Remember the story of the Exodus. The journey to freedom was never easy for the people of Israel. The journey to freedom will never be easy for us.

We just heard a conversation between God and Moses, one of the only people in the Bible known to have direct conversations with God. Exodus chapter 33 comes after the story of the Golden Calf, where the people display their complete lack of faith by creating and worshipping a statue made of gold just a few weeks after God has given them the 10 commandments. The wise group of people who choose our lectionary readings have left out the end of chapter 32 and the beginning of chapter 33.

I am suspicious that the wise group of people must not know you very well and must think that you are easily frightened. I will summarize the part of Exodus we have missed between last week and this week: Moses comes down from the mountain and saw the people dancing and carousing and worshipping the golden calf and Moses’ anger burned like fire. He broke the stone tablets, and he took the calf that they had made and ground it into powder and mixed it into water and made the people drink it.

Then Moses said, ‘Who is on the Lord’s side? And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. Moses said to them, take out your sword and go through this camp, and kill your brother, your friend, and all of those who are so caught up in their partying and their drunkenness that they refuse to return to God. That day three thousand of the people were killed.’ You can tell me you do not like this part because of all of the violence. That is fine. I agree. I do not like violence and people killing each other with swords. Just remember this: the journey to freedom was never easy for the people of Israel and it will never be easy for us.

After a few more verses and several more days of grief and sadness Moses goes to meet with God again. Moses pleads with God to accompany the people of Israel for the remainder of their journey into the promised land. God has not forgotten the faithlessness and flagrant idolatry of the people, and says, I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.’

It is vital for us to know this part of the story because sometimes we think the journey to freedom is going to be easy. Sometimes we think we can just say we love Jesus and everything will be fine. It is not going to be easy and everything will not be just fine.

In our reading from Exodus today, Moses pleads with the Lord. “I want to know you” Moses says, “Consider that this nation is your people.” And God says, “I know you Moses. I will make all my goodness pass before you, but I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious. I have standards Moses.” It is almost as if God is saying, “You say that this nation is my people. I say, ‘these people better start acting like they are my people.’”

First, remember that the journey to freedom is not going to be easy. Second, remember that God has standards. We can say, “We are a Christian nation until we are blue in the face.” It won’t mean anything until we act like we are a Christian nation. It hasn’t happened yet. We have a long way to go.

It has not been an easy journey to freedom here in America. Our journey began with hundreds of years of one of the cruelest institutions ever created by people, the enslavement of millions of people, all for the purpose of greed. Slavery and racism are what the Rev. Jim Wallis describes as America’s original sin. By this, I think he means we keep going back, and going back and going back to the evils of slavery and racism. We can’t seem to get rid of this terrible scar on our hearts.

The violence and terror of slavery and racism are so evil, so ugly we want to turn away and just pretend that it is over. It’s not over. Don’t turn away. Instead, pay attention to the racism. Try to learn from the terrible, evil history of our nation. Try to be changed and even strengthened by what you learn. Learn from the faith of those who were enslaved. Learn from their experience. The journey to freedom is long and difficult; we better learn from those who have gone on before us.

The people who were enslaved faced a strange dilemma. They had been enslaved by a group of people who called themselves Christians. They had been enslaved by a group of people who considered the book of Exodus to be Holy Scripture. The book of Exodus is about the journey to freedom. Yet the people who were reading the book of Exodus in church each Sunday were taking away the freedom of more and more people each year. Even after the slave trade ended the slave owners took away freedom from thousands of people each year. It was what they did to the babies who were born and to the little children who would be playing one year and working hard in the fields the next year. Each year the slave owners
kept on taking away freedom from more and more people. And each year the slave owners kept on reading the book of Exodus and saying they were Christians.

The people who were enslaved faced a strange dilemma. They heard the stories of the Bible. They learned about Jesus and about Moses and about heaven. And they understood this truth: God has standards. People can say they are following Jesus as much as they like. Saying that we are following Jesus doesn’t mean anything.

The slaves taught this truth to their children in many ways. One of the ways was to tell the truth about life in their songs. Some of the songs seem easy at first: I got shoes, you got shoes, all of God’s children got shoes. When I get to heaven gonna put on my shoes and walk all over God’s heaven, heaven, heaven. Everybody talkin’ ‘bout heaven ain’t a going there, heaven, heaven. I’m gonna walk all over God’s heaven.

The song sounds happy and easy and simple. But it’s not simple. Did you notice that little powerful message in the middle? Listen two the second verse: I got a robe, you got a robe, all of God’s children got a robe. When I get to heaven gonna put on my robe and walk all over God’s heaven, heaven, heaven. Everybody talkin’ ‘bout heaven ain’t a going there, heaven, heaven. I’m gonna walk all over God’s heaven.

God has standards. Everybody talkin’ ‘bout heaven ain’t a going there. Everybody who says, “I am following Jesus” is not necessarily following Jesus. You know that.

One week ago thousands of people who claim to be following Jesus gathered in Washington, D.C. for the annual Value Voters Summit. This year we found out what they value. The self-described Value Voters support enormous reductions in medical care for the elderly. They support enormous reductions in medical care for the poor. The want to turn away more refugees who are trying to escape civil wars and religious persecution. They support a leader who has bragged of sexual violence against women and, for all I have heard, has never apologized or repented for his violent words and behavior. Everybody who says, “I am following Jesus” is not necessarily following Jesus.

We are like Moses. We say to God, “We are your people, God. We want to know you, Lord.” And God says, “I know you. I have standards.”

How are we going to reveal that we are God’s people? How are we going to reveal that we know something about God? We have to learn from those who have gone on before us.

What do you think? There were two men who lived 240 years ago. Both of them heard the book of Exodus in church. In fact, both of them were Episcopalians. Both inherited slaves from their fathers.

One of them saw the evils of slavery and said, “I will buy more slaves and I will never let them go free.” This man heard the story of the Exodus and was completely unchanged. He acted as if he had never heard that the greatest leader of God’s people, except perhaps Jesus, was Moses, the one who led the people out of slavery into freedom.

But the other man was profoundly changed by hearing the story of the Exodus. He freed his slaves and spent much of the rest of his life working to abolish slavery in the state of New York. His name was John Jay. John Jay understood that God has standards.

Moses asked God this question, “For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct from every people on the . . earth.” John Jay understood that if we are going to be known as God’s people, we shall be having to be distinct. But we will be different from those who are not followers of Jesus by our behavior. We will be distinct because we have found a way to work together to act like God’s people.

When you hear people quote passages of scripture and then use those words to hurt God’s people, do not be discouraged. Remember the experience of those who have come before us on this journey and know: Everybody talkin’ ‘bout heaven ain’t a going there.

When you see people acting with disregard for the poor and those in need and then invoke the name of the one who is beyond all of our names, do not despair. Remember that being one of God’s people means being changed. Being one of God’s people means you are going to be different from those whose main desire is to have power. Be different from them. Have just one desire and try to make it God’s desire.

When you see powerful people hooting and hollering and applauding themselves in triumph when they win a battle against those who have very little power, do not be confused. Remember the story of the Exodus. The journey to freedom will never be easy.