

God, the Teacher

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[0:00] He loves us through his word and revealing himself to us and ministering to us as a good shepherd through his word to us. We're going to pick up our series in Exodus in chapter 19 this morning.

You can join me there in your pew Bible. The words will also be up on the screen behind me from Exodus 19. So we've read some larger chunks of scripture in the last couple of weeks.

This week it's going to be just six verses as we sort of set the stage for this next whole section of the book. But getting into this section that happens at Mount Sinai, Exodus 19, starting at verse 1. In the third month, after the Israelites left Egypt, on the 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.

So you've got to picture that, right? They're in the desert of Sinai and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain. When 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 house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel.

[1:24] 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.

The word of the Lord. Amen. So here on Sunday mornings this summer, we've spent a lot of time in the book of Exodus.

At one point, we listened to the cries of those slaves in Egypt, those anguished cries. And then we saw God responding, starting with that burning bush in the wilderness.

He took action. And eventually, we saw the standoff in Egypt with all those plagues, the plagues that happened. And then God, with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, he delivered his people.

[2:33] The Exodus happened. Through the Red Sea, there was this mighty Exodus. And then last week, we watched as God met his people on the other side, met them there in the wilderness.

And he was patient with their grumbling. And he gave them water to drink. And he gave them manna each day to eat. And he gave them water to drink.

God bringing his people through the Red Sea. That was kind of like their rebirth as a nation, really. God bringing them through that opening in the sea.

It was sort of like God bringing them through the birth canal. And it's sort of their birth as a people, as a nation. And then they get into the wilderness. And those wilderness years that followed, those were kind of like their childhood and their teenage years as a people.

God bringing them through. God bringing them through. He met them there in the wilderness. And he met them there at Sinai. Because they had some growing up to do.

[4:00] He didn't want to rush them to the promised land like we talked about before. He needed some time with them. A lot of theologians talk about that. Those wilderness years.

It's sort of like the childhood and teenage years. They had some growing up to do. They needed some care and some direction and some education. They needed a good teacher. And God himself met them there.

God himself was their teacher. Like I said, Exodus 19 here brings us into a whole new section of the book. And a whole new leg of their journey.

And God is still a father to them. And he's still a mighty warrior and a savior and a provider. But now he's also their teacher. He's building a relationship with them over time.

And he's teaching them about life. And he's just, well, he's just wanting these former slaves to try on their new identity. And grow into their new identity. He wants them to know who they are and what life's about and what their purpose is.

[5:05] Again, verses 4 to 6. You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt. How I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant. And 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.

It's kind of a big thing. They were to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. And God had big plans for them, a big calling for them. And for them to embrace their new identity and grow into it and really live it out.

There was some preparation that was required. They needed some time with their divine teacher.

Now in the weeks ahead, we're going to look at some of the lessons that God gave to them.

And we're going to spend some time with that teaching that God shared with them. But what I want to do today is really set the stage for all that by focusing some time on God the teacher.

[6:14] On God himself and what sort of teacher our God is. And in order to do that, I want to share a sort of parable, a modern parable of sorts with you.

So this is a little bit unorthodox, but you can kind of see this morning's message is sort of an extended children's message. Or an extended sermon introduction that will serve us for the weeks to come.

And introduce this next section of the book. And introduce the God that we find here. So what I'm going to share comes from a picture book. It's called Thank You, Mr. Falker.

And it's something of a modern parable about God and about us. So I'll read the story and show the pictures up on the screen. And then we'll come back to Exodus and wrap things up this morning.

So Mr. Falker was a teacher. And the book was written by one of his students. So just listen as I read. It says, Thank you, Mr. Falker.

[7:19] By Patricia Polacco. The grandpa held the jar of honey so that all the family could see.

Then dipped a ladle into it and drizzled honey on the cover of a small book. The little girl had just turned five. Stand up, little one, he cooed.

I did this for your mother, your uncles, your older brother, and now you. Then he handed the book to her. Taste. She dipped her finger into the honey and put it into her mouth.

What is that taste? The grandma asked. And the little girl answered, Sweet. Sweet. Then all the family said in a single voice, Yes, and so is knowledge.

But knowledge is like the bee that made that sweet honey. You have to chase it through the pages of a book. The little girl knew that the promise to read was at last hers.

[8:20] Soon, she was going to learn to read. Tricia, the littlest girl in the family, grew up loving books. Her school teacher mother read to her every night.

Her redheaded brother brought his books home from school and shared them. And whenever she visited the family farm, her grandfather or grandmother read to her by the stone fireplace.

When she turned five and went to kindergarten, most of all, she hoped to read. Each day, she saw the kids in the first grade across the hall reading. And before the year was over, some of the kids in her own class began to read.

Not Tricia. Still, she loved being at school because she could draw. The other kids would crowd around her and watch her do her magic with the crayons.

In first grade, you'll learn to read, her brother said. In first grade, Tricia sat in a circle with the other kids. They were all holding their neighborhood, their first reader, sounding out letters and words.

[9:26] They said, Be, be, boy, boy, and look, look. And the teacher smiled at them as they put all these sounds together and got a word right.

But when Tricia looked at a page, all she saw were wiggling shapes. And when she tried to sound out words, the other kids laughed at her.

Tricia, what are you looking at in that book? They'd say. I'm reading, she'd say back to them. But her teacher would move on to the next person.

Always when it was her turn to read, her teacher helped her with every single word. And while the other kids moved up into the second reader and the third reader, she stayed alone in our neighborhood.

Tricia began to feel different. She began to feel dumb. The harder words got for the little girl, the more and more time she spent drawing, how she loved to draw, or just sitting and dreaming, or, when she could, going for walks with her grandmother.

[10:35] One summer day, she and her grandma were walking together in the small woods behind their farm. It was twilight. The air was sweet and warm.

Fireflies were coming up from the grasses. As they walked, Tricia said, Grandma, do you think I'm different?

Of course, grandma answered. To be different is the miracle of life. You see those little fireflies. Each one is different. Do you think I'm smart?

Tricia didn't feel smart. Her grandma hugged her. Oh, you are the smartest, quickest, cleverest, little dearest thing ever. Right then, the little girl felt safe in her grandma's arms.

And reading didn't matter so much. Tricia's grandma used to say that the stars were holes in the sky. They were the light of heaven coming from the other side.

[11:42] And she used to say that someday she would be on the other side, where the light comes from. One evening they lay on the grass together and counted the lights from heaven.

You know, her grandma said, all of us will go there someday. Hang on to the grass or you'll lift right off the ground and there you'll be. And they laughed and both hung on to the grass.

But it was not long after that night that her grandma must have let go of the grass. Because she went to where the lights were on the other side.

And not long after that, Tricia's grandpa let go of the grass too. And school seemed a bit harder now. Reading was just plain torture.

When Sue Ellen read her page or Tommy Bob read his page, they read so easily that Tricia would watch the top of their heads to see if something was happening to their heads that wasn't happening to hers.

[12:44] And numbers were the hardest thing of all to read. She never added anything, right? Line up the numbers before you add them, the teacher would say. But when Tricia tried, the numbers looked like a stack of blocks, wobbly and ready to fall.

She just knew she was dumb. Then one day, her mother announced that she had gotten a teaching job in California, a long way from the family farm in Michigan.

Even though her grandma and grandpa were gone, the little girl didn't want to move. Maybe, though, the teachers and kids in her new school wouldn't know how dumb she was. She and her mother and brother moved across the country in a two-toned 1949 Plymouth.

It took five days. At the new school, it was the same. When she tried to read, she stumbled over words. C-C-C-Cat.

R-R-R-Ran. She was reading like a baby in the third grade. And when her teacher read along with them and called on Tricia for an answer, she gave the wrong answer every time.

[14:02] Hey, dummy, a boy called out to her on the playground. How come you're so dumb? Other kids stood near him. They laughed. And Tricia could feel the tears burning in her eyes.

How she longed to go back to her grandparents' farm in Michigan. Now Tricia wanted to go to school less and less.

I have a sore throat, she'd say to her mother. Or I have a stomach ache. She dreamed more and more. And she drew more and more. And she hated, hated, hated school. Then, when Tricia started fifth grade, the school was all abuzz.

There was a new teacher. He was tall and elegant. Everybody loved his striped coat and his slick gray pants. He wore the neatest clothes. All the usual teacher's pets gathered around him.

Stevie Joe and Alice Marie, Davey and Michael Lee. But right from the start, it didn't seem to matter to Mr. Falker which kids were the cutest or the smartest or the best at anything.

[15:13] Mr. Falker would stand behind Tricia whenever she was drawing and whisper, Ah, this is brilliant, absolutely brilliant. Do you know how talented you are? Well, when he said things like this, even the kids who teased her would turn around in their seats to look at her drawings.

But they still laughed whenever she gave a wrong answer. Then one day, she had to stand up and read, which she hated. She was stumbling through a page in Charlotte's Web and the page was

going all fuzzy when the kids began to laugh out loud.

Mr. Falker, in his plaid jacket and butterfly tie, said, Stop. Are all of you so perfect that you can look at another person and find fault with her?

That was the last day anyone laughed out loud or made fun of her. All except Eric.

He had sat behind Tricia for two whole years, but he seemed almost to hate her. Tricia didn't know why. He waited by the door of the classroom for her and pulled her hair.

[16:24] He waited for her on the playground, leaned into her face and called her Toad. Tricia was afraid to turn any corner for fear Eric would be there. He felt completely alone.

The only time she was really happy was when she was around Mr. Falker. He let her erase the blackboards. Only the best students got to do that. He patted her on the back whenever she got something right and looked hard and mean at any kid who teased her.

But the nicer Mr. Falker was to Tricia, the worse Eric treated her. He got all the other kids to wait for her on the playground or in the cafeteria and jump out and call her stupid or ugly.

And Tricia began to believe them. She discovered that if she asked to go to the bathroom just before recess, she could hide under the inside stairwell during the free time and not have to go outside at all.

And in that dark place, she felt completely safe. But one day at recess, Eric followed her into her secret hiding place.

[17:34] Have you become a mole? He laughed. He pulled her out into the hall and danced around her. He buried her head in her arms. Curled up in a ball. And then suddenly she heard footsteps.

It was Mr. Falker. He marched Eric down to the office. And when he came back, he found Tricia. I don't think you'll have to worry about that boy again, he said softly.

What was he teasing you about, little one? I don't know, Tricia shrugged. Tricia was sure that Mr. Falker believed that she could read.

She had learned to memorize what the kid next to her was reading. Or she would wait for Mr. Falker to help her with a sentence, and she'd say the same thing that he did. Good, he would say.

Then one day, Mr. Falker asked her to stay after school and help wash the blackboards. He put on some music and brought out little sandwiches as they worked and talked. And all at once, he said, Let's play a game.

[18:44] I'll shout out letters. You write them on the board with that wet sponge as quickly as you can. A, he shouted. She made a watery A.

Eight, he shouted. She made a watery eight. Fourteen. Three. D. M. Q.

He shouted out many, many letters and numbers. Then he walked up behind her, and together they looked at the board. It was a watery mess. Tricia knew that none of the letters or numbers looked like they should.

He threw the sponge down and tried to run. But Mr. Falker caught her arm and sank to his knees in front of her. He said, You poor girl, he said.

You think you're dumb, don't you? How awful for you to be so lonely and afraid. And she sobs. But little one, don't you understand?

[19:46] You don't see letters and numbers the way other people do. And you've gotten through school all this time and fooled many, many good teachers. He smiled at her.

You know, that took cunning and smartness and such, such bravery. Then he stood up and finished washing the board.

We're going to change all that, girl. You're going to read. I promise you that. Now, almost every day after school, she met with Mr. Falker and Miss Plessy, a reading teacher.

They did a lot of things she didn't even understand. At first, she made circles in sand and then big sponge circles on the blackboard going from left to right, left to right. Another day, they flicked letters on a screen and Tricia shouted them out loud.

Still other days, they worked with wooden blocks and built words. Letters, letters, letters, words, words, words, always sounding them out. And that felt good. But although she'd read words, she hadn't read a whole sentence.

[20:56] And deep down, she still felt kind of dumb. And then one spring day, had it been three months or four months since they started, Mr. Falker put a book in front of her.

She'd never seen it before. He picked a paragraph in the middle of the page and pointed to it, almost as if it were magic or as if light poured into her brain.

The words and sentences started to take shape on the page as they never had before. She marched them off to...

Slowly, she read a sentence, then another, and another, and finally, she'd read a paragraph. And she understood the whole thing.

And she didn't notice that Mr. Falker and Miss Plessy had tears in their eyes. That night, Tricia ran home without stopping to catch her breath.

[21 : 59] She bounded up the front steps, threw open her front door, and ran through the dining room to the kitchen. She climbed up on the cupboard and grabbed that jar of honey. Then she went into the living room and found the book on a shelf, the very book that her grandpa had shown her so many years ago.

She spooned honey on the cover and tasted the sweetness and said to herself, the honey is sweet, and so is knowledge. But knowledge is like the bee who made the honey.

It has to be chased through the pages of a book. And she held the book, honey and all, close to her chest. She could feel the tears roll down her cheeks, but they weren't tears of sadness.

She was happy. So very happy. The rest of the year became an odyssey of discovery and adventure for the little girl.

She learned to love school. I know because that little girl was me, Patricia Polacco. I saw Mr. Falker again some 30 years later at a wedding.

[23 : 11] I walked up to him and introduced myself. At first he had a little difficulty placing me, and then I told him who I was and how he had changed my life so many years ago.

He hugged me and asked me what I did for a living. Why, Mr. Falker, I answered, I make books for children. Thank you, Mr. Falker.

Thank you. God says to us here in Exodus 19, you have seen what I did to Egypt, how I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself.

God says to us, you are my treasured possession, a kingdom of priests. I have big plans for you. God is our teacher.

Does that mean he lays out some rules for us? Yes, we need rules. Does that mean he has some lessons for us to learn? Yes, there are many lessons that we need to learn.

[24 : 20] Does that mean he gives us work to do, sometimes hard work, and that he expects us to do the work and do the learning? Yes, like any good teacher, yes. There's more, though, too, and the Mr. Falker story gets at what that more is.

The author, Palako, in the afterword in the book, she comments later about Mr. Falker. She says, he unlocked the door and pulled me into the light.

He unlocked the door and pulled me into the light. She experienced a sort of exodus. God is our teacher, and he's an exodus teacher.

He pulled Israel out of darkness, out of their slavery, pulled them in close to himself, and he invested in them and spent time with them and taught them and redefined them and helped them define their new definition and guided them and pulled them into the light.

And he does that with us, too. Our teacher, God, he meets us in our sin. He meets us in our weakness. He meets us in the wilderness.

[25 : 31] He'll meet you in your sin, in your weakness, in your wilderness. He will. In fact, he's with us right now. Right now.

We'll talk more about it, but that meeting at Sinai, that meeting between the people and God there at that mountain, we're doing a mini version of that right now.

And whenever we meet for worship, that meeting at Sinai was an extended time of worship. And our teacher, God, he showed up then, and he shows up now to minister to us and to lead us along and to pull us into the light.

And he knows how to find us throughout the week, too. On our own, the truth is we kind of look at the letters of God's law and at God's instruction to us, and all we see are wiggling shapes.

We just don't understand very well. And honestly, we don't always care all that much, and we just sort of fake our way through, and we just try to keep up appearances.

[26 : 40] But our God, he wants more for us than that. So he meets us. He meets us where we are. Psalm 103 says he knows that we are formed. He remembers that we are dust.

He knows our weakness and our disabilities and what's going on. He grieves over our failures, and he grieves, too, over the bullying that we've perhaps experienced and perhaps the bullying that's robbed us of our joy or robbed us of the ability to trust, to hope, to put ourselves out there.

He knows. He sees. He sees us, and he meets us where we are, and he leads us somewhere new. That's our Exodus teacher, our divine teacher, our God. He pulls us into the light, and that's what we're going to see.

That's the God we worship. At Sinai, he came down to a mountain in a cloud. Years later, he came down to Bethlehem as a baby, and he grew up, and they called him rabbi, teacher, for that's what he was.

That's not all he was, but that's what he was, a special kind of teacher, Jesus. He stood up to bullies, and he defended the weak, and he ministered to those with disabilities, and he redefined people and helped them to see themselves through a different set of eyes, through the eyes of God.

[28:04] Jesus came, and he taught about life. God became incarnate, and he came, and he taught about life and showed us how to live. He taught us about money and prayer and lust and worry and about love.

I think that's really what made Mr. Falker a great teacher. It was his great love. He loved his students, and that's our teacher God, too, and so much more beyond.

He loves us. The one who made us and gave his life for us, he's the one who gives us lessons and commands and reveals our purpose to us and guides us each step of the way.

So last Sunday, we learned how God displaced Pharaoh as king and became, for his people, a good king.

Now we're learning, too, that he's a good teacher. Let's pray together. God, we thank you for meeting us in the dark and pulling us toward the light and bringing light into our world.

[29:13] Help us to know you more. Make us teachable. Open us to all of your tender mercies and to all of your tough love.

We want to be receptive both when you're reassuring us of things and when you're laying down the law because we know, Lord, who you are. We know how much you love us.

Make us teachable. That's our prayer. In Jesus' name, Amen. In response, let's sing together.

He leadeth me. Yes. He leadeth me. Let's sing it out. Let's stand to sing. Amen. you