



“Who and Whose We Are”
Scripture – Exodus 20:1-4, 7-20
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, October 4, 2020

Every trip my senior high youth group took together began the same way. *Not* with families gathering in the church parking lot at — what we teenagers thought was — an ungodly hour; *not* with us vying for the best seat in the 15-passenger van while our parents crammed duffel bags into the inadequate cargo space behind the last bench. That all came later.

The beginning actually came a few weeks earlier, when our youth pastor sat us down to write a covenant that would undergird the upcoming conference or mission trip. Ed would pull out a flip chart and a sharpie and write across the top of the page: “Do nothing to destroy or create a life.” Every youth group covenant started this way; it covered a lot of bases. Then Ed would turn to the group, inviting us to articulate ground-rules to govern our life together: “Respect one another,” we’d say. “Participate fully; listen with open ears and an open heart; be on time; strive to share God’s love.”

We teenagers didn’t think much of this exercise at the time; for us it was routine, not ritual. But, looking back, I see that there was something formative happening. As we spoke aloud our intentions for how we would treat one another, we were developing a shared purpose, a shared identity. We were engaged in the sacred work of forming community. Creating a covenant was a way of reminding each other and ourselves who and whose we are.

This scene from Exodus — complete with thunder and lightning and a smoking mountain — is far more dramatic than that of a senior high youth group sitting around a flip chart in the church Fellowship Hall. The words God utters carry far more weight than those we penned in sharpie. But the intent of these covenants is, more-or-less, the same: to remind the people who and whose they are.

We all know the 10 Commandments. I don’t mean we can recite them from memory, but the “10 words” God utters here have long shaped our common life. We’ve seen them posted in spaces both sacred and secular — from sanctuaries to courthouses to public schools — as if to strike the fear of God into anyone who steps out-of-line. Many of us have heard them plucked from the pages of Scripture in an effort to scold a poor choice of word or action, just as my proper, southern grandmother used to do whenever she overheard me utter, ‘O my God’: “Sudie Elisabeth,” she would say, “I can’t believe you would take the Lord’s name in vain.”

I wonder how many of us hear the 10 Commandments this way — as if they were intended to be a script for proper, southern grandmothers. Or as a rebuke to defiant words thrown out in the heat of a family argument. Or as the voice of our conscience when we want to take a Sunday off and sleep in. If that’s the case, it’s no wonder so many of us dismiss them as an outdated rulebook and move on, in search of good news somewhere else in the witness of Scripture.

But is that really their purpose?

When God utters these words before the whole congregation of Israel, the people are weary and worn; they are worried about their future, they are wondering if they would have fared better in Egypt. A lot has happened in the first 19 chapters of Exodus. After hearing the cries of the enslaved Hebrews, the Lord appears to Moses from a burning bush and says: “I have come down to deliver [my people Israel] from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land.”

And deliver them God does. With displays of power and might, God plagues the hard-hearted Pharaoh with locusts and hail and days of darkness, until — finally — the tyrant relents and releases the Hebrew slaves. And then — when Pharaoh changes his mind and sends chariots to pursue them — the Lord creates a way out of no way. The God of Israel drives back the Red Sea waters and leads the children of Israel from bondage to freedom.

But their journey doesn't end there. The Hebrew people must forge ahead, and forge a new identity. Released from Pharaoh's clutches, they have gained their freedom. But they have lost their sense of who and whose they are.

So the Lord descends upon Mt. Sinai to tell these wilderness-wandering tribes what it means to be the people of God: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,” the Almighty begins. And from this declaration flows every instruction the Lord utters: You shall have no other gods. You shall not make any idols. You shall not make wrongful use of my name. Remember the sabbath, and keep it holy ...

To our ears they may sound like rigid rules invoked to correct rebellious behavior, but to the long-suffering people who first heard them, they were a form of release. For, in creating covenant, God calls upon the Hebrew people to re-orient their common life: to turn away from the Pharaoh who enslaves toward the God who liberates; away from lives abused by systems of death toward lives in service to the source — and way — of life.

Take the first four commandments — the ones that speak specifically to the relationship between God and God's people. The covenant community is to worship and serve only God, the one who brought them out of the land of Egypt. In other words, they are *not* to bow before Pharaoh; they are *not* to serve an empire that strips them of dignity; they are *not* to subject themselves to powers and principalities that demand bondage and exploitation. Instead, they *are* to bow before the Lord who made heaven and earth, and then took time to rest; they *are* to serve God's vision for creation, in which all people and all animals may rest from their labors. Yes, they are to worship and serve God, and God *alone*.

After this, the commandments that govern communal relationship progress naturally. For when the people orient their common life toward the God who brought them out of the house of slavery, their character reflects God's character; their actions mirror God's actions. Love of God flows seamlessly into love of neighbor.

With these commandments God establishes the ground-rules for life within covenant community. *I have redeemed you*, God reminds them. *I have delivered you from bondage to freedom, from death to life. You are a priestly kingdom, a holy nation — a people set apart in your love for God and neighbor.* So God begins anew the sacred work of forming community — of fashioning a people of promise to inhabit a land of promise, marked by abundance and wholeness for all.

In short, with these commandments, God teaches the people who and whose they are.

God is still engaged in the sacred work of forming community — through the Word read and proclaimed, through bread broken and wine poured out, through water splashing in the font ... Every time we baptize children young and old, we rejoice that the same God who delivered Israel through the waters of the Sea, welcomes all who pass through the baptismal waters into the covenant community.

“Child of God, Child of the Covenant — You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

The words we offer the newly baptized are different from those God offers the people from Mt. Sinai. But the assurance is the same: we belong to God — the one who brought our ancestors out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. We are called to live as a priestly kingdom, a holy nation — a people set apart. Whenever we gather at the font, we are reminded who and whose we are.

Yes, God claims us as children of the covenant and sets us apart for holy work. Like our ancestors in the faith, we are called to orient our common life toward the one, true God — the One who, long ago, heard the cries of an oppressed people and led them out of bondage.

The house of slavery looks different in our time. But, still, people the world over cry out for release — from bondage to anxiety or despair, from unjust systems that abuse and exploit, from conditions that strip human beings of dignity and hope. And the wilderness we are wandering seems both perilous because of a disease we don’t fully understand and desolate due to the crisis of trust in our common life.

And for such a time as this, God sets apart a priestly kingdom, a holy nation — a community called to reflect God’s character, to mirror God’s actions. We are faithful to this calling when we, too, hear the cries of the oppressed and respond with liberating love.

We are faithful to this calling when we listen to the voices of those long silenced, and raise our own voices to demand liberty and justice for all. We are faithful to this calling when we respond to the needs of those in bondage to scarcity — just as we have done through donations of food kits and egg-laying chickens for our Guatemalan sisters, and by making thousands of sandwiches for our friends at Emmanuel Dining Room. We are faithful to this calling when we come alongside those longing for release from the clutches of desperation, and offer a listening ear, a word of comfort, a helping hand ... We are faithful to this calling when we give ourselves in service to the source — and way — of life.

This is who we are because of whose we are — the God who leads from bondage to freedom, from death to life. May our common life reflect God’s intention for us, for all the world.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

God of truth and wisdom, you have created us to enjoy life and to savor its blessings, this day we give thanks for the solid foundation and sound guidance we discover in your Ten Commandments. You call on us to have *no other gods before you*. May we take account of the gods in our lives – wealth, power, fame, and whatever summons our allegiance more than you – and may we recommit to seeking YOU and YOUR WAY above all others.

You instruct us not to create any graven images and not to bow down to them. Lord, in these divisive times in which we live, it seems that many have made political parties or personalities our graven images. May we be mindful of the failings of human beings, the lack of charity toward those with different opinions, rationales that

prop up injustice, and narrow visions that seek the good of the few rather than the common good. May we know that if we worship you, we will strive for justice and mercy above selfish interest.

You command us not to take your name in vain. We confess that many invoke your name to sanctify their own agendas. May we worship you in thought, word, and deed, and may we seek to live the holy lives you summon us to live.

You direct us to remember the Sabbath and to keep it holy. May we be mindful of the need not only to work, but also to rest and to reflect on your wisdom.

You beckon us to honor our parents. Lord, so much of our learning and so many of our habits are formed in our homes. May we respect and learn to appreciate all that our parents have done for us and may we be forgiven for the times we failed to honor them. And if we are parents, may we live in ways that model a life of faith and create a truly loving environment.

You call on us not to kill. We confess that we often create a culture of death, division, and destruction. May we remember that you have created all people in your image and that it is our duty to create a culture that respects life and seeks to reconcile what is broken.

You charge us not to commit adultery. May all who are married remain faithful to their vows, may they be patient and forgiving, and may they know the joy of putting the needs of their spouse above their own.

You warn us of the sin of stealing. May we not take from others what is rightfully theirs – including their dignity and self-respect.

You forbid lying. Many deny the truth when it does not fit their narrative, and make up their own story and call it truth. May we remember that deception and the twisting of truth corrodes our character.

You command us not to covet. Too often we envy what belongs to others. May we know the joy that comes with a content heart and a serene soul.

Living Lord, we are grateful for these ancient, yet always relevant commandments, because they show us the way to a life that is rich, joyful, and fulfilling.

And now we pray the prayer your son taught us to pray together, saying,

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.