." This is the faith of resur-

rection. That God will overcome the powerful oppressive and maleficent forces of the earth and establish a reign of justice, righteousness, and peace.

Reflect with a friend

1. As Exodus reveals, Pharaoh's power is an illusion when confronted with Yahweh's, how easy is that for you to actually believe? In other words, the real felt consequences of Pharaoh's power still existed for Israel, does the display of Yahweh's power convince you?
2. What illusory powers, things that cause us to fear them or promise us they'll give us peace, would you identify in your world? Are you allured by them, afraid of them, or both? How might the story of Exodus help you confront those powers?
3. Do you find it difficult to view the world this way? Why or why not? If not, how would your life concretely change if you were able to? In other words what would you be able to stop "serving" if you no longer believed it actually had the power it claims to?

THE THIRD WEDNESDAY TO THE  
THIRD FRIDAY OF LENT

# An Empire Turned on its Head

*“Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron in the night and said, “Get up, get out from among my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, serve the LORD as you have requested!*

*Also, take your flocks and your herds, just as you have requested, and leave. But bless me also.”*

*Exodus 12:31-32 (NET)*

*Read Exodus 11-12*

photo by Tom Barrett

The escalating conflict comes to a morbid end. The empire of Pharaoh has realized its impotence and it now lies in rubbles. The slaves are slaves no more, but a people... Yahweh's people.

The escalating conflict between Yahweh and Pharaoh reaches a stunning and unsettling end. It is now the Egyptians crying out (11:6) and Moses (and his God) who is feared throughout Egypt, not Pharaoh (11:3). In a few short chapters, the power dynamics have flipped. The ruthless oppressor of chapter 1 is now pitiable, weak, and entirely at the mercy of the slaves and their God.

The final plague highlights just how vulnerable the most potent force in the world was. The narrative is terse, unapologetic, and to the point. It happened in the dark of the night, Yahweh struck the firstborn in the land of Egypt without the lamb's blood, from ruler to beast. The horrific nature of this final "wonder" aside, Exodus highlights the helpless and hopeless state of Pharaoh's empire. A deified ruler was the life force of the empire and the empire's people. Yet Pharaoh could not even protect his own home. The empire has fallen, and the slaves of Pharaoh are free.

Yet the final command Pharaoh will give, "but bless me also," directs us to the moral of Exodus's story. A blessing was something



the greater bestowed on the lesser, the stronger to the weaker. It carries the idea of implanting some of your own abundant strength and life force into another. Those having all the wealth, power, resources, and prestige could elevate the lives of those below them.

The remarkable irony in this instance is in the ruler of the Egyptians asking a slave to impart to him power, privilege, life, “bless me.” In this instance, Pharaoh comes to terms with his impotence and calls out to the only one he thinks can help him, Yahweh and His mouthpiece, Moses.

The power of blessing flows from Yahweh, the emancipating God, not the powers of the empire and all its resources. In the words of Walter Brueggemann, “The power to bless is not within the grasp of the empire.”

With this realization and newfound freedom, the formerly enslaved people, Israel, move beyond Pharaoh and into a life of God's presence—one not dependent on empire, but on the God of life.

Reflect with a friend

1. What would you identify as the empire in your life, those things offering power, prestige, wealth, life, etc.? What draws you to them? What do you hope to find in them?
2. Is it easy for you to believe that “the power to bless is not within the grasp of the empire?” Why or why not?
3. What might it look like for you to find blessing (be imbued with life) in Yahweh today? Where are you finding this to be the case? Where are you struggling to find life in Yahweh?
4. How might you exchange some of your power, prestige, privilege, etc. in order to bless others?

THE THIRD SATURDAY TO THE  
THIRD TUESDAY OF LENT

# Keep Still

*“The LORD will fight for you.*

*You just keep still.”*

Exodus 14:14 (CEB)

Read Exodus 13–15:21

photo by Gates Marcinkovics

The Redemption and continued preservation of the newly emancipated band depend entirely on Yahweh. The final act of their emancipation makes this clear. Israel and Egypt have been repeatedly shown who Yahweh is. Now Israel enters the desert, wandering into a brave new world where Yahweh reigns, and the oppressive empire is behind them at last.

In a striking turn of events, Pharaoh has a change of heart (at the behest of Yahweh it seems (14:1)) and pursues Israel to re-enslave them. The response of Israel is disappointing but to be expected. In the face of the greatest military on the planet, they fear. Fear leads to lament, regret, and finally despair (v.11). Yet Moses assures them with a commanding utterance (14:13-14).

The order to "fear not" does not claim there is nothing worth fearing but instead reminds Israel that Yahweh fights for them. This results in a counter fear of Yahweh (14:31) as Israel rightly recognizes the might and rule of Yahweh above all else.

Fear has no place in a world where Yahweh is actively engaged. There are plenty of dreadful things but none capable of overpowering Yahweh. This fear betrays distrust that either Yahweh isn't truly active or present, or that his presence isn't

enough, concluding He is either powerless or unreliable. When Yahweh is feared, it is because we have come to see and know the God who fights for us. When Yahweh is feared, nothing else need be.

Israel now exists in a radically new world where Yahweh's rule is effective, and Pharaoh's has been exposed, proven impotent.

This is what we proclaim when we proclaim Jesus. The governance of God has prevailed, and no other governance threatens to shake it. The announcement of God's alternative governance leads to freedom from bondage, freedom from empire, freedom from threat and coercion, and empty promises.

Moses' utterance (14:13-14) reaches forward into the alternative future assured by God, voiding the unbearable present, nullifying the threat of Pharaoh and his empire. The one's you fear, the oppressive power that threatens you, will soon vanish because the LORD fights for you. The chariots and their threat were very real, but so was Yahweh's impending rule.

And this new administration of God is ushered in by God and for God. There is no doubt it is always and only Yahweh who stands in as the agent of deliverance (14:31). Moses appeals to God for

precisely this reason, it is God's outstretched arm that frees the captives (15:4). This divine agency makes us uncomfortable, as we are powerless to influence, coerce, or summon it. We simply have to "keep still."

This is the message of grace. One that assures us that while we are no match for the oppressive empires of the world, we believe there is a God who is. In the face of this, we can do nothing but keep still and see the salvation of Yahweh, knowing that it is the LORD who fights for us.

Reflect with a friend

1. In Michael Walzer's classic *Exodus and Revolution* he writes, "Wherever you live it is probably Egypt." In what ways is this true in your context? In what ways do you contribute to the empire's reign and oppression?
2. Is the command to "keep still" comforting or unbearable for you? Where does this come from (pride, doubt, past hurt, etc.)? What might "keeping still" look like for you today?
3. The archetype of liberation from "Egypt" (and particularly Pharaoh) is played out through the remainder of the scriptures (a thread stretching to the end of the book of Revelation). Spend a moment reflecting and sharing your reflections on all that Egypt and Pharaoh symbolize, and what Yahweh's divine self-disclosure reveals about the nature of your current reality.



THE FOURTH WEDNESDAY TO THE  
FOURTH FRIDAY OF LENT

## Life in the Wasteland

*“And as soon as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud.”*

Exodus 16:10 (ESV)

Read Exodus 15:22–18

photo by Martin Sanchez



So much of Lent is about confronting the wilderness and looking towards the glory of God. And this is a pretty apt picture of our daily life with Jesus. We, too, look back at our deliverance wrought by the strong outstretched hands of Jesus. We know and believe that we were miraculously snatched from the grip of death at that moment. Yet we look up and see nothing but a wasteland.

Israel, emancipated by the outstretched hand of Yahweh, find themselves wandering in the barren desert. Stripped of the illusion built by the empire, they are left entirely dependent on Yahweh. Their oppressors gave them the illusion of security, provision, and life.

The manna is the lesson of the wasteland. Dependence on Yahweh must be renewed each day. There is no place for substituting reliance on Yahweh's presence with Yahweh's provisions. So water is given as it is needed, and always miraculously. And manna is to be gathered for the day (with the exception of the sabbath) with the knowledge that God will provide it again tomorrow. This material provision points to the more important life-giving reality in the wasteland. Yahweh is with Israel.

Israel's refusal to gather only enough for the day betrays their refusal to believe Yahweh will provide. A refusal to believe that Yahweh is with them and for them. They doubt that God can and will continue to sustain them.

So, Israel hoards.

So much of what Lent challenges us to do is to confront our desire to hoard. Hoarding offers the illusion of control, security, life. We hoard, or desire to hoard, food, clothes, information, money, others' attention, and power to provide ourselves with life amid the barrenness. This scarcity mindset can only see the wasteland and fails to see the giver of life that resides with us in it.

Jesus invites us to live risky lives of dependence, lives free from hoarding. Jesus invites us to see that actual provision in the wasteland is divinely initiated. Everything else offers a mere illusion of provision and will only rot.

We cannot provide this life for ourselves. So the wasteland life insists that God be with us while letting go of the illusions of life.

And God is with us. Each week at communion, we are reminded that the bread of heaven sustains us, carries us, satisfies us, gives us life. Turn away from the illusions of life. Behold the

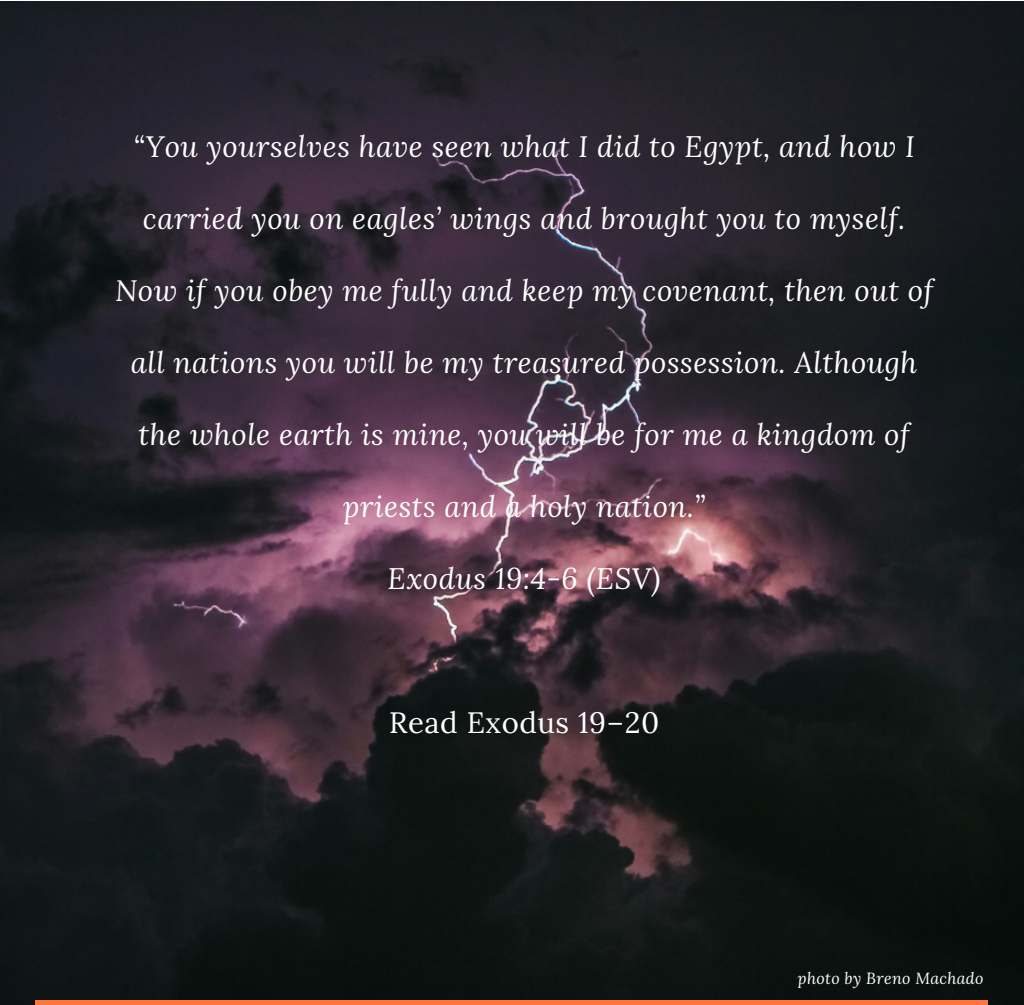
glory that goes with us in the wasteland providing life when there  
is none to be found.

Reflect with a friend

1. In what ways is life like the wilderness? In what ways is it not? Does this difference somehow direct us to God?
2. How do the illusions of empire follow us into the wasteland? What illusions of life do you find yourself allured by and why ?
3. In what ways is our desire to build lives of flourishing for ourselves hoarding? How do you see this showing up in yourself? What might it mean to let go of some of this? Is that a scary idea or a freeing one?

THE FOURTH SATURDAY TO THE  
FOURTH TUESDAY OF LENT

## From Slaves to Priests



*“You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I  
carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.  
Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of  
all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although  
the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of  
priests and a holy nation.”*

*Exodus 19:4-6 (ESV)*

**Read Exodus 19-20**

photo by Breno Machado

As we cross the midpoint of Lent, we traverse a massive turning point in the Exodus narrative. Turning from Pharaoh and the exploitative empire, Israel gazes upon the glory of their redeeming God.

Emancipation is not freedom into nothing. Freedom into nothing is the sort of independent, enlightenment freedom into personal autonomy that risks Israel becoming the same type of empire they were liberated from. Instead, Israel will be shaped by sustained practices, becoming an emancipated community that stands defiant to the pharaonic system of exploitation and abuse.

The faithful and mighty acts of God's redemption (19:4) transfigure the status and awareness of the slaves into Yahweh's treasured possession, a people set apart by God. No longer under the rule and reign of Pharaoh's oppressive empire, the Israelites are now expected to serve Yahweh,. not as a nation of slaves, but as a nation of priests (19:6).

Freedom from slavery and into the community of God entails living out God's distinct mission, a divine vocation. Freedom to live as one pleases is a road that leads back to Pharaoh's empire. Instead, Israel entrusts herself to her deliverer for guidance, wis-

dom, and mission. This mission stands out against the backdrop of the self-serving kingdoms of the world. The exploitative missions of greed and power necessarily trample the earth. Yahweh's mission restores it. The way of Yahweh is the way of life. As a nation of priests, Israel will be the conduit for the life of the world if they will believe and follow Yahweh.

The fear of Yahweh (20:20) is the crux of the issue. Moses offers a confounding double fear, "Do not be afraid, for God has come... so that you will continue to fear God." The language couched as fear in the Old Testament connotes allegiance, fidelity, and adherence to Yahweh. In this way, it is much like the New Testament's belief or trust. It is a commitment that assumes a readiness to obey the covenant and offer loyalty, not to the laws themselves, but to the God that commands them. The world of Exodus assumes everyone lives in fear of something, offering fidelity, trust, and obedience to something. The fear of Yahweh leads to a life where fear of anything else is unnecessary.

Whether Israel or the Church, the community of God is always distinct among the world, defined and shaped by God as a priestly and holy community (19:5). These identifiers shape her identity and

her vocation and only come about by means of her fidelity to Yahweh.

A priestly community is one through which God works to mediate Himself to the world. This was Israel's vocation, and it is now the community of Jesus' vocation. The Church, endowed with the presence of God's Spirit, is a unique people through which God reveals Godself. In this way, the Church mediates the life of God to the world because she mediates Godself to the world.

Living out this vocation results in holiness. The community of God devotes herself to the service of Yahweh. Doing so necessarily pits God's people as living objections to the pharaonic empires and their various regimes. This distinction in service results in a distinct people, a set-apart people, a holy people.

Our fidelity to God, rooted in our freedom from enslavement, results in our being used by God to bring emancipation to the spaces we inhabit. In New Testament language, the Light of the World (John 8:12) deputizes us as lights of the world (Matt 5:14). This phenomenon is echoed by Paul (Phil 2:12-16) and reinforced by Revelation (21:22-27).



A liberated life means taking on a new identity and a new mission within the world. It is a life we can only live by faith. This faith obligates and transforms us, making us those who move differently through life, bringing God's presence to the world as we do.

Reflect with a friend

1. What would change if you began to see yourself as God's priest? What might this look like in your world?
2. Do you have positive or negative connotations of "being holy?" Where do these come from and how does the description here challenge them? How do you see yourself as holy within God's holy community (Also see 1 Peter 2:9-10)?
3. How does the description of fearing God strike you? Does Moses contradicting "fears" help? In what ways have you seen this language abused? How does what Exodus describes here differ from the toxic uses you've encountered?
4. Does this type of obedient loyalty to Yahweh (or Jesus) seem restrictive or life giving? Do you tend to run to it or shy away from it? Discuss ways you can help encourage one another to live out your vocation as priest.

THE FIFTH WEDNESDAY TO THE  
FIFTH FRIDAY OF LENT

## The Preferential God

*“You must not mistreat or oppress foreigners in any way. Remember, you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt. You must not exploit a widow or an orphan. If you exploit them in any way and they cry out to me, then I will certainly hear their cry.”*

Exodus 22:21-23 (NLT)

Read Exodus 21-24

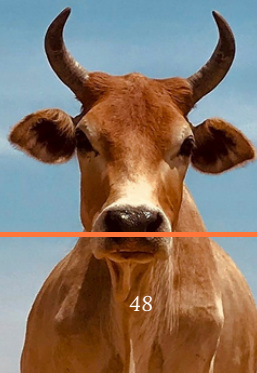


photo by Anand Thakur

We must never confuse religious observance with divine intimacy. During Lent we run the risk of adhering to strict fasts or other religious rites while ignoring our neighbor, or even God. The world of Yahweh, even when imagined in its most legal and religious language is always a world of love for God and neighbor.

The Exodus makes one thing apparent. God's vision for the world excludes and refuses to tolerate the exploitative nature of empire. Thus, the lesser-known laws following on the heels of the ten commandments curb the predatory greed that is the empire's life force. The new society of Yahweh is not one of predation but neighborly love.

The Ten Commandments provide the foundation of the new communities identity. These universal principles are meant to shape and rule all of life in the emancipated community. Immediately following these principles are a series of case laws that bring to life those principles in Israel's world. With few exceptions, the case laws highlight the inclination to default back into living in the ways of empire. The formerly oppressed risk becoming oppressors. A restructuring of society is necessary. At the center of this new order is allegiance and worship to Yahweh. All else flows from this.

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The worshiping community's default trajectory is not amassing power and seeking vengeance but neighborliness and justice. These two concepts ensure that Israel identifies, cares for, and lifts from vulnerability those who risk oppression. Those who stood the most significant risk of exploitation, the orphan, the widow, and the foreigner, are given special consideration by Yahweh. It is Yahweh who stands with the vulnerable as their protector. Should Israel exploit and commodify their vulnerable, they will answer to Yahweh.

The stakes are high. Israel, meant to be a holy nation, runs the risk of becoming everything she escaped. Thus God commits to eliminating those who refuse neighborliness.

The same God of compassion to the oppressed becomes the God of wrath for the oppressor. The cry of the poor mobilizes the God who stands for the poor to disrupt the narrative of empire.

God's Law disrupts the ways of empire, imagining a community of love, where the vulnerable are cared for rather than preyed upon. These laws are foreign, even shocking to our modern ears. Yet the aim of them is a community of compassion and justice. The community of Jesus is one where there are no outsiders, and

exploitation is replaced with redemption and restoration. God's vision for a world of self-giving neighborly love lives on in us today.

Reflect with a friend

1. God has a soft spot for the poor, the vulnerable, the humble, etc. In what ways do you find yourself impoverished? How has the story of God's deliverance of Israel colored your own story of deliverance?
2. In what ways does God's preference for standing with the vulnerable convict you? In what ways does it encourage you?
3. What does it mean to for you to live a life of neighborliness rather than one of empire? Where might you live a more neighborly life? What's holding you back?
4. Reflect together on how Lent might enable you to stand in solidarity with the poor and marginalized around you.

THE FIFTH SATURDAY TO THE  
SIXTH WEDNESDAY OF LENT

## The Fire Among Us

*“I’ll move in and live with the Israelites. I’ll be their God.  
They’ll realize that I am their God who brought them out of  
the land of Egypt so that I could live with them. I am God,  
your God.”*

Exodus 29:45-46 (MSG)

Read Exodus 25-31

photo by Hudson Hintze



It can be easy to subjugate God to our specific ways of worshipping or talking about God. In God's grace, patience, and willingness to condescend to us, we can forget that Yahweh is also the fiery God of emancipation. As we edge closer to Easter, we should hold in tension the terrifying power, authority, and strength able to wrest sin and death to the ground, and Yahweh's insistence on accomplishing this through His own debasement, and humiliation. All at once, at Jesus' crucifixion, the humility and the power of God are most clearly disclosed.

The first half of Exodus seems to almost clash with the second. The fiery God of emancipation and power (1-24) is now directing the finer points of a tent in which He will dwell. The liberating God (1-24) and the dwelling God (25-40) seem at odds. One depicts a sovereign wildling of a God, relentlessly active. The other displays a passive, content, dwelling God concerned with Israel's rest.

Yet Exodus makes it clear. The Emancipating God and the dwelling God are one and the same. The fiery God of the Red Sea is content to dwell among a people, a people of no status at that. In other words the God of liberation is confrontational, insisting on being taken on God's terms.

In this sense, the particular nature of Israel's cultic practices are rooted in the God whose authority and power over the earth have been made clear. It might have been easy for Israel to forget—to mistake Yahweh for some tame, dull, lush of a diety.

We, too, can find ourselves in the comfort and familiarity of our routines, bored by God. We slowly, over time, fashion a God of our liking. Borrowing from the God who resides among us, we dare to think we can say what God is and is not.

As we enjoy our coffee and contemporary worship, we can easily forget that the dwelling God may awaken at any moment and go about God's work of liberation among us. Or that the liberating God may seek to dwell and rest and take residence among us.

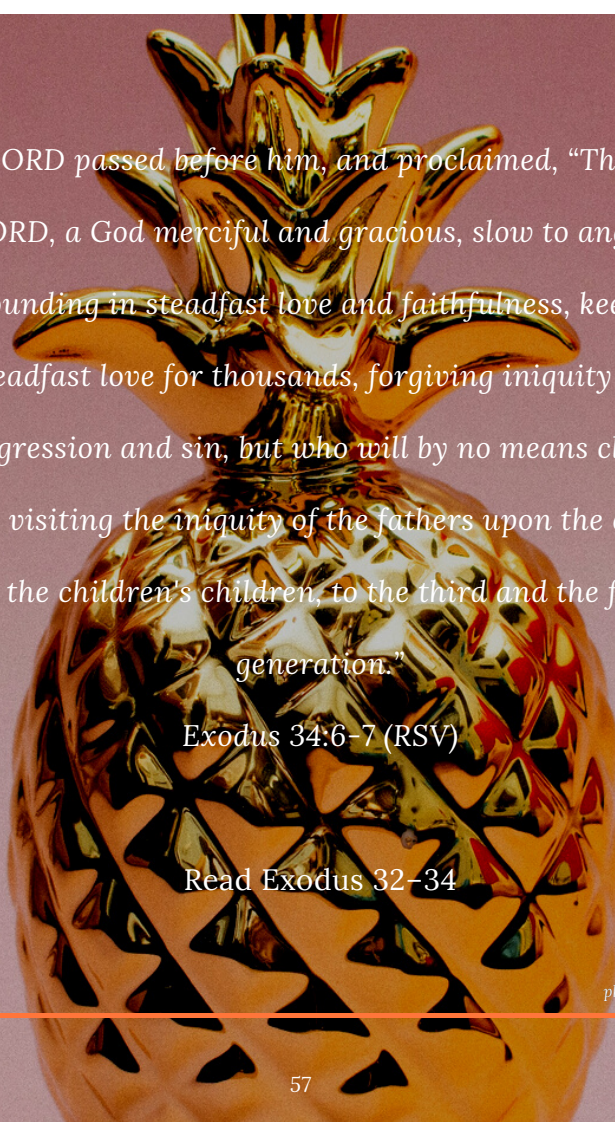
We are rightly comforted and put at ease by the love of God, fully displayed by Jesus. But let us never confuse Jesus' reassurance with the tameness of Yahweh. The God who comforts us and insists on dwelling among us has, and always will be, a consuming fire.

Reflect with a friend

1. In what ways does who God is confront you? Is this unsettling or comforting?
2. Do you feel that you are overly comfortable (bored) in your worship of God? Why do you think this is? How might you change or maintain this?
3. Do you feel you've left room in your understanding of God for God to freely move and act as God wishes? In other words, do you tend to view God as more of a personal being, or as a construct of ideas? Has this always been the case?

THE SIXTH THURSDAY OF LENT  
TO PALM SUNDAY

## Relentlessly Faithful



*“The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”*

Exodus 34:6-7 (RSV)

Read Exodus 32-34

photo by Kobby Mendez

It can seem like faith would be easier if we could only see—miracles, God, whatever—just anything more than what we see now. But this is never the case. We, like Israel, are a forgetful bunch. The divine splendors of yesterday fade quickly, and our fidelity wanes. Emancipation was not won by us, neither will our inheritance be. Faith in Yahweh begins and ends with the knowledge that it is God who carries us, always.

Israel's rebellion (Exodus 32) is astounding. Having seen the power of Yahweh displayed in the Exodus, the Red Sea deliverance, the provision in the wilderness, the guiding fire and cloud, and the descent upon mount Sinai, they almost immediately break the covenant with Yahweh.

The breach is remarkable. It occurs before Israel departs the mountain where it was ratified and comes on the heels of their commitment to it (24). It breaks several commandments, but perhaps most shockingly, the first one given (20:3-4). And if this weren't enough, Israel ignores the festival guidelines of Yahweh, throwing what amounts to a pagan festival. All of this is done in the name of Yahweh (32:4-5). And all of it is done while disregarding Yahweh's covenant stipulations.

Yet, the remarkable breach of covenant is overshadowed by Yahweh's ultimate response. A response that stands as one of the most cited Old Testament passages on the character of God.

In response to Moses' request for insight into Yahweh's ways (33:13), Yahweh discloses that He is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness for thousands of generations. Two parallel descriptors bracket the central picture of Yahweh's patience (slow to anger). Compassionate and gracious describe Yahweh's response to breaches of relational fidelity. In this case, the broken covenant.

Yahweh's abounding steadfast love and faithfulness depicts Yahweh's commitment to loving and sticking with His people, even when they are covenant breakers. Thus we are reassured as readers that in the face of flagrant disregard and contempt for Yahweh, God's anger will pass, and compassion and faithful love will overshadow the rest, ensuring God stands by the promise made to Israel.

It is significant that God does not reveal Godself primarily in terms of God's power (omniscience, omnipresence, etc.) but in terms of relationship. While it is true God will not merely ignore or

excuse evil—there will be consequences—forgiveness supersedes this demeanor, committing to visit compassion and faithful love for thousands of generations.

The remarkable reality is that our relationship with God is far less dependent on our behavior than we want to believe. Not that obedience doesn't mean anything. It does. Yet regardless of our faithfulness or unfaithfulness to our emancipator, He fully commits Himself to us. This is the self-giving God, willing to be betrayed, handed over, and crucified in commitment to those He has sworn to love. We are held fast by His commitment and love for us, often in spite of our disloyalty and indifference to Him.

Reflect with a friend

1. How do you tend to believe your faithfulness, (obedience, fidelity, whatever you want to call it), shifts God's disposition towards you?
2. Above all God makes the point that He is gracious and compassionate, is this easy for you to believe about God given the story and its immediate context? Does Jesus change this in any way?
3. Is it easy for you to believe God is gracious and compassionate given your life journey? Does knowing this about God change anything about your perception of your journey or God?



## HOLY WEEK

# God with Us

*“Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle...So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels.”*

Exodus 40:34 (RSV)

Read Exodus 35–40

photo by Eberhard Grossgasteiger

The story of Israel's liberation into divine relationship is our story in so many ways. As we enter Holy Week we are left with the reminder that divine deliverance is and was always about restoration into divine relationship. The emancipating God liberates us from the empire of the present evil age and into divine communion.

The exodus of Israel out of slavery and into covenant with Yahweh comes to its end. In the face of Israel's rejection of Yahweh and Yahweh's covenant, God has shown that He is a God of compassion, patience, and steadfast love. The empire's powers, riches, and prestige that enslaved them are now far behind them. Israel is left with Yahweh and Yahweh's instructions.

The people show a renewed commitment to God, willingly offering their newfound riches (Ex. 12:35-36) in service of Yahweh (35:20-29). The detail and craftsmanship highlight the care that went into this project. It contrasts with the haste of the golden calf. This is no short-term, fickle arrangement between God and humanity. Emancipation from the empire of Pharaoh means enduring liberation into the embrace of Yahweh's presence. Life with God was always the goal. In the concluding moments of

Exodus, God's presence finally settles among the people, and for a moment, we catch a glimpse of paradise restored on earth.

Divine deliverance always moves towards divine relationship. As we enter Holy Week, we should remember this. Holy Week is a somber time. Yet all of the shame, guilt, and disappointment of our brokenness has been overcome. Our relationship with God is restored. We are not only liberated; the divine presence dwells with us. We should not get so mired in reflecting on our enslavement that we forget we have been joyously freed into a rich life with God.

But more than this, we, in much greater measure than Israel, experience the fiery indwelling of Yahweh's presence here and now. The same emancipating God that brought an empire to its knees, the same thunderous presence that descended on Mount Sinai, and the same billowing smoke that inhabited the tabernacle's holy place is the same one who dwells among and within us.

God has liberated us in Jesus so that we might live with God forever. He is for us. He is carrying us. He is with us, even to the end of the age.

Reflect with a friend

1. Reflect on the whole of Exodus. What aspects of it have spoken to you the most over Lent this year?
2. Is the reality that God's Spirit dwells with you one you regularly consider? Why do you think this is? How does being mindful of this reality change your perception of daily life?
3. Spend a moment reflecting on God's liberation this week. End this chapter of your journey together by praying a prayer of thanksgiving with one another.

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