

# At the Foot of the Mountain

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 17 May 2026

Preacher: Matt Hofman

[0:00] Good morning, everyone. Good morning. Thank you for inviting me back. It's been great to be welcomed so warmly by so many of you. Thank you for all the work that's been done to put the service together.

Again, a thank you to the tech team for all the work that you do. Technology is great when it works and horrendous when it doesn't. I'm pleased to be here again.

I'm pleased with you. I rejoice with you in the arrival of Pastor Keith coming in just a few weeks. I know Keith and his family from being in Waupon.

I taught all three of his children in high school, currently serving on the education committee with him at our school. He is an excellent man, a deep thinker, and we rejoice with you in his coming.

Today I have prepared a message called At the Foot of the Mountain, based on Exodus chapter 19. And right here at the beginning of the sermon, I would like to give credit to Peter Laufman, whose words on this topic I found to be very helpful.

[1:07] So if you'd like to join in the reading on Exodus chapter 19, the words will also be up here on the screens behind me. If I can make it work.

There we go. On the first day of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt, on that very day, they came to the desert of Sinai. After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob, and what you are to tell the people of Israel.

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. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites. So Moses went back and summoned the elders of the people and set before them all the words the Lord had commanded him to speak.

[2:22] The people all responded together, We will do everything the Lord has said. So Moses brought their answer back to the Lord. The Lord said to Moses, 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.

Then Moses told the Lord what the people had said. And the Lord said to Moses, Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and be ready by the third day, because on that 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.

They are to be stoned or shot with arrows. Not a hand is to be laid on them. No person or animal shall be permitted to live. Only when the ram's horn sounds a long blast may they approach the mountain.

After Moses had gone down the mountain to the people, he consecrated them, and they washed their clothes. Then he said to the people, Prepare yourselves for the third day.

[3:38] Abstain from sexual relations. 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.

The Lord descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up, and the Lord said to him, Go down and warn the people, so they do not force their way through to see the Lord, and many of them perish.

Even the priests who approach the Lord must consecrate themselves, or the Lord will break out against them. Moses said to the Lord, The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, because you yourself warned us, put limits around the mountain, and set it apart as holy.

[ 4 : 54 ] The Lord replied, Go down and bring Aaron up with you. But the priests and the people must not force their way through to come up to the Lord, or he will break out against them.

So Moses went down to the people and told them. Thus far the reading of God's holy word. Just over four years ago, during spring break of 2022, my mother, my wife, out in the audience today, and I visited the country of Egypt, where my brother, Colonel Peter T. Hoffman, chaplain in the U.S. Army, was stationed for a year.

Besides seeing the pyramids and the tombs of the long-ago pharaohs, we visited St. Catherine's Monastery. At least, that is one of the names of this place.

The official title is The Greek Orthodox Monastery of the God-Trodden Mount Sinai, which is why they call it St. Catherine's Monastery.

There we received a private tour from one of the monks, Father Justin. He's the one with the beard. We saw some of the ancient manuscripts in the possession of the monastery, some of them dating back to the 300s A.D., the Sinai Codex.

[ 6 : 24 ] Peter and I also seized the opportunity to climb Mount Sinai. We were accompanied by a local Muslim guide. The only way you're allowed up the mountain is with such a guide, who had not eaten or drinking anything since sunup, because we happened to be there during Ramadan.

That year. We ascended the mountain, winding back and forth past hospitality huts, our eyes fixed on the summit.

We were offered Kit Kats, Baby Ruth, Coca-Cola at these little rest stops. The people of Israel received manna and water from the rock.

We were offered highly processed sugar and caffeine. In our story for today, the Israelites have left Rephidim. They packed up and they moved to the desert of Sinai, and here they are at the foot of Mount Sinai.

Here they're going to meet with God. Here God will speak to them, and here they will vow to follow the Lord. We need to understand that when we read these Old Testament passages, quite often what's happening there is instructive to us as New Testament people, as the people of God.

[ 7 : 47 ] There are parallels for us to find and discover. Here in chapter 19 is no exception. Several key elements tell us not only who the Hebrew people are and who God is, but who we are as Christians before him.

We see, for instance, that God delivers us before he makes any claim on us. We see in this chapter that God asks for our commitment before he reveals what is fully required of us.

We see God outline his purpose for the people of Israel and how that is fulfilled now in us, the church, through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

And we see we are a people who have been set apart, a people who have been called out of the world. We notice in verse 2 that Moses is quite eager to get up to the top of the mountain.

Remember, he has been here before. He's so eager that it seems to be the first thing he does when they get there. Moses had an experience at Mount Sinai more than 40 years ago when he was confronted with God speaking from a burning bush.

[ 9 : 05 ] They told us that this is the same type of bush, not the exact bush, of course, but the same type of bush that was likely the one that Moses saw burning in the desert.

Moses received this experience and it became foundational for him as he went back to Egypt and called the people of God out as he confronted Pharaoh and proved to him that our Lord is the true God of the universe.

Moses has powerful memories of the transformation that took place in his life. Perhaps he's hoping that his people, the people of Israel, will have a similar transformation.

Maybe he's thinking that if they can experience God like he has, they'll get it and they'll stop fooling around with the gods of the other peoples.

They'll stop in their wandering and their wavering. The experience Moses had impacted him greatly, but for others, the same experience might not have the same effect.

[10:14] What Moses hopes for is maybe what many of us have hoped for in the lives of our friends and family. Those of us who have been called by God, who have felt that call, we want others to experience the same thing.

So we hope that they will get it in the same way that Moses hoped that the people of the Hebrews would get it. We maybe tell our friends to attend Life Fest held down there in Oshkosh, or do a certain small group Bible study, or listen to this one specific sermon by a powerful and well-known preacher.

Something that impacted us, that opened our eyes. And often, when we have these hopes, it seems like nothing happens. or at least less than we had hoped for.

Maybe they enjoyed their time. Maybe they even learned a great deal. But it doesn't seem to have changed them in the way that we were hoping or in the way maybe that we ourselves have been changed.

Maybe that's happened to you. Maybe you've experienced that, that you've worked in someone's life, maybe for years, and you end up feeling disappointed, mystified.

[11:34] Weren't these people at the same event I was? Didn't they hear or read the same words I did? How could they not be impacted the way I was?

But Christianity isn't about a mountaintop experience. It's not about a life-changing event or even some magnificent spiritual experience.

experience. It's about a relationship. God wants to make us into a people for him. The people we should be.

He wants us to be whole people, complete people. He wants joy and satisfaction in our lives. Not something that is done just with a single mountaintop experience.

experience. Those powerful experiences are great. The impact that the burning bush had in the life of Moses was fantastic. But God wasn't the burning bush.

[12:37] The burning bush was a sign that pointed toward God. It hit Moses with shock and awe, but it pointed toward the relationship that God wanted to have with him.

So if Moses is hoping that merely by bringing the people here, everything will be okay, he's probably going to be disappointed. But he goes up the mountain.

Moses is one incredible man. According to the scriptures, he lived 120 years. He's 80 years old at this point and heads up the mountain. No Kit Kats, no Coca-Cola.

On that first trip up the mountain, Moses is told by God what he is supposed to tell the people. You yourselves, these people, the people he's talking to at that time, you've seen what God has done. How God carried you on eagle's wings to bring you out to himself. God is, of course, referencing the ten plagues on the Passover, the events that led to the freedom that they are now experiencing.

[13:45] God used the plagues to demonstrate that he was the almighty and he was much more powerful than the false gods that the people of Egypt were worshipping.

The Egyptians worshipped the Nile, for instance, and for good reason, outside of the fertile Nile Valley, Egypt is a sandbox. Approximately four percent of the land of Egypt is suitable for growing crops.

that doesn't even make sense to those of us who live in the Midwest, right? On one of our last days, we had the opportunity to take a hot air balloon ride. We were in the balloon and I took this picture because I taught this lesson to my sixth grade Bible students back when I was a middle school Bible teacher.

I repeated that fact to them. Hey, Egypt's a giant sandbox. Four percent of the land is good for growing crops. But when you see it, the impact is so much greater, right?

Look out the windows. Look at the flourishing green we have in the Midwest of America, right? They don't have that in Egypt. You can see exactly where the irrigation stops.

[15:00] There's no life outside of the Nile. They worship the Nile. It makes sense to them. This is where our life comes from. What does God do? Very first plague. Boom.

He turns their river to blood. They have no chance to get water and life from it. They worship the Pharaoh who derived his authority from the fact that he was supposedly the God Amin-Ra in human

form.

So what did God do? He struck down the next Pharaoh. He struck down the firstborn son of Pharaoh and of all the people and even of their animals.

God delivered the Israelites and this is so significant and it's almost embarrassing to me that I didn't get this as I taught this lesson to my middle school students a couple decades ago.

The deliverance people of God comes before today's story which of course is before the Ten Commandments.

[16:04] The deliverance happens before. we are granted the benefits of God even before we do anything. And the same thing happens to us as the people of God today doesn't it?

Our deliverance as we sang today in the most appropriate songs our deliverance was accomplished thousands of years ago. We have been delivered by Jesus Christ long before we were even born much less accepted God's call in our lives.

we were delivered ex mero moto. That's a Latin phrase meaning purely out of God's good will. In all of our dealings with God free grace anticipates us with blessings and goodness.

All our comfort is owed not to the fact that we know God but the fact that we are known by him. We love him.

We visit him. We covenant with him. But only because he is the alpha and the omega. So God tells Moses what his plan is for these people.

[17:16] These are in verses 5 and 6. Key verses in our message today. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant then out of all the 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. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.

So notice again that God has called them out of Egypt but their commitment to him is voluntary. It's an if you then statement. And here's another cool thing or important at least they don't know what the covenant is yet.

They don't know what they are committing to do. They don't know the Ten Commandments. They come in the next chapter. God is calling them out before he gives them the requirements.

And God does this without apology. Sometimes I feel like I hold back. Maybe you feel the same way. I hold back from following God completely because I don't know what's next.

[18:28] I want to hedge my bets. I want to trust God but having this in place is very comforting as well. God asks us to commit fully to him.

we don't know what's coming next. He operates on his own terms. He calls us out of a life of plenty and into a hot dry desert and asks us to follow him through the hard times ahead without apology.

See God knows our future and he knows where we need to go. He asks for our commitment! Up front. I don't know! what's next. You don't know what's next.

But what's next is not the issue. The issue is will you commit to follow him? It's a relationship remember. It's not some sort of bargain.

Think about a bride and groom. I'm sure that marriages have been held right up here on this stage many times. They come to the wedding to make a commitment.

[19:37] They come to the wedding to enter into a relationship. They are vowing to remain together. They don't know what's going to happen in the future, do they?

This is the type of commitment God is calling for, which is exactly why in the New Testament we, the people of God, are referred to as the bride of Christ.

So vows are a statement of future intentions. Marriage vows, the covenant of marriage is a good example. You named your church, covenant Christian Reformed Church.

God wants a relationship. He wants, come what may, that each party vows not to walk out on each other. What do the voices of our modern day culture say?

They say, why not just live together? Why go through the hassle and the expense of a fancy ceremony and a meal? We love each other.

[20:37] Isn't that what it's all about? excuse me while I take my things and walk out on you. God wants a relationship.

He wants a commitment. With this commitment outlined in verses 5 and 6, God outlines the big plans he has for the people of Israel. And those big plans again are echoed in the lives of us as New Testament Christians.

God states three things which apply to the Hebrews and us as well. We'll be a treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.

Let's spend a few minutes with each one. A treasured possession. God calls them and us his treasured possession. Remember, the whole earth is his, but he has chosen us.

He desires a special people. So when we see in verse 10 that God wants them to be consecrated, he wants them to wash their clothes, it's probably more than just the fact that they need a bath.

[ 21 : 50 ] And after wandering around in the desert, I'm sure they do. God demands that they treat him differently from their peers and the false gods that they are used to.

Israel has to sanctify themselves before they hope to come into his presence. The physical action of washing their clothes was supposed to remind them to purify their minds and their hearts.

It's a serious business to come into the presence of a holy God. Now, growing up on the farm, I had three sets of clothes, and I'm sure Terry, Sam, you remember these days.

We had school clothes, we had barn clothes, and we had one set of clothes called Sunday clothes. We wore them every Sunday until we outgrew them, the Sunday clothes. We've kind of gotten away from that as a culture. I'm not saying we have to go back to it, but it did say something in your head when you put those clothes on.

[ 23 : 02 ] Today is a special day. I'm not going to school. I'm done with my farm work for now. This is a special day. And we do some things the same way today even.

Of course, we always have a week or a service or at least a reading before we have the Lord's Supper. Before we celebrate communion, we remind ourselves it's a serious thing to come into the presence of a holy God.

Moses is prepared. Moses has met with God before. Moses knows God. But the people, they better be careful. They better set these limits around them.

God is calling us into this special relationship because he chooses to do so. But don't forget who God is. Don't forget how unique God is in the universe.

Secondly, he calls them and us to be a kingdom of priests. Originally, it appears that the entire Hebrew people were supposed to be priests.

[ 24 : 08 ] But because of their failure, because of their not wanting to enter the land at Kadesh Barnea, and especially because of the sin of the golden calf, which is a few chapters ahead yet, only one tribe eventually was chosen, the tribe of Levi, to be the priests.

This changed with the advent, with the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, with the coming of the Church of God. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, because of the ascension of Jesus Christ, as we celebrate today, we have a high priest above all the human high priests.

We are in fact, we in fact have a high priest who is currently in heaven, speaking on our behalf.

Speaking of those who follow Jesus Christ, we read in Revelation 5 10, you have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God.

They will reign on the earth. And again, speaking to those of us who follow the Lord, Revelation 1 verse 5 and 6, to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and has made us to be a kingdom, and priests to serve his God and Father.

To him be glory and power forever and ever. Amen. You may not always feel priestly, but God in his time and God in his place and God in his presence will someday bring all of this to fruition.

[ 25 : 39 ] His word will be fulfilled. Thirdly, he called them and us to be a holy nation nation.

We read in 1 Peter 2 verse 9, you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, so that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Those closing words of that verse are so important, aren't they? all of this is not for self indulgence. So we can pat ourselves on the back and say, look at how good we are.

God has called us to be his people. No, this describes the world, the work, the ministry of God's people here.

We are not to achieve by political means, we are not to achieve by our own strength, we are not to achieve on our own ability, not by might, nor by power, as we read in the prophet, but by the Spirit of God.

[ 26 : 52 ] We are to achieve on nothing less than our dependence on God Almighty. We are to be a holy people, committed to faith, a people to show the goodness of God, to show people the reality

of God, because we are set apart.

So on the morning of the third day, the people are clean, they come before God at the foot of the mountain. This event is a formative event in the faith and the life of these people.

They have already made a commitment to God, they have already seen miracle after miracle, the plagues that we referenced earlier, the parting of the Red Sea, the manna coming out of thin air, the water pouring out of the rock, the impossible victory over the Amalekites.

They've seen all that, but they have not experienced the very personal presence of God himself. It will be a fantastic and frightening experience.

When Moses speaks, verse 19 says, the voice of God answered him. believe me when I tell you I took hundreds of photos during our short trip to Egypt.

[ 28 : 17 ] This is probably my favorite one. I don't claim to be an expert photographer. We're going up the mountain together with our guide, and I stopped and took a picture of the summit, and the aura, the corona of the sun behind it.

God came to Mount Sinai. He visited with his people. He called them into a special relationship with him in the same way that he has called us.

Maybe right now you're going through a dry spiritual time. Could God be bringing you through water and fire so that he may set you before his holy mountain.

Where knowing that you are not self-made, you might start to experience the awesome presence and his tremendous renewal in your life.

Remember, he has already delivered you. He has already called you and chosen you. He has come to you to enter a relationship.

[ 29 : 29 ] He has called us to live our lives as a response and a thank offering to the fact that we are a treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.

Please pray with me. Our most gracious God and heavenly father, we thank you for your word, Lord.

We thank you for the Old Testament stories that relate to us not only historical facts, but call us to follow you in the same way your people of the Old Testament did.

We thank you, Lord, that you have entered into a relationship with us ex mero moto, only by your grace, that you have delivered us from our sins through the death of our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

Christ. We thank you, Lord, for him. We thank you for his ascension that we celebrate today. And we pray, Lord, that as he promised the disciples, his Holy Spirit will empower us to bring this message to a hurting world, to a dark world that needs to hear it.

[ 30 : 45 ] Empower us by your Spirit, Lord, to be your treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. Amen. Amen. Amen.