

June 18, 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Exodus 19:2-8a; Psalm 100; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8

by [D. Brent Laytham](#) in the [May 24, 2017](#) issue

This week's readings are bound together by the theme of journey. Exodus is explicit: "They had journeyed . . . entered . . . and camped." So is Matthew: Jesus "went about all the cities and villages"; later he "sent out" the Twelve. Psalm 100 exhorts us to "come into his presence" and "enter his gates . . . and his courts." Romans, on the other hand, sounds immobile when it emphasizes "this grace in which we stand." But Paul immediately takes us on a journey from suffering through endurance and then character, all the way to hope.

This week's journey is not a journey away from divine identity, however, as if Trinity Sunday were clearly fixed in our rearview mirror. For Paul the terminus of the journey is hope precisely because "God's love has been poured . . . through the Holy Spirit . . . [because] Christ died." (Alliterate this doctrinally as God's agape, Christ's atonement, and the Spirit's actualization.) For Matthew, the apostolic mission will provoke controversy because of Jesus, culminating in "the Spirit of your Father speaking through you." Exodus is explicitly a journey to the Lord, who self-identifies as the One who "bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." And the psalm draws worshipers into the presence of the Lord, who is loving, faithful, and good.

That our journey ends in God is a point worth emphasizing in a culture filled with apps for traveling to self-chosen destinations. God has chosen not only to go with us, bearing us along, but also to be our very goal. Consider how this final verse in Exodus could be described as Israel's handing an open itinerary ticket over to God. Given the mobility of this God, when the people say, "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do," they are pledging to have no other destinations than God.

After all, this passage comes right before the Decalogue. Christians interpret the Ten Commandments as beginning with a preamble about Israel's journey "out of the

land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exod. 20:2). And because this phrasing looks back to the place departed from (Egypt) and the condition left behind (slavery), this journey into God is easily misinterpreted as merely freedom *from* rather than freedom *for*.

But the first claim of the Decalogue is far more than a rehearsal of the point of departure; it clearly articulates the destination at which Israel has arrived: “I am the Lord your God” (20:2). This claim, which in Judaism is counted as the first of the Ten Commandments (“no other gods” is the second), is always the goal, as well as the ground, of life with this delivering and summoning Lord. So every do or don’t that follows is simultaneously about traveling with and arriving at God. In other words, what Israel agrees in advance to obey (in this week’s reading) is simply ten ways of describing the contours and destination of the same journey.

In related ways, both Exodus and Matthew invite reflection on the identity and shape of the people of God. In both stories, Israel is clearly different from other peoples and nations. Although narratively speaking Israel’s exodus was from bondage in Egypt, conceptually Israel made an exodus “out of all the peoples.” Israel left behind existing social and political formations in order to be identified as belonging particularly to this Lord—that is, to this commanding voice and this electing covenant. Likewise in Matthew, Jesus has summoned 12 disciples/apostles (compare 10:1 to 10:2) to focus and extend his ministry of compassion throughout “the towns of Israel,” with a clear directive to avoid the towns of gentiles and Samaritans.

So in both testaments the politics of election might seem exclusionary, even nationalistic. It isn’t, of course; last week’s Gospel reading makes it clear that this is finally a story of good news for all nations (Matthew 28:19: consider the explicit expansion of authority from Israel [10:1] to “all authority in heaven and on earth” [28:18].) So, too, when the Lord’s “treasured possession” is called to the vocation of “priestly kingdom,” we hear echoes of a prior promise: to make of Abraham a great nation through whom “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). The elect are chosen to receive blessing—and extend it.

In *Does God Need the Church?* Gerhard Lohfink summarizes this election dynamic and adds a dimension: “Being chosen is not a privilege or a preference *over others*, but existence *for others*, and hence the heaviest burden in history.” While Lohfink rightly directs this claim about election toward Israel at the foot of Sinai, it would appear to fit our Gospel story, too. Being sent as laborers in the harvest begins with

a bestowal of power on the Twelve, but that power is not for themselves but for others—for the “harassed and helpless” crowds on whom Jesus has compassion. So election plays out as the disarmed life of vulnerability and self-giving that risks being rejected, persecuted, arrested, and betrayed—indeed betrayed to death.

It’s not a stretch to find here the same cruciform pattern Paul hymns in Philippians 2, where divine power walks a path of service, suffering, and death. We share that path because we have been elected into this priestly kingdom, baptized into this apostolic calling. Can we walk the path with gladness and singing? Only if the Spirit of God sings through us; only if Paul is right that “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”