

“Remember the Covenant”

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Exodus 19:16-20; 20:1-17 (NRSVUE)

¹⁶On 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. ¹⁷Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸Now all of 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. ¹⁹As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder. ²⁰When the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the Lord summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

20 Then God spoke all these words,

²“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴“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. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷“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.

⁸“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹²“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

¹³“You shall not murder.

¹⁴“You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵“You shall not steal.

¹⁶“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, male or female slave, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

Moses has brought the people out of captivity, a story that will become the formative narrative of the people from every generation through the current one. God has rescued them from their enemies. God has provided water for them in the desert and food where there were no crops or livestock or game. God will continue to lead them and provide for them all the way to the Promised Land.

But who are they? The Israelites have a clear ethnic identity, descended from the family of Joseph many generations before. They have a story of shared trauma, as slaves in Egypt. They have a promised future, delivered miraculously from captivity and bound for the Promised Land. But what holds them together? How will they live? What do they believe? They can’t hold off until they reach their destination to figure out who they are. The stakes are too high. Before they inherit the land promised to their forebears, they need to establish an identity.

In the opening verses of chapter 19, the passage that immediately precedes our lesson for today, God summons Moses. God reminds him of all that has already taken place. Then God offers a covenant to Moses and the people. “If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples...you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”

This wasn't the first covenant God had made. After the Great Flood, God made a covenant with Noah never again to allow such devastation on the face of the earth. God made a covenant with Abraham to make a great nation out of his descendants, and that through him the whole world would be blessed. In many ways, the covenant God offered the Israelites was a fulfillment of earlier covenants – they would become the people God had promised to bring forth long ago.

Moses returns from the mountain and proclaims the message God gave to him. The people hear and rejoice. “Everything the LORD has spoken, we will do.”

So God draws near to them. Today, we have a different understanding of God's presence, shaped by our Protestant understanding that God is already present all around us. We believe that God is as close as our very breath, and nothing is required to make that so. But for an ancient people still uncertain about who they were and this Yahweh who led them into the wilderness, the idea of being close to God was completely foreign. The word we use for what happened next is a *theophany*, God's self-revelation to humankind, like Moses before the burning bush or Elijah and the still, small voice. The theophany experienced by the Israelites was cataclysmic – a display of supernatural force – and, frankly, rather terrifying. Thunder and lightning, an earthquake, a sound like trumpets blaring, smoke and fire descending on the mountain. Moses went in there, while the people waited eagerly at the foot of the mountain.

It wasn't that the people didn't believe God existed. They witnessed miracles. They crossed the Red Sea. They were guided by a cloud during the day and a pillar of fire by night. But they did not yet have a relationship with God. They knew what God could *do*, but they didn't really *know* God. God wanted to be known, but not taken for granted. God wanted to be intimately involved in the lives of the people, yet also “other” enough to be respected and worshiped. What was needed was a way to understand one another, rules of engagement, guidelines for how this relationship would work. The covenant needed definition.

Covenants are not contracts. Contracts are legally binding agreements enforceable through outcomes and penalties. Covenants are not laws, though they may include laws. A covenant is a sacred promise that binds a relationship. The covenant God made with the people at Sinai was relatively simple: *You will be my people, and I will be your God*. The complexity comes in the *How* of the covenant. Hence, God gives Moses the Ten Commandments.

Let's be clear: these are ten *commandments*, not “ten suggestions” or “ten good ideas.” The commandments are not optional. They are not simple, though they might sound simple enough to us today. Nor are they innocuous. The Ten Commandments, central to the covenant between God and the people, require submission to a complete reorientation of life and fidelity to the One who gives and sustains life.

The first commandment sets the stage for this radical reorientation. *You shall have no other gods before me*. The people are reminded that *Yahweh* is their God, the one who led them out of Egypt and out of the house of slavery, because they must first remember that God is responsible for their very existence. *They are* because *God is*. And whoever or whatever they

worshiped in Egypt, whoever or whatever is worshiped by the people they will encounter, or whatever they are tempted to worship now and in the years to come, they must remain faithful to the one, true God.

This might sound rather obvious to us today. Not many of us are likely to erect a shrine to Osiris or put up a sacred pole to Baal, to construct a temple to the figures of Greek or Roman mythology or offer sacrifices in pagan rituals. Either through religion or culture or choice, we accept that there is only one God, and we wouldn't dream of worshiping any other. Or would we? Oh, we may not use the name, image, and likeness, but there are other "gods" that compete for our loyalty. We seek security from Mars, the bringer of war. We seek joy from Bacchus, the model of excess and pleasure. We seek love from Eros and confuse love with lust and possession. We seek wisdom from Athena and put our faith in learning and human knowledge. Friends, we too must guard ourselves against divided loyalties. The ancient Israelites are not the only ones who needed a radical reorientation of life.

The promises required in the covenant are about our relationship with God, but also our relationships with one another. God's covenant is a *collective* covenant, a sacred promise made not just with the individuals who comprise the Israelite community, but with the entire community itself, a critical component too often overlooked – both in ancient and modern times. We are bound to God and to one another.

You know the commandments, even if you can't name them in order: *No other gods. No graven images. Do not use God's name wrongfully. Keep the Sabbath. Honor your parents. Don't murder. Don't commit adultery. Don't steal. Don't lie. Don't long for what other people have.* The first four commandments are about God, the remaining six about other people. They make specific what is referred to more generally elsewhere. In Deuteronomy: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.* In Leviticus: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* From Jesus in the Gospels: the greatest commandments are to *love God and love your neighbor.* That idea wasn't original to Jesus. It was baked in from the beginning.

The Ten Commandments are inextricably linked to the covenant. They are the basic conditions through which the people will express their fidelity to God. They are important, because they declare what the people believe and they establish the rules by which they will live. As such, they define the relationship of the people to God. Most importantly, they establish the identity of a people set apart to serve and honor God.

The commandments still form identity for God's people today. Like the ancient Israelites, we declare what we believe and how we will live by following the Ten Commandments. There are many other things we do and believe about God and our relationship to God, but all of them are built upon this foundation.

Yet the Ten Commandments can also become a kind of idol in and of themselves. For decades, we have debated about where and how the Ten Commandments should be displayed. Should they be etched in the walls of the courthouse? Should they be displayed in the public square? Should classrooms be required to post the commandments...and to teach them? Louisiana, Arkansas, and Texas have all passed laws requiring every public school classroom to prominently display the Ten Commandments. But lost in arguments about multiculturalism, freedom of religion, and the establishment clause is the *purpose* of the commandments to begin with. *It is more important to obey the Ten Commandments than to impose them on others.* Perhaps if those of us who consider them authoritative lived more faithfully, others would be drawn to the faith rather than feel coerced into it.

Love God, love neighbor. It's really quite simple. But it's not always easy. As we continue our wilderness journey, let's reflect on God's covenant and what it means for us. But more than that, let us commit ourselves to more faithful living – not when we reach our destination, but in the midst of the journey. Amen.



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