

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Fourth Presbyterian Church  
3rd Sunday in Lent  
March 4, 2018

**Law and Order**

Exodus 20:1-17; Mark 12:28-31

**Prayer for Illumination:**

*When I was a student at Union Seminary, the professors opened each class with prayer.*

*Our Prayer for Illumination today*

*is a prayer offered by Sib Towner, my OT professor,*

*to open his class on the Torah.*

*Let us pray:*

O God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob —

for generations now,

our ancestors in the faith have searched for your word

in the words of the Torah:

Some squinting in the dim light of flickering lamps in the Judean caves;

Some standing in the cold of stone monasteries before books chained to their desks;

Some peering through thick lenses as they rocked and read before their ghetto shops;

Some in furtive glances at the book hidden above the bunk at Auschwitz.

O God, it is our turn now. Keep us faithful, we pray, to so great a heritage.

In the name of our Rabbi and Friend,

Jesus of Nazareth.

Amen.

**Before reading:**

Today we continue our Lenten readings from the Old Testament covenant passages.

On the First Sunday of Lent, we read in Genesis 11

of God's covenant with Noah to sustain, and not to destroy,

the creation and all living things after the Great Flood.

Last Sunday, Leslie read from Genesis 17

of God's covenant with Abram and Sarai

promising to give them a child, and countless descendants,

to include kings and kingdoms, and giving them new names in the process.

Today we turn to Exodus chapter 20,

to the first few verses of a lengthy covenant passage

known as the Sinai pericope

that stretches across the whole book of Leviticus

and into the book of Numbers, to chapter 10.

At the beginning of this large portion of the Torah

stands the Decalogue in all its majesty:

the Decalogue, literally, the "Ten Words" or "Ten Teachings"

given to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

Let us listen now to God's *Ten Words* to them them,

and to us today...

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As with all the covenant passages in the Old Testament,  
these *Ten Words* of God are about God's faithfulness and human obedience.

The question at stake is always  
whether or not the human response will be as faithful as God's gracious initiative.

Walter Brueggemann has written that  
"these commands might be taken not as a series of rules,  
but as a proclamation in God's own mouth  
of who God is  
and how God shall be 'practiced'  
by this community of liberated slaves."<sup>1</sup>

In recent decades  
there have been battles in some southern states  
over whether these Ten Commandments should be posted in the county courthouse,  
given the separation of church and state.

In some places, citizens in favor of leaving them there  
would post small signs in their front yards,  
with pictures of two stone tablets printed in blue ink on a white plastic boards,  
with five commandments on each tablet.

Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor recalls occasionally driving by these yards on Sundays  
to find the owners mowing their grass around the signs  
on the Sabbath.

She suggests that  
"Public defense of the Ten Teachings is no substitute for practicing them,"  
and that  
"the best plan may be to turn the signs around (or at least print them on both sides),  
so that those who commend God's direction to others  
remember to follow the directions themselves."<sup>2</sup>

But we'll leave aside the question of the separation of church and state for another day,  
since at the moment  
we are gathered here to proclaim our primary citizenship  
as those who belong of God's covenant people.

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There is an old story about a Protestant minister and a Jewish rabbi who were friends.  
When the two friends part, the minister always says to the rabbi,  
"Keep the faith!"  
To this the rabbi always responds,  
"Keep the commandments!"<sup>3</sup>  
Of course, with these ten commandments appearing  
at the beginning of this long covenant passage  
that stretches across Exodus-Leviticus-Numbers,  
we come to understand that keeping the faith means keeping the commandments  
and vice versa.

If our faith tells us that the universe has been spoken into being  
by the powerful Word of the Creator —  
a Word that separated and distinguished one thing from another,  
and made boundary lines  
and named things according to their kind,  
then we might expect that for this creation to flourish  
there would be some order to be adhered to,  
some care to be taken in one part of this creation  
relating to the other parts,  
and some wisdom to be learned  
about how the whole enterprise works.

That reality of distinction and order is made explicit in the second chapter of Genesis,  
when God places two trees in the garden  
and permits the fruit of the one to be eaten,  
while forbidding the fruit of the other;  
In that passage, God the Creator introduces a moral order  
to govern the human creatures.

These Ten Teachings clarify that moral order.

They are are “categorical law,  
setting forward the principles essential for the viability of a [human] community—  
something like our constitutional law.”

They are very different in form  
from the common law or case law” found after them in Exodus,  
“in which the guidance offered grows out of real-life situations,  
replete with exceptions and other qualifications.

The Decalogue comes to us almost as a kind of legal credo,  
fundamental to what individual Israelites understood was expected of them  
as people of God.”<sup>4</sup>

This credo holds two things together:

the people’s relationship with God,  
and the people’s relationships with one another:  
the first table of the law  
aims at establishing a right relationship with God.  
(For the record,  
there only 4 commands on the first table.)

And on the second table,  
the other 6 commands regulate relationships between people.

All ten teachings are addressed to the individual Israelite  
in the second person singular, “You” —  
though they are intended to regulate community life.

So the well-being of the individual is grounded  
in how the individual relates to God,  
showing ultimate loyalty and reverence to the one God;  
and how the individual relates to God is inextricably linked  
to how he or she relates to others:

One’s elders are to be heeded and cared for and heeded,  
thus honoring of father and mother is commanded.

The sanctity of life is to be respected,  
thus murder is prohibited.  
Family integrity and cohesion and care for children is paramount,  
thus adultery is forbidden.  
Private property is to be respected,  
thus stealing is a crime.  
There must be a reliable system of justice,  
so lying under oath (and by extension, lying anytime) is a major offense.  
And all such order is eroded when the private, inner, moral life is unchecked,  
so coveting your neighbors house or spouse,  
is to be avoided — since thoughts so often bear fruit in action.

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In the opening lines of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin writes:  
“Nearly all the wisdom we possess,  
that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts:  
the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”

The Ten Commandments give us this knowledge  
showing us who God is and who we are meant to be,  
if we are to live our lives in God’s image.

Human life flourishes when lived out in a context of law and order.  
Not the brutal “law and order” of a repressive regime of arbitrary enforcement,  
nor in vindictive punishments doled out to instill fear in the vulnerable.  
But law in the sense of wisdom and an appreciation for natural consequences,  
and order in the sense of God’s perfect balance  
and God’s life-giving way.

**Then our obedience becomes more than just doleful duty,  
but an expression of love for God and love for all God’s children,  
and a joyful embrace of the good life God intends.**

When we see that we have been given these commandments  
by a God who loves us,  
then we are able to respond with joyful obedience.

Jesus understands this,  
so he summarizes all of these Old Testament laws  
as the love of God and love of the neighbor.

When we believe that the fundamental truth of life on this earth  
is that God has blessed us,  
and wants to bless us even more,  
then we will want to respond to that blessing by blessing God in return,  
and opening ourselves to even more blessing  
through acts of faithful obedience.

And while there are necessary consequences of breaking God’s law,  
there is also amazing divine mercy and forbearance revealed here:

Yes,

*God punishes the children for the iniquity of the parents,  
even to the third and fourth generation of those who reject God.*

But,

*God shows steadfast love to the thousandth generation  
of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

That is to say,

“God’s ‘steadfast love’ far exceeds God’s wrath.”<sup>5</sup>  
God’s faithfulness will always outlast our disobedience.

So we learn from both the Protestant Minister and the Jewish Rabbi,  
Keep the faith  
*and* keep the commandments.  
To do the one is to do the other.

Or in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,  
“The one who believes is obedient,  
and the one who is obedient believes.”

Keep the faith by keeping the commandments.

And when you fail at keeping the commandments,

which we all will,

**keep the faith anyway,**

and know that God’s faithfulness

will never fail you,

for God is love,

**and love never fails.**

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, The Book of “Exodus” in *The New Interpreters Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 1:841

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) 77.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, *Feasting*, 77.

<sup>4</sup> W. Sibley Towner, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) 75

<sup>5</sup> Towner, *Feasting*, 77