

*Presence: Formed to be God's people*  
Fall 2017 Teaching Series  
Oak Grove Church of the Brethren

**Daily Bible Readings**



## *Presence: Formed to be God's people*

Do you recognize the picture on the front cover? Even though it is obscured, you almost certainly see the Roanoke Valley as viewed from the Mill Mountain Star overlook. It really wasn't that hard to tell, was it?

This picture was chosen in order to help us think about how we see things. In many ways, our lives as Jesus-followers living in 2017 Roanoke might not be all that different from the lives of people who don't give Jesus a second thought. We enjoy comfortable homes, go out to eat with our families, purchase flowers for someone we love on their birthday, form opinions on social and political issues of the day, deal with sickness and occasional suffering, and enjoy a wide variety of entertainment in a beautiful location. Through human eyes, life in the Roanoke Valley might look the same whether or not our daily routines are shaped by our commitment to Christ and the church.

But imagine a different scenario with me. Imagine that somehow the waters of baptism actually changed the way our eyes work. What if—like the picture on the cover—the streets and shops and people of the Roanoke Valley looked somewhat familiar, and yet somehow different after we were baptized? What if the popular vision of life and culture and politics ought to be obscured, because our faith in Jesus teaches us to see things differently? If we really are different because we are Jesus-followers, how should those differences play out in our everyday life?

As unexpected as it may seem, the Old Testament book of Exodus actually deals with these same issues, albeit from a very different starting point. In the book of Exodus, we see how God takes a group of slaves whose only earthly value (according to the plans of the Egyptian king) is found in the sweat of their brow, but whose heavenly value has already been established through God's earlier promise to Abraham. The people we meet in Exodus are God's people. They have nothing of value to make them any more desirable to God than anyone else; the only

thing that matters is that God has chosen them. This is a relationship of grace.

And so we will read the familiar stories of the people's suffering, Moses' call, and their deliverance from Egypt. The story, however, doesn't end there. It continues as they come to understand God's purpose for their life. The people are to be formed into a community who will give testimony to God's grace, so that all nations might come to know God, the creator of heaven and earth.

As we will see, this wasn't an easy task, because the people were constantly challenged by external pressures to evaluate their relationship with God based on their present circumstances or by the desire to be like the nations around them—in other words, on what they could see. Moses had a challenging task, teaching them to see differently.

If we are attentive to these texts from Exodus, the connections to our own life should become apparent. We, too, were slaves—slaves to sin, separated from God. But like the people in Exodus, God made a way for us to be brought into the family of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Having been redeemed from sin, we now have a purpose—to testify in both word and deed to the goodness of God's grace in our lives, that others might come to know Jesus as well.

What does God's purpose for this world look like? In his book *The Naked Anabaptist: the bare essentials of a radical faith*, author Stuart Murray summarizes this neatly:

“The biblical vision of universal restoration includes peace between God and humanity; enemies reconciled; disintegrated personalities healed; weapons of war decommissioned and transformed into agricultural implements; injustice and oppression removed; communities flourishing; creation liberated from bondage; and the abolition of sickness and death” (129).

Our invitation is to participate with God in this vision. Part of that involves our vision being corrected so we may see the world as God wants it to be. How do we do this?

That has been a significant concern of mine for some time. Each week, we are shaped by our culture in ways that do not reflect the Kingdom of God. Without necessarily thinking about it, we learn to see things in some particular ways. Our financial decisions are shaped by what is fashionable and appropriate for our economic level. Our political opinions are shaped by NPR, FOX News, or whatever other news source we listen to. Our opinions about our neighbors and our enemies are shaped by our close set of acquaintances, who are often just like us. And somewhere in the midst of that, our spiritual opinions are shaped by an hour or two of church per week, as well as the prayer and Bible study we do on our own. With all of these influences acting on our lives, how are we learning to see things as Jesus sees things?

This Bible reading guide provides a set of Bible passages and questions chosen to correspond with the theme of the upcoming sermon text for that week. Some of the Bible passages will connect more directly than others; they are all chosen to help you ponder and pray, more than to provide direct answers to questions you may have.

I hope that our time spent reading Exodus together, reflecting deeply on the passages selected for Sunday worship, washing one another's feet at Love Feast, and engaging some community leaders as part of our Christian Life Seminar will be a helpful time for us to allow God's Spirit to continue forming us into the unique, set-apart people of God living in Roanoke in 2017.

Pastor Tim

## Exodus Reading Guide

In addition to our daily Bible readings, you may wish to read through the entire book of Exodus according to this plan:

- Day 1: Exodus 1 – 2
- Day 2: Exodus 3:1 – 4:17
- Day 3: Exodus 4:18 – 6:12
- Day 4: Exodus 6:13 – 7:13
- Day 5: Exodus 7:14 – 10:29
- Day 6: Exodus 11:1 – 13:16
- Day 7: Exodus 13:17 – 15:21
- Day 8: Exodus 15:22 – 17:7
- Day 9: Exodus 17:8 – 18:27
- Day 10: Exodus 19:1 – 23:33
- Day 11: Exodus 24
- Day 12: Exodus 25 – 31 (skim)
- Day 13: Exodus 32 – 33
- Day 14: Exodus 34 – 40 (skim)



# Absence

## Bible reading

September 4: Job 3

September 5: Psalm 22; Matthew 27:46

September 6: Psalm 109

September 7: Matthew 20:30-34

September 8: Matthew 26:36-46

September 9: Exodus 1:8 – 2:10

## For reflection

Exodus begins with the seeming *absence* of God. This is, of course, just the beginning of one part of a much longer story. But as this story begins, God is nowhere to be found in the midst of the people's great difficulty. The absence of God almost screams off the page.

Taken by themselves, these chapters pose a significant theological challenge. From the creation in Genesis to the new creation in Revelation; from the promises of a coming Messiah to the birth of a Savior to the arrival of the Holy Spirit; God's promise has been one of *presence*, not *absence*. Where is God in Exodus 1 and 2?

Thankfully, these two chapters of Exodus are not the complete story; the absence of God will be addressed later. For now, notice how people find a way to live in defiance of cruel oppression. Two midwives refuse to kill baby boys. A mother takes great risks to protect her infant son. Together, their stories contribute to the downfall of the Egyptian empire.

There are times in our lives when God's absence is all we can perceive. For some, that sense of absence may have begun as a youth, when we

began to wonder about God on our own, rather than simply accepting the faith our parents handed to us. For others, God's perceived absence may have seemed painfully cruel during a time of great struggle and loss.

How do we live when God seems absent? Is our commitment to Christ and the church based on how we feel? Do we walk away during the "dry seasons" of faith, or do we continue to follow? These are important questions for us to consider.

Does God seem to be particularly present or absent from your life? How do you know?

- 1. Think about times of great struggle in your life (personal, or the grief you feel over the challenges of our day). How has your faith sustained you during those times? What does it mean to say "Jesus is Lord" when he is seemingly nowhere to be found?**
- 2. In what ways do the Scripture readings from this week describe the seeming absence of God? Do any of them seem to describe how you feel at this time?**
- 3. This week, pay attention both to the news and to the conversations of people around you. What crises exist in our world, and how are people responding to them? Where does God seem to be in the midst of these struggles?**



# Invitation

## Bible reading

- September 11: Jonah 1-4
- September 12: Isaiah 6:1-8; 43:1-7
- September 13: Matthew 4:18-22
- September 14: Matthew 19:16-30
- September 15: Acts 16:6-10
- September 16: Exodus 3:1-15

## For reflection

Think about times when you have experienced significant difficulty or controversy. In the midst of those times, were you ever tempted to think, “Well, there’s no real need to worry, God is in control”?

That might have been what people were thinking in Exodus 1-2. But perhaps in times like these, we really wonder about God’s absence. How can God be silent when people whom God loves are in such dire straits? We might have faith that God is in control, but there are times when we’d like to see a bit more evidence.

Exodus 3 provides that evidence. God breaks the silence by appearing in a burning bush and calling Moses to a special task. Moses will return to Egypt and bring the people out of slavery. God will be with them all.

It is important that we not become distracted by the burning bush. Maybe we think that if we heard God speak in spectacular means such as these, we would quickly respond to God’s invitation. But that’s not the point. The point of the passage is not so much *how* God calls, but *that* God calls us to participate in bringing about God’s kingdom “on earth, as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).



God's invitation to us can be unsettling, because the stakes are so high. God knows this, however, and offers Moses some assurance. When Moses asks "Who am I to do this?" God reassures him that Moses' identity is not the issue. "I will be with you" is God's answer. Whatever lack or weakness we bring to the task will be compensated by God's presence.

When Moses follows up this question with "Who are you?" God's response reminds Moses of all that has come before. "You need not worry here, either. I am the God of your fathers. I was with your ancestors, and I will be with you."

We are invited to serve God. God will be with us as we go.

- 1. Have you ever experienced God's call in your life? How did the call come to you? How were you sure you were hearing God's call?**
- 2. Have you ever been guilty of thinking "God is in control, he will sort everything out" without considering that you might be the one through whom God will sort things out? If so, reflect on this. Might you have missed an opportunity to be faithful?**
- 3. As you read the Bible passages for the week, notice that God's call can be quite challenging, and not everyone is willing to follow. Do any of these Bible stories speak to you in a particularly significant way? If so, why?**



# Questions

## Bible reading

- September 18: Psalm 94:1-19  
September 19: Jeremiah 1:1-10  
September 20: John 5:1-15  
September 21: John 11:1-44  
September 22: Acts 9:1-19  
September 23: Exodus 3:16-4:17

## For reflection

This text for this Sunday is really a continuation of a story that began with last Sunday's text. God has invited Moses to an important task, and Moses is struggling mightily with the implications of that call. If Moses says "yes" to God, Moses' life will be at risk. One does not confront kings and emperors and expect to emerge unscathed!

And so Moses starts asking questions about God's call. "The people won't believe me, God? What then?" "I can't do this—you need a good speaker, and I'm afraid of speaking in public." Isn't it interesting that Moses is afraid to confront Pharaoh, but he has no hesitation in confronting God with all kinds of reasons why this is a bad idea!

Do you think God gets angry with our questions? If these verses in Exodus are any indication, the answer is "no." God patiently answers each of Moses' questions and provides a solution intended to encourage Moses. It isn't until Moses flatly refuses the invitation that God gets angry. Questioning is fine; refusal crosses the line.

God's call to us is not intended to be easy, convenient, or safe. We may or may not have the necessary skills to accomplish the task offered

to us. But that does not mean God isn't willing to listen to our concerns, calm our fears, and answer our questions. Our concerns are legitimate, because we are important to God. It's our stubborn refusal that God will not tolerate.

When we first encountered the issue of "call" in last week's reading, we noted that we sometimes notice God's absence when we are in the midst of a difficult situation. Here in Exodus 3 and 4 we notice that God's call to Moses *is the answer* to the difficult situation. God still chooses to bring about God's will by working through people who will respond to the call.

- 1. Have you ever doubted God in some way? Did you admit that to another person, or did it seem like the kind of thing you shouldn't really talk about—like maybe you were the only one who felt that way?**
- 2. What are some ways that you might have served God, if you had found the courage to say "yes" to God's invitation? Looking back on those times, why did you say "no"?**
- 3. This week's Bible reading passages all deal with issues of "call" and "doubt" in some way. Which one(s) resonated with your life? Why is that?**



# Provision

## Bible reading

- September 25: Isaiah 43:19-21
- September 26: Matthew 6:25-34
- September 27: John 6:22-59
- September 28: Acts 4:32-37
- September 29: Philippians 4:10-14
- September 30: Exodus 16:2-15; 17:1-7

## For reflection

This week's focus from Exodus skips over some of the more famous passages in the book—the 10 plagues and the escape from Egypt. We pick up the story about a month after the people cross the Red Sea into freedom.

It doesn't take long for the journey to become difficult. The people are in the desert where food and water are scarce. Suddenly, slavery in Egypt doesn't look so bad—at least they were well fed. The prospects of dying of starvation or thirst begin to change their attitudes very quickly. If they had Facebook, can you imagine what they would have posted about Moses and Aaron?

The struggle the Israelites face in these two stories is the same struggle we face: is the perception of our own circumstances the standard we use to base reality? Do we really trust that God is with us and that Jesus will provide for our every need?

We might be tempted to read through this passage too quickly and come away thinking that the lesson here is "Don't grumble against God." But the point is deeper than that. God understands that their grumbling

reflects their spiritual immaturity, much like a loving parent recognizes when their child's tantrum is caused by tiredness or fear, more than disobedience.

God chooses grace in this passage. God gives the people the food they need to eat, but also instructs them on how they are to collect it: "only get enough for today; I'll be back tomorrow with more. You have no need to worry, I'll take care of you. Learn to trust me."

Jesus invites us to a similar understanding when he teaches us to pray "Give us today our daily bread." God will take care of us today; tomorrow will be dealt with when it comes.

- 1. What challenges are you currently facing in life? How significant are they, when compared to those faced by God's people in these verses?**
- 2. In what ways are you making decisions based on your present circumstances instead of God's promise to provide for our needs?**
- 3. Sometimes we complain to God because we know God is the only one who can help. Other times our complaining demonstrates a lack of faith. How does your complaining measure up?**



# Love Feast

Sometimes the church calendar helps us in ways that we never could have planned or imagined. Love Feast falls in the middle of our sermon series from Exodus, at exactly the point where the story shifts from God calling the people out of slavery to God forming them into a special nation. Up to this point we have seen how God was present for the people; moving forward we will begin to see how they are to be present to one another and to the world around them.

Love Feast is a perfect opportunity for us to consider this aspect of our discipleship. How does Love Feast change the way we see one another, enabling us to be present for one another as we share life in our congregation?

We live with the constant temptation to reduce faith in Christ to a set of beliefs we hold in our mind. Pushed to its extreme, we can act as if our confession of faith and baptism are just one more item to be checked off life's to-do list before moving on to other things. We know we're not perfect, but at least we have Jesus in our hearts (or so we tell ourselves).

The problem with this view is that it is not supported in the New Testament. One great opportunity—and challenge—of faith is to love one another as we follow Jesus together. The promises we make to one another in Love Feast are one way we obey Jesus.

Footwashing can be an uncomfortable faith practice, but perhaps not for the reason we might think. Granted, it is a bit unusual to hold someone else's foot in our hand. But more importantly, serving another person in this way means that our relationship with them is in good condition. Among other things, it means we've treated them fairly, not spoken harshly to them, and have given and received necessary

forgiveness with them. As awkward as footwashing can be for some people, can you imagine how much more difficult it would be if you happened to sit down next to someone with whom you were in conflict?

Footwashing is one of the visible ways we put our beliefs in Jesus to practice. It measures the seriousness of our love for one another, and potentially exposes any area of our lives where we might be tempted to say “I love God” but “I can’t stand my brother/sister in Christ.” These two loves—love for God and love for one another—are inextricably combined in New Testament faith.

So as we consider how God took a group of people from slavery in Egypt and formed them into a unique people through whom God’s plans would be accomplished, I invite you to think about how God is calling us out of the world in which we live and is shaping us to be faithful disciples who live in the Roanoke Valley in 2017. Footwashing and communion are one way we work at discipleship.

**With our deacons, I invite you to Love Feast  
on Sunday, October 1, at 5:00 p.m.**



## **Bible reading**

October 2: Genesis 12:1-3

October 3: Isaiah 49:1-7

October 4: Matthew 5:13-16

October 5: Romans 6:1-14

October 6: 1 Peter 2:4-12

October 7: Exodus 19:1-6

## **For reflection**

It would be easy to read the passage for Sunday, October 7 (Exodus 19:1-6) so quickly that we miss its implications. We should slow down here, because Exodus 19 is one of the foundational passages of the entire Bible. The Old Testament has been moving to this point since God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12. Moses' story has been moving to this point since Exodus 3, when God revealed his desire to bring the people out of Egypt to worship at this very mountain. God has special plans for these people.

What are those plans? Not just to exist, but to exist for others. Not just to be free, but to be free to help others understand the grace and goodness of the God who created the world. These people are to be a *kingdom of priests*, a nation through whom other nations would come to know the living God.

We learn in this passage that God's method of relating to people is by grace. The people have done nothing to earn God's special favor. God is simply following through on an earlier promise.

We also learn that this special relationship with God includes some



extra responsibilities. God's promise includes that we are to "obey my voice and keep my covenant." God's people were to be distinct in the ways they relate to one another; in many instances it would be this distinctive behavior that would be the first sign to others that there is something special about the God whom we serve.

Notice in the Bible readings for this week that Peter picks up these exact words in teaching his congregation how to serve Jesus. This part of God's promise has not changed. We are a special people, set apart to worship and serve a holy and loving God. One way we show that love is in the way we act toward one another. These verses give credence to the notion that Christians will rarely make converts by winning arguments. But we will likely attract the attention of non-believers through disciplined habits transformed by Jesus.

In what ways are our lives attractive to those who do not know Jesus?

- 1. Prior to our study of Exodus, what would you have said was the most important passage or story in the book? Why might the verses from this week not have made the list?**
- 2. Why is it more tempting to try to win arguments than to live distinctive lives?**
- 3. In what ways do the choices you make on how you love God, neighbor, and enemy reflect on your love for God?**



# Community

## **Bible reading**

- October 9: Matthew 5
- October 10: Matthew 6
- October 11: Matthew 7
- October 12: Matthew 22:34-40
- October 13: Romans 12
- October 14: Exodus 20:1-20; 23:1-9

## **For reflection**

The 10 Commandments are recognized as the foundation for law, right living, and even for the renewal of our country. They describe the basic ways that people ought to relate both to God and to one another. Simple, right? Just do these things. But are they really as simple as we might prefer? A closer examination suggests some deeper issues.

First, the 10 Commandments are annoyingly broad. To give just one example, what does it mean for us to not kill? An unborn baby? Someone who has broken into our home? Someone who has committed a heinous murder? An enemy in a war? "You shall not kill" seems straightforward enough, until it's my life that is at risk. Then what will I do?

Second, the 10 Commandments are not for the world, they are for the church. Some might think they belong in schools and court houses, but we cannot expect unredeemed persons to follow these. They are part of our work of being a "kingdom of priests."

Our lesson for this week also includes Exodus 23:1-9, an odd sounding set of laws to consider. When taken as a group, these laws suggest an interesting question: What does a reconciled community really look like?

It is one where we do not show favoritism, where we recognize an ultimate limit to the gripes we have against one another. Even if it is our enemy's ox in a ditch, we set our grievances aside and help save the animal. No grievance is worth the tragic blow the loss of a working animal like an ox would cause. Who knows, our response might actually bring about reconciliation.

As you consider these two passages from Exodus, consider them in light of the New Testament passages included with this week's reading. All of these passages of Scripture are intended to invite Jesus-followers to together consider the implications of loving God, loving one another, loving our neighbors, and loving our enemies.

The ways we do this are not as easy to figure out as we might think or wish. We only need to turn on the television or our favorite social media source to learn that there are many persons who are certain that their way of viewing God, other, neighbor, and enemy is the right way, and the only way. How does Jesus instruct us in these things?

- 1. Of all the Bible passages you read this week, which one challenges you the most? Why is that?**
- 2. What are some ways that living the 10 Commandments might be more complicated than first appears?**
- 3. How might our world be different if we really took these instructions to heart?**



## **Bible reading**

- October 16: Genesis 3
- October 17: Numbers 11:1-15
- October 18: 1 Samuel 8:1-22
- October 19: Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8
- October 20: Matthew 5:21-26; 18:15-20
- October 21: Exodus 32:1-14

## **For reflection**

It is difficult to know what is the more shocking aspect of these verses—that the people so quickly turned away from God to serve an idol made with gold, or that they did it so quickly. It has only been about 40 days since Moses brought the 10 Commandments and other laws to the people.

Whichever the case, we cannot underestimate the magnitude of this sin. In asking Aaron to make a golden statue for them to worship and to follow, the people are saying that they are no longer interested in following the God who brought them out of slavery in Egypt. They have seen how God defeated the gods and the armies of Egypt; they were there when Moses led them through the Red Sea; they've eaten manna from heaven and have drunk water from a rock. But it's not enough. Moses is gone and they're tired of waiting.

How do we respond to a text like this? It seems that one option might be to excuse their behavior. After all, this particular group of people has only known the harsh and dehumanizing traditions of slavery. We might expect God to be a bit more patient with them as years of being treated

as valueless cogs in the power structures of an empire are allowed to heal. God was patient with them when they grumbled for food and water in the desert; why is God so harsh here?

Another option might be to reduce this to a flat, flannel-board type of Sunday School lesson and attempt to make some kind of moralistic object lesson out of it (“don’t be like these people—trust God!”) without understanding just how many times we make the same choice to trust something or someone other than God.

We cannot escape the notion that we are these people. Every time we look at a plain teaching of Scripture or of the church and say “Well, that really doesn’t apply to *this* situation,” we are choosing a golden calf of our own. When we trust our money more than God; when we seek revenge instead of reconciliation; when we would rather follow our own way than God’s ways, we are worshiping a golden calf.

If we’re paying close attention, this story will force us to deal with our own sin.

- 1. How important is it that we regularly pray in worship “and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us?” When we come to that part of the Lord’s Prayer, which part of that phrase gets more of your attention: your own sins being forgiven, or your need to forgive others?**
- 2. Each of us is tempted to sin in different ways. What is your “golden calf”? Do you view your own temptations more as “minor indiscretions” or as if you are abandoning God?**
- 3. Spend time in prayer this week thinking about the ways you sin, and ask God for forgiveness.**



# Presence

## **Bible reading**

- October 23: Psalm 99
- October 24: Psalm 150
- October 25: Isaiah 6:1-8
- October 26: Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:12-17
- October 27: Revelation 5
- October 28: Exodus 33:12-23

## **For reflection**

We Brethren might be guilty of missing an important part of faith in Christ. We have a tendency to define our faith by the things we do.

It is certainly true that a faith that exists only in our minds is suspect. James reminds us "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead" (James 2:26). John brings this message even closer to home by telling us "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen" (1 John 4:20). The ways we demonstrate our love for God are a non-negotiable part of authentic Christian discipleship.

That being said, we might be guilty of underemphasizing some classic spiritual disciplines like worship, prayer, and Bible study. How important are the hymns we sing in helping you remain committed to God? How much time have you spent in prayer this week? And if there were some actual way we could measure things like this, would your time spent in worship with our congregation be as important to you as the time we spend in fellowship, in conversation, and in serving together?

It's not that any one of these things is more important than the other; it's that they need to be kept in balance in our lives. The longer we walk faithfully with God, the more important each of these aspects of discipleship should become.

This week's text from Exodus is a fascinating peek into Moses' life. After all he's been through—from doubting his call, to battling Pharaoh, to being disappointed with the fickle people he is leading—the one thing he wants is to feel God's presence. He might have had a nation of his own, but all he wants is to sense God's presence and power.

When we are in the midst of either life's routine or life's challenge, what do we want from God?

- 1. How important is Christian worship in your life? Be as specific as you can. Why is it important? What parts of our worship at Oak Grove most help you sense the presence of God?**
  
- 2. As you think back through these eight weeks of studying Exodus, what did you learn that surprised you? How are you seeing things differently?**



# Christian Life Seminar

Exodus teaches us a new way of seeing. Walking with God and some very stubborn and wounded people as they seek both new life and new relationships with God and with each other should invite us to seek the same things. We are invited into a unique relationship with God to be a unique people in this world.

What does that look like in the time and place where we live? How should our congregation see the community around us, and how might our lives and the ministry of our congregation be changed by what we see?

Our Christian Life Seminar will focus on these questions. The first and last sessions will look at the strengths and weaknesses of various models for witness and mission, as well as spiritual disciplines to prepare us for that journey. The middle three sessions will be led by some Roanoke Valley leaders who will help us understand what they see when they look at this beautiful valley and the people who call it home.

October 25	Models of Mission in the Community
November 1	Sherman Lea, Mayor of Roanoke
November 8	Jenny Lee, Habitat for Humanity
November 15	Afira DeVries, United Way of the Roanoke Valley
November 22	No study—Thanksgiving break
November 29	Spiritual Disciplines for Mission