

No Other Gods *God's Gift of Ten Words 1*

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February 18, 2024

Exodus 20:1-7

²I 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. ⁴You 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 worship 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. ⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Mark 1:9-15

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” ¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Back in the fall, during a week not unlike this past week, a friend asked me a question I have not been able to get out of my mind. I remember it was near the end of October, because it was just after the mass shooting in Lewiston, Maine, where 18 people were killed and another 13 injured. The Hamas attack earlier that month in Israel had exploded into the full blown war in Gaza, and this was before we knew that by now nearly thirty thousand people would be killed. Washington, D.C., was in an uproar about something – I don't even remember what, but the question came my way with the urgent exasperation many of us feel these days about unbearable violence at home and abroad, about political rancor and all manner of deceptions claiming to be truth. My cell phone rang. With no preface whatsoever the voice on the far end simply asked: Is there any measure of morality anymore?

Is there any measure of morality anymore? The season of Lent is our annual invitation to follow in the footsteps of Jesus as he makes his way toward the cross. For us, it is a spiritual journey, no doubt, but it also calls for us to consider the ethics of Christian discipleship as we seek to follow him. Especially as we look around at the pervasive issues of violence, deceit, and immorality. How does a follower of Jesus live within a pluralistic society? How does a follower of Jesus live a moral life in a culture of moral relativism?

One Christian scholar gives answer to these questions by describing the journey of faith as a life with a firm center and soft edges. The firm center is holding fast to that which is true, and above all God's truth. Soft edges mean hospitality and kindness, especially toward those who may not share our thoughts, our opinions, our beliefs. Each year we make our Lenten journey with the prayer that Jesus' humanity might make us more fully human in the way God intends. This Lenten season, we are gathering around what Jesus would have considered part of that *firm center*, the essential law of God that enabled his *soft edges of* compassion, mercy and grace.

Among the truths about God, at that firm center are the Ten Commandments; Jewish scholars, the Ten Words, because the text itself does not use the word *commandment*. Decalogue only means Ten Words. These ancient rules for human flourishing were first made known to the people of ancient Israel by God speaking through Moses. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, they have been pillars for human community ever since. We can imagine that during his wilderness temptation while Jesus was contending with wild beasts and being comforted by angels, these Ten Words from the God of Mount Sinai were guideposts that helped him through. He will later summarize them as the greatest of all commandments – love of God and love of neighbor; so our focus on them seems a worthy way to make our Lenten journey toward Jerusalem in a time when we wonder, Is there any measure of morality anymore?

As we begin this journey, I feel called to say up front that when the Ten Commandments get tangled up with local politics, as often happens these days, they get cut off from their deep religious roots. Once again just now, this time in Oklahoma, there is a hot debate about the public display of the commandments at the state capital. There had previously been A six thousand pound Monument of the Ten Commandments there that's 600 pounds a piece! It was removed some years ago when the state Supreme Court deemed it unconstitutional. Today there are laws before the Oklahoma legislature to recreate the monument as well as place the commandments in every public school. Now, there may be appropriate places to display influential legal codes, like the bas-reliefs in the U.S. Supreme Court, where these Ten are displayed alongside other legal codes from history. But these words from the Book of Exodus, expounded upon in Leviticus, and later repeated in Deuteronomy, endorse the particular religious tradition of Judaism and Christianity. As we just heard in the reading of the first three, they claim allegiance to the Liberating God of Ancient Israel, they forbid the worship of other gods and they forbid misusing the name of God.

So whenever a local community gets caught up in debates about public displays of the Ten Commandments, something profound goes missing in these kinds of culture wars.

In the words of Professor Tom Long, “In popular religious consciousness, the Ten Commandments have somehow become burdens, weights and heavy obligations. For many, the commandments are encumbrances placed on personal behavior. Most people cannot name all ten, but they are persuaded that at the center of each one is a finger-wagging, *thou shall not*. For others, the commandments are heavy yokes to be publicly placed on the necks of a rebellious society...”

Understanding of the Decalogue as a set of burdens overlooks something essential,” Long writes, “namely that they are prefaced not by an order – Here are ten rules; obey them! But instead by a breathtaking announcement of freedom. *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery....* Then Tom Long concludes with this: “These words begin with the good news of what the liberating God has done and then describe the shape of the freedom that results. If we want to symbolize the presence of the Ten Commandments among us, we would do well to hold a dance. The good news of the God who set people free is the music; the commandments are the dance steps of those who hear it playing. They are not weights, but wings that enable our hearts to catch the wind of God’s Spirit and to soar.”¹

My friends, we are heirs to this Judeo-Christian heritage, who hear and attend to these Words primarily as God’s gift of freedom. They are not intended to be a signpost for humanity in general, but to be written upon the heart of a particular people who worship the one, true Living God, and in so doing, become a blessing for all of humankind, no matter faith or creed. Our biblical, theological heritage reminds us that once, we were slaves in Egypt, and we were rescued and given new life. The accompanying gift of that freedom was this set of guidelines for how to celebrate human flourishing in community with one another.

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Living by the Word*, Christian Century, 3/7/2006.

Now, here is a key thing to remember as we consider them in our contemporary context. In this moment of continuing racial reckoning in our country, it's important that privileged white folks like myself never equate our biblical history with the torturous hardship of American slavery. However, it is our calling to understand who God is and who we are in relationship to God. And the formative, biblical revelation of that relationship was when God freed our forebears in faith from the bondage of slavery and created a community to spread God's peace and wholeness and prosperity to the ends of the earth.

That's why these commandments are not a six-thousand-pound immovable weight to be erected in the center of a pluralistic society. They were, after all, originally placed inside the Ark of the covenant so that they could travel with the people wherever they went. They are actually travel companions which represent the lightness of being we enjoy as free children of a Liberating God.

Some years ago, I retreated with some pastors to Sapelo Island, one of the barrier islands off the coast of Georgia. We stayed in a rustic tabby cottage owned by the descendants of slaves who once worked the land. While we were there, I read a remarkable book by William McFeely called *Sapelo's People: A Long Walk to Freedom*. McFeely was a Pulitzer-prize winning historian who helped found the Black Studies department at Yale University. He wrote notable biographies of Ulysses S. Grant, Frederick Douglas and the artist Thomas Eakins.

His book, *Sapelo's People*, describes how the slaves from coastal Georgia became Civil War refugees, and then returned to the island as free people. McFeely wrote of their return saying, as freed people, "by working the island's land, by laughing, weeping, praying on it, being born and dying on it, the former slaves traded possessors and became the island's and the land became theirs... These freed people now bore the joyous burden of raising up community with and for one another."²

² William McFeely, *Sapelo's People: The Long Walk to Freedom*, p. 94

Under today's looming question, Is there any measure of morality anymore? This is the work to which we are called by this biblical, formative gift of freedom which reminds us we need no other gods. We are free to build human community with and for one another. Moses came down the mountain with Ten Words intended to define the relationship between this God and this particular people. He carried this message: Because the Lord is the God of Liberation, you are free from the need of any other gods; free from the tyranny of lifeless idols; you are free to rest on the seventh day; free from murder and stealing as ways to establish yourself as a covenant community. All because *the LORD your God, brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*

In the coming weeks we are going to consider the moral implications of the Ten Commandments, and we will return to these first three – no other gods, no idols, and no vain, empty, careless use of God's holy name because all of the others are derivative of these. But today, we begin at this firm center – our humanity, our worshipping community, is born of God's gift of freedom. Our authentic life is firmly centered in these ten words. Then they allow us to live with soft edges –with compassion, mercy, grace, peace, and with a measure of morality.

AMEN.