

Daily Devotions
from the United Reformed Church

Stories from Exodus

part 3



Sunday 23rd August to Saturday 5th September 2020

Table of Contents

<i>Sunday 23rd August Psalm 11</i>	2
<i>Monday 24th August Cloud and Fire</i>	4
<i>Tuesday 25th August Crossing the Sea</i>	6
<i>Wednesday 26th August Moses' Song of Triumph</i>	10
<i>Thursday 27th August Miriam's Song and God's Provision</i>	13
<i>Friday 28th August Bread from Heaven</i>	14
<i>Saturday 29th August Water from the Rock</i>	18
<i>Sunday 30th August Psalm 12</i>	20
<i>Monday 31st August Moses Learns to Delegate</i>	22
<i>Tuesday 1st September The 10 Commandments</i>	25
<i>Wednesday 2nd September On the Mountain</i>	27
<i>Thursday 3rd September The Golden Calf</i>	29
<i>Friday 4th September Anger and Murder</i>	31
<i>Saturday 5th September Divine Anger</i>	34

Sunday 23rd August Psalm 11

Dan Morrell, Media for Ministry Consultant (Yorkshire Synod), member of St Andrew's Roundhay, Leeds.

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent word!
What more can He say than to you He hath said,
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

2 Fear not, He is with thee, O be not dismayed,
For He is thy God, and will still give thee aid;
He'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by His righteous, omnipotent hand.

3 When through the deep waters He calls thee to go,

as your names are written in heaven'. There are various references in Revelation, particularly 20:15, again in the context of judgement 'Your name is written in the book of life'.

My childhood understanding was that God has a book and your name needs to be in it: a vast list of good people who will go to heaven, but one that you can easily be deleted from if you do something wrong. Clearly the Israelites were doing something very wrong with their idol, limiting God and reducing him to a human-made image, and Moses had to plead with God to keep them in the book, even offering himself in their place.

I wonder now if it's more about keeping faithful to God, working with him not against him, doing the work allocated to you, participating as a forgiven human in God's unfolding story here on earth. In this sense, our names in the book of life would not be entries in a directory, but part of an interactive story that we are involved in both as individuals and communally. Faith alive and active: gift of an eternal source, renewed for every generation (The Nature, Faith and Order of the URC).

Prayer

Take my life, and let it be
consecrated, Lord, to thee;
take my moments and my days,
let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands, and let them move
at the impulse of thy love;
take my feet and let them be
swift and beautiful for thee.

Dear God,
give me today a strong sense that you are by my side.
Remember me in your mercy, and keep me in your grace.
Be my guide through all that is dark and doubtful;
be my strength in times of testing;
gladden my heart with your peace,
Through the grace of Christ my saviour. Amen.

Saturday 5th September Divine Anger

Ruth Tompsett is an Elder at Newport Pagnell URC

Exodus 32: 30 - 35

On the next day Moses said to the people, 'You have sinned a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.' So Moses returned to the Lord and said, 'Alas, this people has sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written.' But the Lord said to Moses, 'Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book. But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; see, my angel shall go in front of you. Nevertheless, when the day comes for punishment, I will punish them for their sin.' Then the Lord sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf—the one that Aaron made.

Reflection

What surprised me was the idea of being 'blotted out of the book'. I wondered where else in the Bible we might find reference to this book, what it meant to the people of Israel and for the early Church. In Psalm 69 David is in deep trouble and wants God to blot his enemies out of the book of life. In Daniel 7, it's part of divine judgement: 'the books were opened'. Luke 10 has the story of the 70 going out to proclaim Jesus' message of the Kingdom, and on return are told 'Rejoice

The rivers of grief shall thee overflow;
For He will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress."

4 When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
His grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not hurt thee; His only design
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine."

5 "The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no, never, no, never forsake!"

from Rippon's Selection of Hymns 1787

you can hear this sung by Maddy Prior and the Carnival band here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G68FV4xPhrE>

Reflection

This is a Psalm of trust. It begins with the greatest trust we can place in anyone, taking refuge. Trusting God to look after our lives. God offers us a firm foundation, through the promise and love.

There are a great many words of comfort to be taken from this Psalm. Particularly the words surrounding being able to find rest, and find comfort. It says repose, but I've never used that word in my life! Though we may get battered and bruised, and be facing the storms of life. We know we can find rest and solace in God's welcoming arms. In the second stanza, we hear of being strengthened, helped, and caused to stand. It reminds me of these words from the Rend Collective song 'Resurrection Day':

“Because You're risen I can rise
Because You're living I'm alive
Because Your cross is powerful
Because You rose invincible
I can get up off the floor”

This is about us getting off the floor, about us being empowered to do so. As the chorus continues “This is my resurrection day”. Easter seems like a long time ago, but I’d encourage you to have your own Easter now!

This is not something to expect God to do without upholding our side of the bargain! We have been enabled, and given blessing to get up off the floor, but it’s still us who need to get up.

Our relationship with God is a 2-way one, one we must partake in, not just receive. But if we give, then truly, freely, we shall receive.

Prayer

This is my resurrection day
Nothing's gonna hold me in the grave
This is my resurrection day
Nothing's gonna hold me down
Say goodbye to my yesterdays
Ever since I met You I am changed
This is my resurrection day
Nothing's gonna hold me down.

© Rend Collective

Monday 24th August Cloud and Fire
Gordon Woods, Elder, St. Columba’s URC, Oxford

kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbour.” The sons of Levi did as Moses commanded, and about three thousand of the people fell on that day. Moses said, ‘Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the Lord, each one at the cost of a son or a brother, and so have brought a blessing on yourselves this day.’

Reflection

This graphic story describes the breaking of the covenant between God and His people. It starts with Moses coming down the mountain with precious hand baggage, two stone tablets inscribed by God. Suddenly he hears an infernal racket. His companion wonders if it might be war but Moses quotes a snatch of an old poem-it is the sound of partying. We quail. We already know what is going on. The Israelites in the camp had forgotten the solemn promise they had so recently made to God. They no longer trust God’s leadership, they have made a statue of gold, a bull-calf, symbol of vitality and power, and they are engaging in a wild orgy of idol worship. Now when Moses sees this for himself, he reacts in blind fury, and smashes the tablets. God’s covenant with Israel is broken. Faced with abhorrent evil, Moses then annihilates the idol.

Moses asks Aaron to explain himself. He had after all, been left in charge. Aaron makes excuses – it was, he said, all the people’s fault. Exit Aaron. Moses realises that tough measures are called for. Having destroyed the idol, now he has to root out the devotees. And so, in God’s name, he summons the Levites, who alone remain loyal to God, to slaughter the renegades.

Horrrifying as this story may be, we are left in no doubt that sin is to be taken seriously. The people experience the full weight of God’s righteous anger. There is no appeal here to ‘cheap grace’. Grace is costly. And yet God will renew the covenant; and through grace the gap will ultimately be bridged between a holy God and his sinful people.

Prayer

Exodus 31: 15 - 29

Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain, carrying the two tablets of the covenant in his hands, tablets that were written on both sides, written on the front and on the back. The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets. When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, 'There is a noise of war in the camp.' But he said,

'It is not the sound made by victors,
or the sound made by losers;
it is the sound of revellers that I hear.'

As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.

Moses said to Aaron, 'What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?' And Aaron said, 'Do not let the anger of my lord burn hot; you know the people, that they are bent on evil. They said to me, "Make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." So I said to them, "Whoever has gold, take it off"; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!'

When Moses saw that the people were running wild (for Aaron had let them run wild, to the derision of their enemies), then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, 'Who is on the Lord's side? Come to me!' And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. He said to them, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, "Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you

Exodus 13: 17 - 22

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, 'If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.' So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness towards the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle. And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, 'God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here.' They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

Reflection

Writing this reflection I've had one of those moments when I suddenly appreciate an allusion that has probably been obvious to everyone else all along - in this case, that the 'fiery, cloudy pillar' of Guide me, O thou great Jehovah (R&S 345) is a reference to the pillar that guided the Israelites out of Egypt. As Homer Simpson would say: "Doh!"

If you've ever watched a documentary about tornados in the US, you'll remember that while they might travel in a straight line for a while, they suddenly change direction, sending the watchers scrabbling for safety (or gunning their vehicles to follow the new track). If the Israelites' pillar behaved similarly, you can see why they might end up wandering in the desert for 40 years!

The writer of Exodus is clear that God had a plan, and that wasn't going to be delivered by the Israelites marching in a straight line across Sinai to the promised land. Rather, they would have many diversions and obstacles on the way. Perhaps this should reassure us when we feel we

don't have a plan for our life, or that the unexpected diverts us away from the course we thought we would follow. To be honest, I'm not sure that I know anyone whose life has actually unfolded as they might have planned when they were a child - events happen to us all!

The Israelites had the comfort of that fiery, cloudy pillar to guide them across the desert. But what are the pillars in our lives? Do we allow our faith to guide our choices? Do we listen for God as we make those choices? I've always found William Williams' hymn of prayer for guidance and succour resonates with me, and I invite you to pray it too.

Prayer

Guide me, O my great Jehovah,
pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty;
hold me with your powerful hand:
Bread of heaven, feed me now and evermore.

Open now the crystal fountain,
whence the healing stream doth flow;
let the fiery, cloudy pillar
lead me all my journey through:
strong deliverer, be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
bid my anxious fears subside;
death of death, and hell's destruction,
land me safe on Canaan's side:
songs of praises, I will ever give to thee. Amen

[Tuesday 25th August Crossing the Sea](#)

Lawrence Moore, Mission & Discipleship consultant, Worsley Road URC

Exodus 14

changed his mind following a conversation with one of his creatures. The relationship between Moses and God was clearly a good one and God continued to respect Moses whom he suggested he would entrust with the making of a great nation. Moses knew well enough how to challenge God's decision, pleading with him to think about the reasons for the exodus from Egypt and the promises he had made to Abraham, Isaac and Israel. It was the reminder of the promises which proved to be the deciding factor.

However often I read the stories which tell of God changing his mind I remain surprised by the concept of a God who can be influenced in this way and I ask myself, what does this tell me about God and perhaps more importantly, about my relationship with him?

I think it tells us that here is a God who is open to change, who respects and is responsive to the views of his creatures. One who will move from the charted courses as a result of ongoing interaction with his people but who nevertheless remains steadfast in his love for his creatures and faithful to his promises of salvation for all. And it reminds each one of us that our prayers (those conversations we have with God) are honoured by him as a contribution to an ongoing debate about the direction of the world.

Prayer

Faithful God, may we learn to listen for your purposes for the world.
Loving God, may we be open to change in response to the needs of this world.
Listening God, may our prayers reflect our listening and experience of the context in which we find ourselves. Amen

[Friday 4th September Anger and Murder](#)

The Rev'd Fleur Houston, retired minister, member of Macclesfield and

Bollington URC

burnt-offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

The Lord said to Moses, 'Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"' The Lord said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.'

But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, 'O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth"? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, "I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it for ever."' And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Reflection

"And the Lord changed his mind". Following a tough conversation between God and Moses, and not for the first time, God changed his mind. No longer full of wrath, burning hot against his people, ready to consume them but prepared to find a different way through the difficulty.

This is our God, almighty, omnipotent, creator of the universe who

Then the Lord said to Moses: 'Tell the Israelites to turn back and camp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-zephon; you shall camp opposite it, by the sea. Pharaoh will say of the Israelites, 'They are wandering aimlessly in the land; the wilderness has closed in on them.' I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, so that I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord. And they did so.'

When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed towards the people, and they said, 'What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?' 6 So he had his chariot made ready, and took his army with him; he took six hundred picked chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them. The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt and he pursued the Israelites, who were going out boldly. The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, his chariot drivers and his army; they overtook them camped by the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, 'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, "Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians"? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.' But Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.'

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on

dry ground. Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers.'

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, 'Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt.'

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers.' So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in

is one in which trust and faith in God is waning. How can we move closer to and rebuild our trust in Him? What mountains do we need to climb; to ascend to recapture the glory of a loving God? I believe that ultimately we must accept that God - not us - is in control; that to create a closer relationship with Him we must accept in faith that patience is a virtue; there is much that we can never see or comprehend - like Moses in that relentless cloud. We should find time and space to focus on God through Christ's example - as Moses did on the mountaintop - in solitude and personal prayer; free of life's distractions so that we can build that relationship in true humility.

Prayer

"Lord, teach me to seek you, and reveal yourself to me as I look for you. For I cannot seek you unless first you teach me, nor find you unless first you reveal yourself to me." (St. Ambrose (340-97))

Thursday 3rd September The Golden Calf

Val Morrison is a member of the URC in Doncaster.

Exodus 32: 1 - 14

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' Aaron said to them, 'Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.' So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mould and cast an image of a calf; and they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, 'Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.' They rose early the next day, and offered

The Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.' So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. To the elders he had said, 'Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.'

Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Reflection

God manifests Himself within human history as Creator and Lord of all; acting in the realm of natural order but also in its upheaval as seen in the nature miracles of the Exodus plagues, the manna and quails and Sinai engulfed in a cloud. Mount Sinai is believed to be the mountain in the Sinai Peninsula of Egypt which tourists can ascend today to watch the sunrise.

In ancient times people believed that going to the top of a mountain was a way of being closer to God. Many years ago we journeyed to the summit of Vesuvius in Campania, Italy and found ourselves engulfed in the volcano's cloud and smoke; akin perhaps to the experience of Moses as he received the tablets of stone. Mountain top experiences often give panoramic views of the expanse beneath; seeing the vastness of God's creation and our humbleness before Him. We live in an age which remains sceptical of supernatural incursions by God into His universe, but in Biblical times as now, we have to accept that such phenomena are invested with a significance intended by God as revelation. Today's world

the Lord and in his servant Moses.

Reflection

This is the point in the story where Israel discovers for the first time that they have a fighting God, who can be trusted both to stay with them and see the Exodus through, and to overcome the massive powers ranged against God's good purposes for the world – and therefore against them.

The key is the exchange between Moses and the people (vv 10-14). The people see the pursuing Egyptian army and are thrown into panic: have they been liberated, only to be slaughtered in the desert? Moses' response is crucial: "The Lord will fight for you; you have only to keep still!" (v14). The whole Exodus narrative concludes with Israel gazing at the pursuing soldiers, now lying dead on the seashore (v50).

The story is framed as Israel's testimony of faith in their liberator/warrior God. God does everything – hardening Pharaoh's heart, clogging the chariot wheels and drowning the soldiers. It's a narrative device to emphasize God's sovereignty and power, not to say that Pharaoh is a pawn, manipulated by God into the disastrous destruction of his army. Rather, the story emphasizes the massive and implacable powers of Empire ranged against God's good purposes for the world (the Kingdom). They cannot be reasoned with, or brought into line for anything longer than a day or two (as in this story). Empire, with the social, political, theological and military powers at its disposal, cannot be defeated or reformed. It is only by destroying it that God can bring the Kingdom to birth.

Exodus happens because God is driven by the cries of the slaves, who are helpless victims of these powers. This is a compassionate, outraged, loving God who will fight against anything that threatens the future of the world – even if it costs the life of God's Son.

Prayer

Exodus God,
Forgive the deafness of my ears that do not hear the cries of the
neediest.
Forgive my apathy that is so slow to be stirred to anger and action.
Forgive the blindness of my eyes that refuses to see the deadliness of the
way our world works.
Forgive the theological and practical reasons I find not to take up my
cross and struggle for the Kingdom alongside you.
Call me to follow.
Call me to fight.
And give me your Spirit, that, by your grace,
I am able to answer your call. Amen.

[Wednesday 26th August Moses' Song of Triumph](#)

The Rev'd Ruth Watson, Bolton and Salford Missional Partnership
Minister

Exodus 15: 1 - 19

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord:

'I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.

The Lord is my strength and my might,
and he has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him.

The Lord is a warrior;
the Lord is his name.

'Pharaoh's chariots and his army he cast into the sea;
his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea.

The floods covered them;
they went down into the depths like a stone.

'you shall not murder'? We might discover that, 'God forbids anything
that harms my neighbour unfairly. Murder or injury can be done not only
by direct violence but also by an angry word or a clever plan, and not
only by an individual but also by unjust social institutions. I should
honour every human being, including my enemy, as a person made in
God's image.'*

Why not take some time to consider what one, some, or all of these
commandments might be saying to you and to your situation today:

What is this commandment about?

What does it forbid?

What does it encourage?

Where might it be applied?

* Presbyterian Church (USA) The Study Catechism. Geneva Press, 1998.

Prayer

O God, your word is our command.

Teach us how to live rightly with you and with others.

Guide us, so that we might avoid what's wrong, do what's right,

And live abundant lives. Amen.

[Wednesday 2nd September On the Mountain](#)

The Rev'd Ian Gow Minister, Eltham URC

Exodus 24: 9 - 18

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of
Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was
something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for
clearness. God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of
Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank.

adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.' Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.' Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

Reflection

Surveys tell us that most people in the UK cannot name the Ten Commandments. The same surveys show that most UK Christians can't either. So, if you can't recall them today without peeking at Exodus 20, you're in good company. Not to worry, though, because you can look them up any time.

But are they worth looking up? Many people think not. Some are put off by the number of 'nots' that are mentioned. Others note that these commandments come from a different time, place, and culture. In our time and place, fewer and fewer of us have livestock, and hopefully none of us own male or female slaves, never mind coveting those that belong to others.

Like all potentially life-giving rules, these commandments only come alive when they are interpreted. Simply reciting the words is of limited use. So, we need to ask questions. What is each commandment about? What does it forbid? Even if it contains the word, 'not', what does it encourage? How and where does it apply in my life and that of others? What happens, for example, if we ponder God's "word" (see 20:1) that

Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power—
your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy.
In the greatness of your majesty you overthrew your adversaries;
you sent out your fury, it consumed them like stubble.
At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up,
the floods stood up in a heap;
the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea.
The enemy said, "I will pursue, I will overtake,
I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them.
I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them."
You blew with your wind, the sea covered them;
they sank like lead in the mighty waters.

'Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
awesome in splendour, doing wonders?
You stretched out your right hand,
the earth swallowed them.

'In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed;
you guided them by your strength to your holy abode.
The peoples heard, they trembled;
pangs seized the inhabitants of Philistia.
Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed;
trembling seized the leaders of Moab;
all the inhabitants of Canaan melted away.
Terror and dread fell upon them;
by the might of your arm, they became still as a stone
until your people, O Lord, passed by,
until the people whom you acquired passed by.
You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own
possession,
the place, O Lord, that you made your abode,
the sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands have established.
The Lord will reign for ever and ever.'

When the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his chariot drivers went into the sea, the Lord brought back the waters of the sea upon them; but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground.

Reflection

At the time of writing, we are in lockdown – how that will be different come August we don't yet know. Yet the news is beginning to be full of amazing recoveries – patients of all ages being clapped out of intensive care by those who have treated them. The gratitude of all the patients to the NHS staff is wholehearted. They cannot thank them enough for bringing them safely out of harm. Yet the NHS has always been there, bringing people from the brink of death to full recovery. It didn't make the news before. We often blame God for causing our misery, our unhappiness as if He makes it his business to make us miserable. But how much of our praise for when He brings us out of a dark time is as wholehearted as that of the patients today, or even of Moses having brought the Israelites out of Egypt? We complain when things go wrong – where is God, why has He allowed this to happen to me? But forget when we come out of it to praise Him that He has been there all along and has enabled us to come through. God is not just there for the good times and then to be a sounding board to let off steam when things go wrong. God is there all the time, working tirelessly with us, within us, inspiring us to incredible acts. So, whatever we face, may our praise be as uninhibited as His love is all encompassing.

Prayer

God of the incredible, you are an awesome God for whom nothing is impossible. May we never forget in our humanity the wonderful nature of your divinity. May our praise be from our heart and as loud as we can make it! You can bring us out of the darkest moments into your glorious light. Praise be indeed to our awesome God! Amen

wisdom to perceive You,
diligence to seek You,
patience to wait for You,
eyes to behold You,
a heart to meditate upon You,
and a life to proclaim You;
through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

[Tuesday 1st September The 10 Commandments](#)

The Rev'd Trevor Jamison is minister of St Columba's URC in North Shields

Exodus 20

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 bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. 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. For six days you shall labour 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. Honour 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

I worked in an office for many years, as a team member, team leader and later as a manager. Learning to delegate was difficult for me – a details person. I needed a mentor to help me to work out what I still needed to get involved in, and what to leave in the capable hands of my team.

Later, as a technician, I came to value the opinions of those who joined our area from outside – who could both ask critical questions and offer advice from their experience elsewhere. Fresh eyes can offer valuable insights.

Moses was working as the only judge for the people – dealing with every dispute from the petty to the serious – and the work was too much.

Jethro, coming from outside, was able to offer the detached insight that saw the problem and suggested a solution – Moses needed assistance, and a structured process to make sure that everyone could get a satisfactory outcome to their disputes. And so the system was set up, with officers at various levels making judgements, and an escalation process for the serious issues.

Jethro was one in a long line of 'outsiders' used by God, illustrating that although the people of Israel were God's chosen race, God still knew and valued people of all nations. Time and time again, such people add to the story of God's people – people like Melchizedek, the priest who blessed Abraham (Gen 14), Rahab, who helped the spies (Joshua 2), Ruth the Moabite, Naaman the leper (2 Kings 5). There are many others. God often sends help from unexpected sources. It may be a neighbour, a colleague, or a stranger in the street who offers us an insight into our needs – sent from God to help us. We should keep ourselves open to that help when it is offered, and thank God for the assistance that we receive.

A Prayer of St Benedict

O Gracious and Holy Father give us

Exodus 15: 20 - 27

Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them:

'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.'

Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went for three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. That is why it was called Marah. And the people complained against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?' He cried out to the Lord; and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

There the Lord made for them a statute and an ordinance and there he put them to the test. He said, 'If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord who heals you.'

Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they camped there by the water.

Reflection

It's been real Cecil B DeMille stuff. (For the younger set, big-screen

blockbuster movie stuff!) And such a rollercoaster! After the terrible years of slavery in Egypt, the plagues and miracles, suddenly the people are free and Miriam is leading the women in a celebratory dance, with tambourines and a song of praise to the God who has done these wonderful things for them. It's a picture of overflowing joy!

And then three days later, walking through the desert and no water. We're talking about townies here. Not nomads used to this sort of thing. So when they find water but it's undrinkable, there's understandable trouble. They turn on Moses, the visible leadership.

Moses hasn't lost the plot. He goes straight to God who tells him what to do and the day is saved. Off they go again after a reminder from God that they need to keep looking to Him, relating to Him and obeying Him. And their next stop is Elim with its plentiful springs and fruitful palm trees.

Rollercoaster living is exhausting, but so is being stuck in slavery or the wilderness. Jesus offers us peace - whatever we're going through. This past year has given us plenty of opportunities to choose whether we'll complain at our human leadership or God Himself, or whether we'll accept the peace that passes understanding and plod through whatever wilderness or rollercoaster we found ourselves in. Whichever, we can be assured that God was with us, every step of the way.

Prayer

Thank You, Lord, that you have endless patience with us. We so easily slip back into slavery, whinge when we encounter problems - especially limits to our privileged western lifestyles, and balk at any continuation of hard times. Remind us that You are with us, a loving God who provides for all our needs with a generous hand. Lift our hearts in praise and gratitude to You, for You are worthy. Amen.

[Friday 28th August Bread from Heaven](#)

The Rev'd Jacky Embrey is moderator of the Mersey Synod

dealt arrogantly with them.' And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt-offering and sacrifices to God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law in the presence of God.

The next day Moses sat as judge for the people, while the people stood around him from morning until evening. When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, 'What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?' Moses said to his father-in-law, 'Because the people come to me to inquire of God. 16 When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make known to them the statutes and instructions of God.' Moses' father-in-law said to him, 'What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do. You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace.'

So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said. Moses chose able men from all Israel and appointed them as heads over the people, as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. And they judged the people at all times; hard cases they brought to Moses, but any minor case they decided themselves. Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went off to his own country.

Reflection

I am amazed at the yeastiness of a word uttered: bringing life and death, sacrifice and success.

I am astounded at the flawlessness of Your word: transforming, transfixing, loving without limit.

Deliver us from the cacophony of voices seeking our attention, and may our ears be drawn ever closer to Your voice, “pure like silver, fire refined”. Amen.

[Monday 31st August](#) [Moses Learns to Delegate](#)

The Rev'd Sue Cossey is a Synod Pastoral Advisor for Bristol and a member of Zion United Church, Frampton Cotterell

Exodus 18

Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for his people Israel, how the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt. After Moses had sent away his wife Zipporah, his father-in-law Jethro took her back, along with her two sons. The name of one was Gershom (for he said, 'I have been an alien in a foreign land'), and the name of the other, Eliezer (for he said, 'The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh'). Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came into the wilderness where Moses was encamped at the mountain of God, bringing Moses' sons and wife to him. He sent word to Moses, 'I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you, with your wife and her two sons.' Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed down and kissed him; each asked after the other's welfare, and they went into the tent. Then Moses told his father-in-law all that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had beset them on the way, and how the Lord had delivered them. Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the Lord had done to Israel, in delivering them from the Egyptians.

Jethro said, 'Blessed be the Lord, who has delivered you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh. Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods, because he delivered the people from the Egyptians, when they

Exodus 16

The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, 'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.'

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.' So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, 'In the evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your complaining against the Lord. For what are we, that you complain against us?' And Moses said, 'When the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening and your fill of bread in the morning, because the Lord has heard the complaining that you utter against him—what are we? Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord.'

Then Moses said to Aaron, 'Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, "Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining."' And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked towards the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. The Lord spoke to Moses and said, 'I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, "At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'"

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning

there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, 'What is it?' For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, 'It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. This is what the Lord has commanded: "Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.'" The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. And Moses said to them, 'Let no one leave any of it over until morning.' But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food, two omers apiece. When all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, he said to them, 'This is what the Lord has commanded: "Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord; bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning.'" So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded them; and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it. Moses said, 'Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the Lord; today you will not find it in the field. For six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none.'

On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, and they found none. The Lord said to Moses, 'How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions? See! The Lord has given you the sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days; each of you stay where you are; do not leave your place on the seventh day.' So the people rested on the seventh day.

A decade ago, many might have critiqued this as depressingly modern with no glory or images of God as a monarch. Instead of the desired pomp, we sing of "lying lips that... keep the truth out of reach" and the image of God as a tongue-tamer who saves us from our Babel sounds.

Perhaps these days we can grasp the sense of poignant prophetic petition which is so necessary for the Church in this Covid-shaped generation. I dare not rehearse the Babel sounds we hear in 2020.

The legend is that David wrote this whilst he was the rock star soldier in the jealous Saul's court. Even he could not escape the cold war of gossip, complaints and backbiting. David despised destructive tongues due to the words themselves and the underlying pride.

The taming of our words is more than a personal habit-forming tool or a secret to success. It is an ethical crisis which relates to how we cultivate community. The taming of what we say also challenges us to tame our resources of knowledge—who we listen to.

Hymn lyrics like these reclaim and retain what was such a sacred part of the biblical tradition: the lament. There are times when the Church must celebrate life together, and when the Church must lead the way in offering up tears, not for hate but for healing. The lament defends no political sides, offers no bandage for pain, and lays out no medals of honour. It presents the wound in the open, claiming no winners, ultimately pleading for the one true Healer to see and step in.

The best thing the Church can do for the salvation of the world is in singing the blues, threading together the poetry of pain with the shifting of hearts towards purposes higher than our desires.

Prayer

Tongue-Tamer,

Prayer

Life-giving God, we are still. Forgive us for forgetting to look for your presence among us. Help us be quiet enough to see you. Help us let go of our panic and remember that you provide us what we need for this day. Help us trust your provision for tomorrow. Life-giving God, you reveal yourself as love. Help us rest in love and act in love this day. Amen.

Sunday 30th August Psalm 12

The Rev'd William Young, Pastor, Covenant Baptist United Church of Christ, Washington DC

Lying lips that falsely falter keep the truth far out of reach. Come, O God and still the chatter; end their boats and twisted speech.	Rise, O God, and save the needy; come to heal the worn and weak. Foil the schemes that fuel the greedy; lift the fortunes of the meek.
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With these Babel sounds oppressing, who but God can tame the tongue? When the faithful seek God's blessing, honest words are shared and sung.	Save us from the wicked lawless - leave their blemished words behind, every word you speak is flawless - pure like silver, fire refined.
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you can hear the tune here
<https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/157583>

Reflection

This paraphrase of Psalm 12 was written before the current political and ecological atmosphere. Read it as you would have seen the world in 2011...Now read it as you do today.

The house of Israel called it manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey. Moses said, 'This is what the Lord has commanded: "Let an omer of it be kept throughout your generations, in order that they may see the food with which I fed you in the wilderness, when I brought you out of the land of Egypt."' And Moses said to Aaron, 'Take a jar, and put an omer of manna in it, and place it before the Lord, to be kept throughout your generations.' As the Lord commanded Moses, so Aaron placed it before the covenant, for safe-keeping. The Israelites ate manna for forty years, until they came to a habitable land; they ate manna, until they came to the border of the land of Canaan. An omer is a tenth of an ephah.

Reflection

None of us could have imagined a year ago the ways in which our lives have changed this year. The same could be said of the Israelites, as they came to the wilderness of Sin. God, through the agency of Moses and Aaron, had defeated Pharaoh and his army and released the Israelites from slavery. No wonder Miriam danced.

But soon it began to feel like they had gone out of the frying pan into the fire. The Israelites had left slavery behind only to find themselves hungry. Instead of trying to tackle the problem or turning to God for help, or even turning reasonably to Moses and asking for guidance, their first reaction seems to have been to round on their leaders.

Nevertheless, God sent bread from heaven and meat as well. God's provision went on right through the journey in the wilderness, only stopping as they entered the promised land, where they would be able to fend for themselves.

Looking from the outside, we can see that the Israelites were probably scared, anxious to feed their children and unused to freedom and to fending for themselves, having been slaves for so long. We too are probably scared, anxious to be able to provide for ourselves and our

families, and unused to the changed world in which we find ourselves. Having seen God provide for us through our lives so far and knowing how God provided for the Israelites during their time in the wilderness, we now face our time of trial. Can we find the faith to trust in God's provision and to be open to God's guidance for the future, even though we can't know all that is in store?

Prayer

Living and loving God,
Our situation today is as new to us,
as the Israelites' situation was to them.
Send your Spirit to guide us in this new country in which we find ourselves.
Open our eyes that we might see your path for today,
Open our hearts that we might perceive your ways, for each of us and for all of us.
Thanks be to God, Amen

[Saturday 29th August Water from the Rock](#)

The Rev'd Martha McInnes, Minister, Cardiff and Penarth Churches

Exodus 17: 1-7

From the wilderness of Sin the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarrelled with Moses, and said, 'Give us water to drink.' Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?' But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?' So Moses cried out to the Lord, 'What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.' The Lord said to Moses, 'Go on ahead of the people, and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and

go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.' Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarrelled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'

Reflection

Some of us might liken the last few months to a time of wandering in the wilderness. We have felt adrift, unsure of our direction, lost without our routines, challenged by how we related to each other with newish technology and changing definitions of "community." We might even feel this a time of testing-"massah." "Where is God?" Some of us might have even been quarrelling-"meribah." "Why God?"

A way through the wilderness may be before us, but we don't trust the way. How can this be God's way for us? We continue to question, to quarrel, to wander.

But this is a story of God's faithfulness. Despite the blindness of the people of God, God is among them. God is not a long way ahead, waiting for them to catch up. God is not behind them pushing them forward. God is among them. God is among us. We may question, quarrel, and wander, but God is still here. We may self-isolate. We may work in a demanding environment. We may worship in different ways, but God is among us. Our struggles may cause us to lose sight of God's presence.

And not only is God present. God is providing. How has God sustained you over the past few months? What gifts might you have overlooked due to the stress of living through a pandemic? Where is God with you as you walk through the valley of loss? Maybe even now we cannot see God's presence. Maybe it is hard to identify God's provision, but this story confirms God is present and providing for us. We pause to catch a glimpse of that provision and presence today.