

POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCES

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Exodus 24:12-18

This past year, my wife and daughter hooked me into watching a television show called “The Crown.” I’m sure many of you are familiar with it. It is a lavish, historical drama which focuses on the lives of the British monarchs. The episode of this series that really caught my attention was the one depicting the coronation of the current queen, Elizabeth.

As a child, Elizabeth was not expected to become queen. She was not in the line of succession. Her grandfather, King George V, ruled for 25 years. When he died in 1936, his oldest son ascended the throne as King Edward VIII. Edward¹ ruled for less than a year. He desired to marry the once-divorced and also still-married American socialite named Wallis Simpson. For numerous reasons, Edward chose to abdicate the throne to be with his love. Royal succession then passed to his brother, Albert, Elizabeth’s father, who was crowned King George VI. (Albert is the subject of the movie, “The King’s Speech.”) Albert ruled for only fifteen years. He died from a blood clot² at the age of 56. His early death propelled his daughter Elizabeth to the throne at age 25—far sooner than anyone anticipated. She took the throne in 1952 and has held it for the past 67 years.

Elizabeth’s actual coronation, however, did not take place for over a year after she became queen. This delay is traditional so as to provide the nation time to mourn their lost monarch and to have adequate time to plan the elaborate ceremony.

The coronation took place on June 2, 1953, at Westminster Abbey. For the first time ever, television cameras were allowed inside the abbey to broadcast the ceremony to the world.

In the recreation of the coronation event, the writers of “The Crown” do something interesting as a storytelling device. They have Edward, the former king, serve as narrator for the coronation.

Edward and Wallis were living at the time in Paris. As this show portrays it, on the day of the coronation, they throw a coronation-watching party. Edward’s chair is placed like a throne directly in front of the television set. Wallis sits next to him—the queen that never was. The guests fill the room behind them. There is even a

¹ He was known personally as David.

² coronary thrombosis

wealthy but boorish American who is embarrassingly insensitive to the occasion and who keeps tossing out thoughtless questions about the ceremony. He is oblivious to Edward's pain. His questions force Edward to explain all the tradition and ritual of the moment. The actor playing Edward does so with tremendous melancholy and a pained sense of regret over what he has given up.

At the height of the coronation, the cameras turn away and focus on a wall in the abbey. They do this because this is the time of the anointing with oil of the new monarch by the Archbishop of Canterbury. When the cameras cut away, the American asks, "Where did she go?" Edward explains that this is the anointing. He calls it, "The single most holy, most solemn, most sacred moment of the entire service." The American asks, "So how come we don't get to see it?" To which Edward replies, "Because we are mortals."

Our reading today from Exodus is also about an event that mortals cannot witness, and that is God delivering to Moses on Mt. Sinai the tablets containing the law and the commandments. This event is arguably the most holy, most solemn, most sacred moment that we find in the Old Testament.

For 400 years, the Hebrews resided in Egypt. Because they were a foreign race, in time, the Egyptians made them slaves and forced them to toil in the great Egyptian building projects. In that 400 years, the people mostly forgot about YHWH, their Lord, the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. However, God hears their cries of anguish in Egypt and calls Moses to help deliver them to freedom. Moses leads his people out of Egypt and toward the land of promise. However, they must pass through the wilderness. As they go, they must learn how to live in relationship to this God whom they know very little about. If they don't do this, then the land of promise does not exist.

Just ahead of our reading, Moses has convened 70 elders of the people and he holds a ritual in which together he and these leaders reestablish the covenant God had made with their ancestors so many generations earlier. This covenant which had been mostly forgotten, states that the people shall worship the Lord and the Lord shall watch over the people. Moses and the people commit to the Lord.

In our reading for today, we find the Hebrews in the wilderness having fled Egypt and camped at the base of Mt. Sinai. God says 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.*" It is crucial to remember here that the covenant has already been re-established. What God now offers Moses is the instruction for living within the covenant—the operating manual. This instruction will consist of the law and the commandments.

So Moses heads up into the mountain alone. While he is on the mountain, a *cloud covered the mountain*. We are told that this cloud is God's glory. The cloud

remains over the mountain for six days. On the seventh day, God calls to Moses from the cloud. We are told that the people below can witness this and what they see is that *the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain*. Moses enters into the cloud and remains there for 40 days and nights. Eventually, Moses returns to the people and brings them the tablets containing God's law.

To have a covenant with the Lord is a wonderful thing. It cements that relationship between us and our creator. But there is only one problem with the covenant. And that is that it is broken from the start. Because of the people's sin, they will always turn from God and seek out other things to worship. They will always be unfaithful in some respect. It is like someone getting married but purposely not deleting their dating app. "I just wanted to keep my options open." You can't. You're married. The covenant says we will worship God and God alone.

So God delivers guidance in how to live in this covenant. God offers to Moses the law and commandments of instruction. These laws and commandments include the decalogue—what we call the ten commandments—do not murder, steal, or lie, love your God, and more. People, being people, look at these laws as prohibitions demanded by God. It's like when a child hears a parent tell them not to touch the stove. The parent gives this command in love. God offers the commandments in love. They are meant to make our lives better. But we twist them into regulations and focus our lives of faith in trying to observe these laws. "Did I murder anyone today? No. Then check, I'm a good person."

I would like to suggest another way of looking at God's laws and commandments. Instead of thinking of them as hard and fast rules, what if we view them as a picture—a picture painted by God—a picture of what the world could be if people did live in covenant. It would be a world in which people worshiped only God, not money or power or fame or any other idol that distracts us. It would be a world where God is respected and the people joyfully set aside one day a week in worship. It would be a world where parents and elders are honored, where no one kills, where no one is unfaithful, where no one steals or tells lies against their neighbor, where people are happy with what they have and do not covet what their neighbors have.

What God offers Moses is not a list of ordinances to be obeyed, but a word picture of God's kingdom offered in love. We find these word pictures throughout scripture. The prophet Isaiah describes a time when swords are repurposed into plows—instruments of killing become instruments of creation. It is also Isaiah that describes the peaceable kingdom where *the wolf will live with the lamb*. And in that place, *the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea*.

How do we live in a covenantal relationship with God? Our reading from Exodus suggests two things we should do.

First, we need to respect God. Too often we fail to treat God with the necessary gravity. We take God for granted. We are not in awe of or fear of our Lord. When Moses was summoned to the mountain the meeting wasn't just a chance encounter with a friend. The cloud of God's glory settled on the mountain for six days. In a nod to the creation story, God is creating something new. God is creating a new people. On the seventh day, God finally calls to Moses. From down below, all that the people could see was the cloud, but it was a cloud of an all-consuming fire. Except for Moses (who would come back changed), this was not a place for mortals any more than a person could stand next to a nuclear explosion and expect to be anything other than ash. There is simply too much power with God. The people below are like those who are not allowed to watch the queen's anointing because they are mortal.

God is powerful, God is great, and God is also good. We cannot forget that. We must never think of God as anything less than. To respect God fully is to live in covenant with God.

The second part of living in covenant that we learn from our reading is to embrace the vision God offers us. God's laws are inspiration for our theological imaginations. Every moment, we must exercise our imaginations and look at the world as God wants us to see it—a place of peace, a place of compassion, a place with different rules, a place where God is at the forefront of our thoughts and actions.

Our world should be:

- a place where all people have access to medical care,
- a place where all children are protected and nurtured,
- a place where immigrants are received with dignity,
- a place where refugees are welcomed and offered safe shelter,
- a place where all people are safe from hate-filled violence.

To live in covenant is to live in a world governed not by our own rules, but by God's.

We are mortals. We are not gods. But our God loves us so much that God reaches out to us with covenant to guide and instruct us in love. We can reject the covenant as Edward rejected the throne, or we can embrace it like Elizabeth and live in God's kingdom forever.

Amen.