

“The Giver of Freedom”

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery ...”

One Saturday afternoon a few years ago, I was visiting a member of my congregation at a hospital with which I was not very familiar. I was successful in finding parking and navigating the maze of hallways; but then I ran into an unexpected problem with the elevator. It happened after my visit as I was leaving the hospital, my mind occupied with the many other tasks I had to accomplish that day. I was on the third floor of a five-story building, so I pushed the down button and waited until the elevator arrived. Inside, I pushed the button for the first floor; but when the doors closed, the elevator went up instead of down, stopping at the fourth floor. Nothing unusual about that, I thought; I probably hadn't noticed that I had gotten onto an elevator heading up. But when the doors opened, no one was waiting; so I pushed the first floor button again, only to have the elevator once again go up to the fifth floor. Once again, no one was waiting; so now I was becoming puzzled. I once again pushed the first floor button; now the elevator went down (it had nowhere else to go!), but again stopped at the fourth floor with no one having called it there. This continued on each of the lower floors until I finally reached my destination on the first floor, totally confused as to what had happened. I looked for cameras, thinking I might be the victim of one of those “Candid Camera” pranks; but it wasn't until I exited the elevator and noticed a sign next to it that I understood what had happened. This was a Sabbath elevator, programmed to stop automatically on each floor so that observant Jews could visit family members without violating the Sabbath restrictions against work. It was a reminder that the laws that God gave to Moses centuries ago still govern the lives of the people of Israel in our modern world.

To many outside observers, the laws that govern the daily lives of observant Jews may appear to be overly harsh and restrictive. Kosher laws determine which foods are permissible and which are forbidden; not only is pork strictly outlawed, but so are shellfish and such practices as combining meat and dairy. Sabbath laws restrict most activities, including driving, cooking, and even pushing elevator buttons. The manner of dress is also strictly regulated, and even wearing clothing that combines two different kinds of thread is often prohibited. Every aspect of the daily lives of observant Jews is regulated by their interpretation of the Torah, which in one sense means the first five books of the Bible but to many Jews defines the entire Hebrew Scriptures, the revelation of God to his people. But while to us these laws may seem quite onerous, to the Jewish people they are celebrated as God's revelation as to how they are to live as God's people.

- “Central to the belief in a living G-d is the Jewish belief that He communicated His will and His commandments to the creature whom He endowed with free will, but whom He called to be His obedient servant. The very essence of Judaism rests upon the acceptance of a spiritual-historical event in which our ancestors participated as a group, as well as upon acceptance of subsequent spiritual revelations to the Prophets of Israel. The extraordinary historical event I refer to is the promulgation of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. G-d's will was also made manifest in the Written Torah, written down by Moses under Divine prophecy during the forty-year period after the exodus.” – www.chabad.org.

After their liberation from slavery in Egypt, their being brought through the waters of the Red Sea, and witnessing God providing food and water in the Sinai wilderness in the midst of their continual murmuring and complaining, the people of Israel arrive at Mount Sinai in obedience to the command God gave to Moses: *“I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”* (Exodus 3:12). Upon their arrival, the people witness a *theophany*, a spectacular appearance of the holy God of Israel in their midst:

- “On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled.

Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder.” – 19:16-19.

It is out of this spectacular appearance of God that the gift of the Torah is given to God’s people, the *“commands that intend to shape and order the world according to the radical and distinctive vision of the God of the exodus.”* (Walter Bruggemann).

The commandments of the Torah (which number 613) begin with what are commonly known as the Ten Commandments (or Decalogue), familiar to generations of Sunday school and catechism students. While the numbering of the Commandments differs among various Jewish and Christian groups, they are given to God’s people in the context of God’s self-disclosure: *“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery ...”* (20:2). Israel’s destiny under these commandments is rooted in the self-disclosure of God. The exodus provides the authority for the commandments as well as the material claim of these commands; they are God’s teachings to his people as to how they are to live as a community of liberated people:

- “For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?” – Deuteronomy 4:7-8.

The Ten Commandments begin with a central claim about the identity of the God of Israel, and from that central claim flow all of these commands. Because it was the LORD, the God of Israel who established his covenant with Abraham and who called Moses through the burning bush, that freed the people from bondage, therefore this is the only God to whom the people of Israel should pledge fidelity; they are to have *“no other gods before me,”* nor are they to *“make for yourself an idol ... you shall not bow down and worship them.”* (20:3-5). To a people who are journeying to a land where the people worship a multitude of gods, the people of Israel are to be distinguished by their worship of one God (monotheism), who is a *“jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.”* (20:5-6).

As God is the only deity to whom the people are to be loyal, so also is the name of this God to be kept holy. In the ancient world, the “name” of the Lord bespeaks God’s powerful purpose and presence; to make “wrongful use” of the name is to use it “for mischief” in the service of some purpose that is extraneous to the Lord’s own purpose. The holy name of God is never to be used as a means to some other end; *“we do not curse, swear, practice magic, lie, or deceive using God’s name, but instead use that very name in every time of need to call on, pray to, praise, and give thanks to God.”* (Small Catechism).

As the name of God is to be kept holy, so also is the Lord’s Day a day which is to be observed as holy unto the Lord. Unlike the other commandments, this one is not a prohibition; rather, it enjoins Israel to positive action. The seventh day is to be marked as a “holy time,” complete devoted to the Lord. Israel rests because God rests: *“For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.”* (20:11).

- “I would like to think that Sabbath observance, like virtue, is its own reward, that it is worth doing not because it makes you a better worker, but because it makes you a better human being in those parts of your life that have nothing to do with work.” – Rabbi Harold Kushner.

As the first three commandments deal with our relationship with God, the final seven are centered on our relationship with other human beings, how we live together as God’s holy people. The first of these relates to our most central relationships: our parents and families. To “honour” our fathers and mothers means treating our parents with appropriate seriousness, *“a command which protected parents from*

being driven out of the home or abused after they could no longer work: 'Those who do violence to their father and chase away their mother are children who cause shame and bring reproach.' [Proverbs 19:26]" (Childs). The motivational clause in this commandment is "so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you," land being one of the central gifts of the covenant. Socioeconomic security and the transmission of the faith from one generation to the next depends on right ordering of relationships between the generations.

- "Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." – Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

All of the remaining commandments also centre on the ordering of relationships within the community of God's people, the manner in which a liberated people are to live together in freedom and security. Human life belongs to God and therefore needs to be respected; while the exact intent of the term "murder" (*rasah*) is subject to debate, the command "*you shall not murder/kill*" is related to Genesis 9:6 in its uncompromising teaching against the taking of another human life:

- "Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind."

As God created human beings male and female and commanded them to "*be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply in it*" (Genesis 9:7), the gift of sexuality is an aspect of God's creation that is both "*enormously wondrous and enormously dangerous*" (Brueggemann). The commandment "*you shall not commit adultery*" teaches us that the wonder of sexuality is available only if it is practiced respectfully and under discipline. The danger is that it is capable of evoking desires that are destructive of persons and communal relations.

The final commandments all deal with differing aspects of one's life that can be taken away and the damage this causes. Living together in peace and security means having one's possessions protected, and so "*you shall not steal*" ensures such mutual protection. One's reputation and good name are of equal value, and protecting persons after having false witness made against them safeguards each person against the destructive power of rumors and false accusations. "Coveting" describes the destructive power of desire that is acted upon publicly, whereby one reaches for that which is not properly one's own. As with all of the commandments that order life among the people, it is a warning against behavior that destroys community.

Our lesson concludes with the people's response to the appearance of God in "*the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking.*" In their fear, they ask Moses to be their intercessor with God, "*or we will die.*" (20:18-19). Moses assures Israel that God will not destroy them, and encourages them to trust God at the foot of Mount Sinai as they had trusted the Lord on the shores of the Red Sea, for God "*has only come to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.*" (20:20).

- "Do not be afraid; stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again! The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still." – 14:13-14.

The influence of the Ten Commandments remains strong both within and outside of the people of Israel. Along with all of the statutes of the Torah, they "*constitute the core of Yahweh's intent and charter for Israel's covenantal existence.*" (Brueggemann). They contain many of the foundation principles of civic law, especially in their prohibitions against murder, theft, perjury, and adultery. For Martin Luther, the Ten Commandments define how we live as a people who "*fear and love God*" and are to be taken seriously by all who seek to live together as God's people in the Church of Jesus Christ:

- “God threatens to punish all who break these commandments. Therefore, we should fear His wrath and not do anything against them. But He promises grace and every blessing to all who keep his commandments. Therefore, we should also love and trust in Him and gladly do what He commands.” – *Small Catechism*.

But above all, the Ten Commandments are about identity – the identity of the God who brought his people out of the bondage of slavery, and the identity of God’s people who have been rescued from the bondage of “sin, death, and the power of the devil” through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They challenge us to consider who we are, what is our relationship with God, and how do we relate to each other as sisters and brothers in Christ.

- “The Ten Commandments are primarily about the identity of God, the character of God’s followers, and our relationships to one another. Our identity, our theology, and our relationships are all intermixed in a set of commandments we may find indispensable but also – if we are honest – increasingly difficult to understand and fully embrace.” – Eric Barreto.

The Ten Commandments are a gift from the God who is the giver of freedom, the one who has freed us so that we may *“belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally”* (*Small Catechism*). God has freed us from all forms of bondage so that we might continue to live as God’s liberated people; this is why Paul teaches us in his letter to the Galatians that *“for freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”* (Galatians 5:1). Far from restricting us from living our lives the way we desire, the Ten Commandments safeguard us from falling back into the slavery of fear, of desire, of greed, of hatred, and of death. They are the gift from the giver of freedom so that we might be guided each day to live as a people who, *“being freed from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”* (Luke 1:74-75).

- “The God we worship is a God who first and foremost is a God who majors in freedom, all sorts of freedom. In whatever ways God’s people seem intent on falling back into multiple kinds of slavery, this Lord is always in the business of searching for ways to grant these would-be slaves a perfect freedom.” – John C. Holbert.

Sabbath elevators didn’t surprise me in my remaining years on Long Island, nor did the sight of Jewish families walking to synagogue and eating only food that was certified kosher. While my faith doesn’t include such practices, I do understand why my Jewish neighbours did not feel oppressed or restricted by the manner in which they lived their daily lives under the guidance of the Torah; for them, it was God’s gift that guided them every day so that they might truly live as a liberated people. For us, the God who frees us from bondage to slavery – both the slavery of physical chains as well as the bondage of sin and death – is the God who is the giver of freedom and invites us every day to live as free people, who seek to follow God’s eternal word which we trust will *“lead us in paths of righteousness of his name’s sake.”* Amen.