

A Sermon for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost, October 4, 2020

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Then God spoke all these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin." Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Over the past month we have heard some of the stories of God at work in the lives of Moses, Pharaoh, and the Israelites. They are epic Old Testament accounts of the way God delivered the Israelites from bondage and slave labor under Pharaoh, through the divided Red Sea. God provided manna, quail, and water to them as they wandered through the wilderness toward the land God had promised to their ancestor Abraham. We have also heard how the Israelites often lost sight of God's provision and care, which God literally rained down from heaven upon them! They forgot. They needed reminding.

In our reading this week we've jumped ahead in the story, to the place where the Israelites have reached Mount Sinai. God calls Moses to an executive meeting on the mountaintop where he says to Moses, "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples." Moses goes back down the mountain and tells the people that God desires to be in covenant with them. It takes them three days to prepare for this great covenant ceremony.

On the third day, the people could not see God, but they sure knew he was there. Thunder and lightning filled the sky, a thick cloud hovered over the mountain, and the blast from God's trumpet was so loud it made everyone tremble. As Moses spoke with God, even the mountain trembled, and God answered in the thunder. Finally, Moses went up the mountain, disappearing in the thick cloud. And when he came down, Moses told the people what God said. This is where the people hear the Ten Commandments, or ten words, from God.

We don't usually hear this exciting lead up to the commandments. In fact, we have heard the commandments so many times, that we might find them boring, or no longer applicable in today's world, or at least it appears as if they are no longer being applied. Learning them in Sunday school over the years, some of us might have

thought, “I’m a good person and I would never break any of these commandments.” Others of us might still be trembling in fear lest we break one of these commandments, seeing God as an angry, scary man in the sky, who is waiting to smite us. Still, others of us may have broken more than one of these commandments and are wondering if God could possibly love us. How we understand the Ten Commandments is a reflection of our relationship with God.

The people of Israel came to understand that the commandments were given in love, given to provide a template for abundant life. The ten words formed them into a community that was an alternative to the distorted life in the world around them, a community that lived in faithfulness to God’s purposes.

The words from God are also for us, connecting us to the promise and assurance that we are the treasured possession of God. The commandments are a gift, a joy, and a delight – you will see God’s law expressed in this way all throughout the Psalms. They give us healthy boundaries as well as a strong foundation for our lives. They are succinct yet deep with implied meaning and understanding them can be a lifelong endeavor.

God knows there are ways of life that work and ways of life that do not work. If we see the commandments as ten rules for a way of life that works, then we might hear them like this. We might come to understand that no one loves us more than God; that nothing else in this world can do for us what God can do; that the name of God holds great power; that sabbath time helps us remember that we are more than what we do; and that honoring parents is to honor their wisdom, and also their best efforts, however imperfect.

We might acknowledge that murder ends life, but also that our words and actions can destroy the hopes of others; that in committing adultery we will set in motion consequences that will affect and hurt those we love; that when we steal it harms others and harms our soul; that telling a lie will not work forever and that choosing not to speak truth can be just as destructive; and that coveting what others have is the root cause of so much of our sin, so much of our inability to keep the other nine commandments.

Through our baptism God has delivered us from our bondage to sin, has borne us on eagles’ wings, bringing us into covenant with God. We are God’s treasured possession, we have heard God’s words of promise and yet, like the Israelites, we sometimes forget.

God’s words to us for a way of life that works can help us remember who we are and whose we are. They can help us love God and one another in a world that has become so distorted by sin. They are a gift given by the God who has redeemed us from a life of slavery that we might live not burdened under the law, but in perfect freedom. When we are in relationship with God, we’re free not to need any other gods. Because God loves us, we’re free to take rest, and not to resort to stealing, lying and covetousness in order to live. To the extent that we live out these words that show us a way of life that works, we ensure that everyone can live in abundance.

These words reveal something of the nature of God, and of the freedom that our relationship with God brings. These words welcome us from whatever Egypt we have escaped, or from whatever Pharaoh we have been toward others. They welcome us into God’s great and forgiving love. Amen.