

Sermon on Exodus 20: 1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22
Lent 3 B
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Some things cannot be grasped when we are comfortable. There is some grace, some meaning, some of what life has to teach us that can only be had on hazardous ground. These are not the meanings that we seek to gain. They are those thrust upon us. Mostly, we have set up our lives so that we are in charge and comfortable. We are in control and minimize the surprises. We may even have been careful to live life by the rules.

I suppose “the rules” might have saved us some anguish over the last year. There are instances of when we have lived too high, embraced too much risk, trusted the wrong people. We might have been more prudent, more conservative. Maybe we should have questioned our own assumptions about the future, interrogated our aspirations for greed. Perhaps we should have been more wary of the business cycle. But it is true that in these waters both the conniving and the innocent have been cast adrift in the same boat.

There may be some “rules” that would have helped, but the Ten Commandments would not have solved these troubles. And whatever wisdom might be in them, they are not a blueprint for salvation or success. Civically, they keep most of us out of enough trouble to stay on the good side of our neighbors, family, and the law. Religiously, as the reformers never tired of reminding us, they are of no account before God. For just as we think the Ten Commandments reveal something about God, they reveal much more about you and me.

When these Israelites began wandering in the wilderness, before their arrival at Sinai, they complained bitterly that they wanted to go back to what they knew, the “fleshpots of Egypt.” At least under Pharaoh’s reign they had food to eat and plenty of it. Now rescued by an unknown God, they were disoriented. Free? What for? With their freedom came not joy but disorientation. Not happiness, but dizziness. Not purpose but wandering.¹

In this state they arrive at Sinai. And God gives ten “words.”² It is noteworthy that God’s words are given publicly, all of Israel hearing them together. They are an alternative to the only other public power these people have ever known: Pharaoh’s power. These are God’s words for an alternative form of public order. If anything knowing God’s ultimate standard stands in stark

¹Exodus 16:2-3. Interestingly enough, Plato depicts the same disorientation when the prisoners of the “cave” are driven to their freedom. Ambivalence about one’s freedom is endemic. *Republic* 7.515-16.

² The characterizations of the Commandments in the paragraphs that follow are from Walter Brueggemann, *The Word That Redescribes the World: The Bible and Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), pp. 124-129.

contrast to the standards we may be most familiar: the standards of Pharaoh, Wall Street, politics, and the way we already know the world works.

God begins by revealing God's name. A few of you may remember how I spoke of the biblical notion of names last Sunday. To know someone's name is to give them a certain amount of power over you. You don't just give it out to everyone who might want it. And God begins by letting these reluctant people God's name, YHWH. This is stunning. From now on this rag-tag tribe of nomads can summon the God who has claimed them. No wonder they greeted this with shouts of joy, and a warning from God not to use it for emptiness.

They are not to make graven images. God is not to be commoditized, bought and sold like so many trinkets at an open market, as Jesus violent reaction in today's scripture from John so aptly demonstrates. God's holiness is not to be reduced to manageable, salable goods.

At the center of YHWH's alternative intention for creation is the invitation to Sabbath rest. Imagine! Stopping work! Just think what will happen to the economy. This *is* a stark alternative to what they said in Egypt, or even on our street. There they said,

Go and get straw for yourselves, wherever you can find it; but your work will not be lessened in the least! . . . Make bricks! . . . Now go and work!³

In contrast to the endless quotas of bricks in Egypt, this nation of ex-slaves is commanded to rest. The fortunes and misfortunes of your life depend on more than your hard work. They depend on the humility of stopping and noticing that the world goes on pretty much as it did when you worked. Some things can only be learned when all your striving stops. Covenantal times are designed so that the advantaged share at least one day a week with the marginalized and the poor.

For all the sophistication of the Greek culture, they did not treat strangers or neighbors well. They enslaved or killed all whom they met on the road. The neighbor was there to exploit, betray, at their expense to enrich you. The next commands show God's will toward neighbor: honor parents, don't murder, don't mix your marriage with others, don't steal.⁴ The neighbor, whether a stranger or your mother or father or spouse, is to be treated as though a gift from God.⁵

"Covet" is something much more important than the psychology of envy. This is a curb of acquisitiveness. Under God's alternative form of governance, life is something other than market transactions. This is not what the Pharaoh – or Wall Street, or your realtor, or your mortgage lender – told you. The capacity to seize and confiscate by power or cunning is in this command curbed. You could think of these commands of God as the decisive word against consumerism.

³ Exodus 5: 4, 11, 16.

⁴ So, Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York, Schocken Books, 1995), note 13, page 372.

⁵ Compare with Deuteronomy 24:17-22.

This Sinai episode signals the beginning of a people, they striking of a covenant, a promise, between God and this slave people. They shall be identified as people who live not as they have in the past, subject to the commands of the Pharaoh, but subject to the command of God.

These commandments are not so much a rule book. Just having them before us reveals both who we are and whom God is turning us into. These words announce the values of the God who has chosen you. I will be very different from what you have grown familiar with in Egypt. You know too well how the world of the Pharaoh treated family and stranger, about exploitation and nihilism.⁶ You and I know that world of the street all too well. And these words from God, by their very existence, show how different God is from us.

This stability of expectation did not produce stability of obedience. This is clear to anyone who has applied one's self to them. The Ten Commandments are not measures of one's neighbor. They are measures of self. That is an infinitely more difficult thing to do. For when these words from God actually catch up with you, there God has you right where God wants to have you. For when you know the truth about what God's expectations are, then you also have the truth about you and me. The law kills. Every time. It wakes up the sleeping person and tells them the truth every time. The truth is there is no future in pointing out the sins you think you have located in another. No future at all. To preoccupy one's self with what one presumes to be the sins of another is a theological dead end.⁷ And it is at the dead ends of life that the foolishness of Jesus' cross can do its work with you and me.

And if that is strange and dizzy land for you, if that dragnet of grace⁸ holds too much fish, then look out, for you may be about to fall out of the net yourself. This is not Pharaoh's wise world. This is God's foolish world.

Our crisis of credit, banking, and trust, has revealed much about the greed of others. It has revealed even more about you and me.⁹ That is what the law does. It shows how different are God's ways from the ways in which we have been trained and live almost every day.

Some meanings cannot be grasped in the familiar comfort of what we have become used to.

⁶“The ten commandments are a crucial line of defense against the destructive nihilism in the world.” Walter Bruggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 186.

⁷ “It's about the mystery of how you hurt yourself. It's like the Talmud says: the evils others do to me are as nothing compared to the evils I do to myself.” Robert Pinsky quoted in Ralph Blumenthal, “If Bernie Met Dante. . . ,” *The New York Times* (March 15, 2009).

⁸Matthew 13:47.

⁹“Bernie Madoff is like a child blaming his mother for letting him start a fight while she wasn't looking.” Joe Nocera, “Madoff Had Accomplices: His Victims.” *New York Times* (March 13, 2009).

There is some grace that can only be had in a crisis. Israel wandered in the wilderness, but they wandered as God's claimed people. We wander in our own messes, but we wander as God's own people. These are not the learnings or the grace that we would seek on our own. They are of the sort thrust upon us.

We struggle to be in charge of our lives. These commandments may keep us out of jail, and show us God's will for our relationship with God and neighbor, but they will not save us.¹⁰ Sometimes no matter what we have done or tried to do, life propels us into uncharted seas, And just as the children of Israel became God's claimed people in these ten words, so to do we struggle in our messes, the good news is that we do so as God's claimed and baptized people. Amen.

¹⁰ "Therefore whoever knows well how to distinguish the Gospel from the Law should give thanks to God and know that [they are] a real theologian. I must admit that in the time of temptation I myself do not know how to do this as I should. The way to distinguish the one from the other is to locate the Gospel in heaven and the Law on earth, to call the righteousness of the Gospel heavenly and divine and the righteousness of the Law earthly and human, and to distinguish between heaven and earth. . . . Therefore if the issue is faith, heavenly righteousness, or conscience, let us leave the Law out of consideration altogether and let it remain on the earth. But if the issue is works, then let us light the lamp of works and of the righteousness of the Law in the night. . . . These two must be distinguished in your mind in such a way that when your conscience is completely terrified by a sense of sin, you will think of yourself: "At the moment you are busy on earth. Here let the ass work, let him serve and carry the burdens on earth; for the conscience has no relation to the Law or to works or to earthly righteousness. Thus the ass remains in the valley; but the conscience ascends the mountain with Isaac, knowing absolutely nothing about the Law or its works but looking only to the forgiveness of sins and the pure righteousness offered and given in Christ." Martin Luther (*LW* 26: 115-16)