**Sermon – Trinity 19 18th October 2020 St James Hall**

Ex 33:12-end – People of God

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|  | As a teenager in the Welsh valleys in the 1980s there was a new craze sweeping through the villages. It was all about standing out from the crowd, and what better way to do it than giving your car a make-over. You would start with faux-fur seat covers, usually a sort of creamy white that looked suspiciously like sheep skin. |

You’d move on to sticking ‘go-faster’ stripes down the side of your car, which didn’t actually make your car go any faster, and would occasionally peel off when you went over 50mph. You’d graduate to fluffy dice dangling from the rear view mirror, a visual reminder of how cool your styling was, never mind that they completely obscured the view out front. Finally you’d have a long, tinted strip at the top of the windscreen that proudly pronounced to everyone whose car it was. Nowadays the trend seems more towards drilling holes in your exhaust and then trying to drown it out with an even louder stereo system. But back then, clearly we had taste! It was all about what made you distinct. In our Bible passage today, Moses is asking God to make the Hebrews God’s people, a people distinct from all others.

Our reading today brings us right towards the end of our ‘God of our story’ Bible series, and we’ve travelled with God’s people right from the time of the Patriarchs until they reach the promised land. Moses knows the path ahead for the Hebrews contains great blessing but also great challenge, and it is with this in mind he makes his request in v15, ‘*Then Moses said to God, “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.****16****How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?”* Moses pleads for God’s presence to accompany the Hebrews, because he knew what made them special, what set them apart from other people groups was that God was with them. God had journeyed with them, he had established a covenant with them and their forefathers. Their origin story, the narrative of who they were, where they had come from and where they were going, was bound up in the God who made them.

Eugene Petersen, the translator of The Message version of the Bible said: ‘*If we are primarily exhorted to achieve, it shapes the way we are.  We get our identity in achievement, out of performance, out of competition. We will learn to evaluate others impersonally, usually as impediments to our own achievement.  But if we are primarily addressed in the form of [Biblical] story, in narrative, we are gathered into something that has meaning, plot and purpose; the seeds of character and significance are embedded is us, and we find ourselves more or less at home in the world and in our community’*. Story is a powerful media through which we as Christians are able to communicate timeless truth. Timeless truth points to a timeless creator who sits behind it, establishing a covenant of love and redemption with his people on earth. In the time we’re looking at, the time of the Hebrews, that covenant was between God and the Hebrews only. It was only through Christ it extended to all people, to us today. Our Bible is based on this premise, with its two parts being named the Old and New Testaments respectively. Nowadays we have less of an idea about what being party to a Covenant means, but to the Hebrews it was fundamental to their identity and purpose. Let me try an offer an illustration.

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|  | When Corinna and I got engaged, we made a trip to the jewellers to select an engagement ring. You consider the quality of the stone and the metal, which are often assured with a certificate and a hallmark. |

It’s a big expense to underline your covenant of love with each other, until you make your vows on your wedding day. Now imagine you have got engaged, and you want to select a ring together. You both arrange to meet, the day, hour and place is set. Now imagine the day comes and one of you is waiting at the agreed time and place. They wait and wait, and the other does not come. Hours pass, days even, and days turn into months and years. One partner has stuck to the covenant made whilst the other has not. The Hebrew word for Covenant is ‘*Hreshet’*. Gods agreements are not some flight of fancy, given on a whim. Like the hallmarks on a ring, God’s covenant are marked by promises made by its maker. Some of you have know 50 or 60 years of marriage together, which is wonderful. In contrast with any human agreement, God’s word of Covenant speaks of the very nature of God himself – they are eternal. His love for us does not grow dimmer or weaken with age or time. Even when we turn away, he is always gently drawing us back to him in forgiveness and mercy. It’s hard for us to imagine someone doing this, because we have human models of love and commitment that frequently break down. But we know the love we feel towards one other has hallmarks of the divine about it – it is not constrained by time or place; it defies logic; it cannot be measured or purchased or forced and is forgiving. The Christian narrative is that this love is a gift in us, given by the God of our story in whose name we were created. And it’s what makes us distinct as Christians – that we have chosen to receive God’s covenant of eternal love. As St Peter wrote: *‘But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.’ (*1 Peter 2:9)

Therefore we know that whatever happens in the future, in his hand he holds each of us, cares for us and will always, always work things out for good in the end. Even if in the short term things seem a little dire – like through the coronavirus – we know the story that was begun in love and will conclude in love and redemption. This is the God of our story.