

Journeys of faith

21 August 2022

BIBLE READING

[Exodus 19:1-3a, 9-19, 20:1-2, 18-20 \(the giving of the Ten Commandments\)](#)

On the first day of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt – they came to the Desert of Sinai ... and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain. Then Moses went up to God ...

The Lord said to Moses, ‘I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you.’ ... On the third day ... the Lord will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, “Be careful that you do not approach the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain is to be put to death.”

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace and the whole mountain trembled violently. As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him in thunder. ...

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 ... [*the rest of the ten commandments then follow* ...]

When the people saw the lightning and heard the thunder and the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, ‘Speak to us yourself 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. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.’

[Hebrews 12:18-29](#)

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: ‘If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death.’ The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, ‘I am trembling with fear.’

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly

Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, 'Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.' The words 'once more' indicate the removing of what can be shaken – that is, created things – so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire.'

[Luke 13:10-17](#)

One Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, 'Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.' Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, 'There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.'

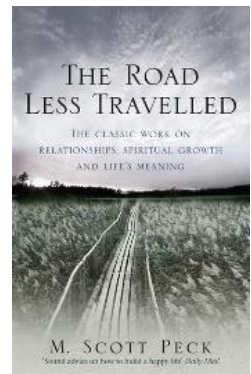
The Lord answered him, 'You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?'

When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.

MESSAGE Journeys of faith

As we journey through life, we make multiple decisions every day ... whether to come or tune in to church worship this morning, who we will eat lunch with today, whether we will volunteer some of our time with this group or that.

In his bestselling book, *The road less travelled*, Scott Peck describes a bigger life choice – between following the road that leads to God or the road that leads to evil. Factors that influence this choice include our background and how we have experienced love, the concept of grace and what forces drive our behaviour – things like fear, faith, uncertainty and habits. Peck writes as a psychologist but his Christian leanings are clear to see.



One of the key factors of course in choosing which road or path to journey on through life is our **concept of God** – and whether God is a strict disciplinarian who demands our obedience, for instance, or the source of love and grace.

Our somewhat challenging Scripture readings today offer us glimpses into **four journeys of faith**. Each journey is quite distinct, yet each journey is seeking to relate to the same God.

This idea of being on different journeys of faith but seeking the same God follows on from the last two weeks looking at Hebrews chapter 11 where famous figures from Scripture along with a list of unnamed people are all commended for the faith. Some achieved startling victories and implement justice while others were persecuted and mocked ... but **all** are equally commended for their faith.



So today we get insights into four journeys of faith. My view is that there are lessons to be learned from all four of these journeys, even if the experiences described do not match our own.

The first journey of faith involves the **Israelites** who journey from slavery in Egypt to Mt Sinai where they encounter the awesome Yahweh, the God who speaks to them – through Moses – the ten commandments and a long series of other laws. This is part of the foundational story that decisively shaped the nation of Israel.



The passage we heard comes from the chapters of Exodus that describe the giving of the **ten commandments**. While we are probably all quite familiar with these commandments – do not kill, do not steal, keep the Sabbath day and so on – we are probably less familiar with their context.

The people have had recent experience of Yahweh's **power** and **grace** as they are delivered from Pharaoh and his army. They are about to learn what it means to live as God's redeemed people, having reached Mt Sinai where God had first appeared to Moses in the burning bush.

What they encounter is called a **theophany** – a visible manifestation of God's presence. And what a presence it is! There are storm clouds, thunder and lightning, smoke and fire, a loud and long trumpet blast and the ground literally shakes. The people are not to go up the mountain – only Moses will speak with God – who returns and announces what we know as the ten commandments.

It's an **overwhelming** and **frightening** experience. The reason for the awe inspiring show is so that the people will have a healthy **fear of the Lord** – not so much **dread** as deep **reverence** and **awe**. This Yahweh is not to be taken lightly, but rather God's words are to be taken with all seriousness and obeyed. God's **holiness** and **power** are on full display.



Despite this, the people often don't get it right and either actively rebel against Moses or ignore God's commands. But this sense that God is **powerful** and **holy** and not to be trifled with remains right through the OT Scriptures. There is also the sense that God's laws as given to Moses provide the foundation stone for the Jewish people – working like an anchor or ballast to give them stability and security through the storms of history.

These aspects of God's character – holiness and power – may seem somewhat alien to many of us, but if we took them more seriously I wonder how that might inform our worship and our ethics?

The second journey of faith is that of **Jewish Christians** who are addressed in the book of Hebrews. Their faith has grown up with the stories of the Exodus and Moses but more recently has been transformed by the story of God's Messiah and High Priest, Jesus, who has opened up a new way to relate to Yahweh.

Unlike their forbears, they have not journeyed to a literal mountain that is burning with fire. Rather they have been invited to the **heavenly** mountain, Mt Zion, that is filled with angels and saints who have ascended to heaven. This



is where God dwells – who is Judge of all – and also where Jesus now dwells – who is the mediator of a new covenant with God and who – in a very Jewish way of thinking – has sprinkled his own blood on the people to make them righteous. They now approach God through Jesus rather than through the Jewish sacrificial system described in the Mosaic law.

The warning is not to turn their backs on Jesus, for God is going to **shake** both the earth and the heavens and everything except for God and God's kingdom will be shown up as unstable and transient.

It's a fairly apocalyptic vision, but maybe we see signs of this shaking around us even now ... with a worldwide pandemic that has killed millions of people and shows no signs of ending, wars and threats of war that are affecting global supplies of food and oil, and the growing realisation that we have to act decisively – and soon – if we are to have a climate that sustains life as we know it.



Again, this **apocalyptic** vision of God who comes to shake the earth may not form part of our journey of faith. But again it reinforces the idea that God is **powerful** and that God is **in charge**, however much we may like to think that we are fully in control of our own destiny.

The implication is clear though – we are to look to **God** and **God's kingdom** of justice and mercy and grace – for these are the things that are enduring – while everything else is going to be shaken.

Same God, but a different journey of faith.

A third journey of faith. **A crippled woman** comes to worship on the Sabbath day. We're told that she has been afflicted like this for eighteen long years. We're told that her condition is caused by a spirit, although this may simply be a first century way of understanding severe **kyphosis** – caused by osteoporosis – if that indeed was her condition.



The woman's journey, one imagines, has been one of pain and shame, and probably poverty and isolation. But she has remained faithful and attends worship each week in the synagogue.

Jesus **sees** her – but rather than seeing a poor bent over woman he sees a **daughter of Abraham** – a child of God who is deserving of mercy and healing. He calls her forward and she comes, oblivious probably to the many staring at her. Jesus touches her and heals her and she straightens up and starts praising God.

Her journey of faith has met God's **kindness** and **compassion** – and also God's **power** – that comes through Jesus. The woman's pain has turned to **praise**, dishonour has turned to **delight**.

This story illustrates aspects of God with which we are far more comfortable – **compassion, healing** and **wholeness** ... although we are well aware that not every journey of sickness or disease has a similar happy ending.

But the same God is at work here, in another journey of faith.

Our fourth journey of faith involves the **leader of the synagogue**, a respected figure in the community of faith. He leads the people in their worship of God each week. He has probably studied the laws of Moses more than most and knows how they shape one's life and one's faith for the better.



He doesn't notice the woman of course. She's just part of the furniture as it were. But he certainly notices Jesus and what Jesus does.

He may have been pleased that the woman was healed – but was **incensed** that Jesus did such a thing on the **Sabbath day**! Surely Jesus – like every Jew – knew the ten commandments including the one about keeping the Sabbath day holy – and doing no work on the Sabbath, based on the story of creation when God rested on the

Sabbath.

In his view, **healing** constituted **work** and was thus forbidden on the Sabbath. Let the woman come back on any of the other six days to be healed, but not on the Sabbath! God's laws are not to be trampled on or ignored.

Jesus confronts this view, calling it **hypocrisy**. If animals could be untied on the Sabbath day so they could eat and drink and be nourished, then why could this woman not also be untied on the Sabbath and allowed to enjoy a new sense of life and freedom? For Jesus, the positive 'do's' of God's kingdom – compassion, healing, mercy – outweigh the negative 'don'ts' of the Sabbath laws.

The synagogue leader's journey of faith travels from being sure of God's ways to indignation to humiliation. His image of God was too **rigid** to cope with Jesus and his way of compassion and inclusion. Did the synagogue leader later rethink his faith and come to a broader understanding? We're not told. But the warning from this story is not to become so **blinker**ed in our faith or so **blind** that we miss what God is doing in the life of those around us.

Same God, different journey.

Finally, thinking about **our** stories and **our** journeys of faith ... what roads have they travelled down? Has our faith grown over the years and become more embracing of other views? Or has our faith become narrower, sure of what is right and wrong? Has our journey at times gone round in circles, or hit a brick wall or needed rebuilding in parts?



And what of our **image of God**? Are we able to hold together in tension some of the aspects we have seen this morning ... from **holiness** and **power**, to the one who **shapes** and **shakes** up events, to **compassion** and **wholeness**?

Let's spend a little time now in quiet to contemplate where our understanding of God may need to stretch and grow a little ...

Time for quiet reflection