

Exodus 19:3-7; 20:1-17 Covenant and Commandments

As the Israelites continue their journey to the Promised Land, God tells them that they will be carried from Egypt to freedom “on eagles’ wings”, but we know that the journey from the banks of the Sea of Reeds to the base of Mount Sinai was anything but smooth sailing. Regardless, God was with the people. They were thirsty; God miraculously provided clean, sweet water. They were hungry; God caused mysterious manna to fall from heaven each day. They were attacked by enemies; God protected them. Now it’s time in their journey to receive guidance on how to live in community: the Ten Commandments. Relationship is at the very heart of God’s gifts of covenants and commands.

God brought Moses and the beloved community to Sinai to propose a dramatic intensification in their relationship. God used classic, covenantal language to solemnize their bond. The book of Exodus is a mixture of very early oral material which has come from different traditions and has been knit together into a single book based on different memories of the same events, all pivotal to their faith and its development. We have four different, individual gospels telling us about Jesus, but in the book of Exodus, the traditions and stories are all mixed and intertwined, making for a difficult and often confusing reading.

Laws were given by a god to people in the ancient world. In this case, the Israelite law was no different than any other law in its day. Law was not simply a means to limit and direct human behaviour so that equity and justice may be experienced by all and peace might prevail: Law always had a theological aspect to it. In many ancient reliefs, a form of sculpture or carving, a high god is seen giving the codes of law to the reigning monarchs. Law was always thought as being of divine origin and was intended to order human society so that it functioned in a way consistent with the divine will and the ordering of the whole cosmos. In other words, law was seen as part of creation itself. Just as there were

'natural' limits and behaviours set within the cosmos itself, so law set these limits within human society. And just as creation was intended to offer life to all, so law was given that people may prosper in this life.

The law becomes an instrument of mutual relationship as the faith of the people responds to the love and grace of God. It is that understanding behind the torah that gives life to its observance. It is a lack of understanding of that torah in that particular sense that leads some Christians to say it is purely 'legalistic' and does not reveal a God of grace, as known by Christians. That could not be further from the truth. These commandments serve to guide the Israelites and us in creating the kind of loving community that God desires.

We need be aware that the commandments were edited and updated by at least three different compilers, according to the conditions of the Israelite people following the Exile in Babylon. This exile happened about five hundred years after the Exodus. Up to the exile, there were no written records: not of the exodus; not Adam and Eve; not Noah nor Abraham and Sara; not Isaac, not Jacob; not Joseph and his brothers ... the stories were preserved strictly through oral tradition, creating inconsistencies and mixed narratives.

As our narrative begins, God introduces Godself, as the one who brought you [singular] out of the house of slavery. God reminded every individual that God had already rescued them so they already had a relationship. The 'Ten Commands' begin with a concern about God. It is only after that, that the concern shifts to matters of human interaction. The first concern is the relationship between God and humanity, and then the relationships within humanity.

Law or Torah in the Old Testament, is always a way to live in the presence of the gracious God who first comes to us in our despair and need. It is also a reminder that living in the presence of this God brings responsibility toward God and toward all God's creation. Law was a way

of helping God's people live such a life. The Torah was not dismissed by Jesus who lived as a faithful Jew. As we heard in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus said: "Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose."

The commandments are at the heart of the Torah, all aimed to prevent a breakdown in relationship between human on the one hand, and between God and the beloved community on the other.. It is easy to get bogged down in rules. But it can be helpful to remember that when God gave the commandments to the Israelites, it was in the context of establishing a consensual covenant that would honour divine and human emotional lives, and protect the newly established relationship between God and God's people.

God's grace happened before any requirements were set out in Exodus. It is expected that in response to God's saving acts, people will WANT to respond and stay in relationship. God identifies self as belonging to the people. "I am the Lord your God." The Hebrew word, Torah is often translated as law which can seem like a negative quality, but Torah is more about teaching and the commandments are positive instruction to enable the people both to stay in relationship with God, and to behave in right ways with each other.

It is God who enables us to see more clearly that the law is a gift and not some deliberate hardship. Now if we all lived by grace treating each other based on our relationship with God, we would not need any laws at all, but, that is simply wishful thinking.

Most modern colonial and post-colonial governments are based on the premise of land ownership. People, generally, and governments specifically, are understood to "own" and "control" the land on which they reside. It is part of the North American Dream for a single family to own a small plot of land on which they can build and maintain a home.

However, in our Scriptures today, God has something else in mind. God tells Moses and the Israelites, whom he has just freed from slavery in Egypt, that they are to be God's "treasured possession". God continues, "The whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation."

When God later delivers them to the Promised Land, God does not give the Israelites land to own, to preside over and do with as they will, but rather land and all that is in it, as a **trust**. They are to be stewards of this great possession that is first and ultimately the possession of God the Creator alone, something quite different from the Doctrine of Discovery.

The story of the Israelites' Exodus and acquisition of the Promised Land can and has been read as a narrative of conquest, and in our post-colonial world, it is important that we acknowledge and resist this misunderstanding. At the same time, threatened as we are by both the domination of people and the domination of natural resources, it is equally important that we also hear the call to resist the narrative of ownership and domination as a whole.

As Christians, what would it mean to truly believe that we own nothing, that everything we have is not only a gift from, but truly still the possession of, God the Creator? To believe that we, too, are such a "treasured possession"? What would it mean to live accordingly?

Exodus reminds us of what we as human beings have in common with the land and all of its resources; we are all both creations and possessions of the eternal God. In light of this, as we recognize and respond to our own needs and desires, making claims on the land as a result, we must also recognize the land as possessing its own distinct claims, dignity, and integrity. Rather than effacing these by subjecting the land to the unrivalled claims of our human mastery, possession, and control, a theology recognizing our status as "treasured possessions" of God in our own right might respond to this trust that God has placed in

us by honouring and upholding the integrity of the land as its inhabitants.

So often we wander through life; we lose ourselves, our destination, our God; Yet God seeks again to call us, to enfold us within a community of fellow travellers, to provide us with a place and a way of living, and to say, “*This is what you were made for.*”

Having been introduced to two covenants, the first with Noah, and then Abraham, we follow the great saga of Israel’s founding myth in the Old Testament, through the Sea of Reeds, through the wilderness to the receiving of the Ten Commandments. This is a point of high drama and significance in the Exodus narrative and indirectly introduces us to the third great covenant between God and Israel, established at Sinai: Israel will be God’s treasured possession, a priestly kingdom and a holy nation, if the people keep their end of the covenant. Here, unlike in the covenants with Noah and with Abraham, a mutual covenant is established rather than a promise from God: Israel must follow God’s commands if they are to remain God’s people.

The Ten Commandments point us back to Israel’s formative narratives, reminding the text’s hearers and readers that they are a part of the story of God’s intention for humanity that began so long ago. The covenant at Sinai is patterned after a suzerainty treaty, in which a suzerain (king or lord), lists the good things that he has done for his vassal, lists stipulations the vassal must obey, and promises reward for that obedience. So God begins by identifying Godself as the one “who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”, displaying like a suzerain, God’s beneficence toward the people.

Theologically, however, this assertion also functions to remind the people of who *they* are: they are precisely the ones whom God delivered. God shared that the divine emotions tend much more to love than wrath. Thousands of generations are blessed for loving God, whereas only four generation are cursed for hating God. God’s love is

much stronger than God's anger.

The God who appeared to Abraham and Sarah is the same God who appears to Moses now, and the people are those who bear Abraham and Sarah's names. The narrative even remembers the creation of the world. The language of "heaven above", "earth beneath", and "water under the earth" recalls the same language in the first creation narrative. The God who separated those waters at the creation, is the only god who is worthy of worship. The commandment to remember the Sabbath overtly refers to the first creation narrative; in resting on the seventh day, the people are in fact doing what God did. In these ways, the story demonstrates that God is the creator and that the people are the created, and that the harmony and order that God established in creation is once again established through God's law in the community of the Israelites.

The Ten Commandments and the books of law that follow, are meant to form Israel as a sacred community, a community rooted in right worship of God – and living in justice and peace with one another. The Israelites are to live as neighbours to one another, the foundation of which is knowing the God to whom they belong.

It's clear that, even though God never announces to Moses where he's being led, Sinai is the destination in this part of the story. The ultimate destination, of course, is Canaan, the land that God promised to Abraham. Sinai has been the place to which God has been leading all along, and not just from the escape from Egypt. The whole journey, from creation forward, has been leading to this place. It is at Sinai that God shows the Israelites the harmonious world in which they're meant to live, and calls them to live in it. It is as if God is saying, "*This* is what you were made for. You were not made to wander, to be afraid, to hunger and thirst, to be lost. You were made to live in this community of justice, in right relationship with your God. Stay true to these commandments, and this is where you will remain."

Of course, we don't stay true, so Sinai serves as a signpost, ever reminding us of the sacred community for which we are made, and calling us back to it. We cannot dismiss the 'Ten Commandments' as no longer relevant to our time and our lives. This 'so-called law,' was given as a gift of grace from a God who from the time of creation sought a relationship with the creatures he created. This law is a blueprint, guiding us in our formation of a relationship with this loving, gracious God. It is there to help us become a sacred community, a community rooted in right worship of God and living in justice and peace with one another and God's most amazing creation. **Amen.**

PENTECOST 18, NOVEMBER 9 PRAYERS
Thanksgiving Sunday, October 9, 2022

God, like the Israelites in the wilderness, we too have known your love, and experienced your care and provision. You invite us to extend that love to the world around us - to care for others as deeply as we care for ourselves. And so, we bring the needs of our world before you now. God, in your unfailing love ... **hear our prayer.**

We thank you for all our blessings, our families and friends, members and friends of this congregation, the freedom to worship together and live as your people. We thank you, God, for everything we delight in - sunlight in autumn days, the beautiful colours found in nature and in art, the rhythms and sounds heard in poetry and music; the marvel of human achievements and dreams and accomplishments reached, the bonds of love in family and friendships to enrich our days; good humour; work well done; the bounty of your loving gifts to nurture, heal, and support our bodies and souls. Most of all we delight in your salvation, the comfort we find in experiencing your steadfast love, and the promise and assurance of having eternal life with You.

God, in your unfailing love ... **hear our prayer.**

Even as we feel blessed, we also remember and hold before you all those who on this day of Thanksgiving are less fortunate. Surround with your loving provision and care the lonely, those who are hungry, homeless, impoverished in body or spirit, persecuted, mourning, or experiencing physical, mental, and emotional challenges in their lives.

God, in your unfailing love ... **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who live surrounded by violence - whether from war or political unrest, crime or domestic abuse. We pray for those who have been victims of violent crime, and for those whose loved ones have been injured or murdered or are still missing. We pray for the people of Haiti whose daily lives are impacted by economic hardship, violence and crime brought on by continued political unrest. Especially we pray for the children, and staff in the orphanage run by Sister Gladys in Port au Prince, who daily fear kidnappings, food shortages, and crimes. Protect them from harm, and provide for their daily needs.

God, in your unfailing love ... **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who find themselves involved in crime, whether by choice or by coercion, those caught up into gangs, human trafficking, or prostitution, those who have turned to crime to pay for their addictions or out of a sense of desperation; for those who are imprisoned. God, in your unfailing love ... **hear our prayer.**

We pray for our homes and families where conflict and turmoil are prevalent; for parents stressed from juggling the responsibilities of work and family, for husbands and wives and partners whose relationships and marriages are breaking down, for children chafing under parental authority or expectations; for those living away or apart from the support of family or friends; for individuals caught in adultery and adulterous thoughts; for those who turn to substance abuse or self-harm to cope with past traumas. God, in your unfailing love ... **hear our prayer.**

We grieve that throughout the world the endless fight for dominance and power continues arising from fear or distrust of those who are “different from us’ whether in faith traditions, culture, gender identity, sexual orientation or physical appearance. We confess that we make our image of you far too small and in our likeness. We pray for peace and reconciliation and a celebration of the different facets you saw fit to create as images of yourself. Help us to value the strength and beauty found in diversity, and to behold you in the eyes of the stranger. God, in your unfailing love ... **hear our prayer.**

Merciful God, give us strength and courage to maintain our hope in the midst of all the turmoil and uncertainty that fills our world. Empower and equip us to be engaged in your work of creating a better world for all. Help us to keep your commandments, to live in faithful obedience to your will. Guard our hearts and minds from all that might distract us from living out our commitment to you. Help us to find our true worth in knowing you more fully and serving you more faithfully. In the name of Jesus the Christ, our Cornerstone, **Amen.**