

Lent 4A: Exodus 19:2-8, 20:1-17
Church of the Good Shepherd
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During the last election, a small storm was whipped up in the media as a result of a handful (really, only two or three) Republican candidates who came out in support of what has been dubbed “Christian nationalism.” This is the view that sees the United States as a specifically Christian country, as a new promised land founded so Christians could create a society that would be an example for the rest of the world. Such a view was shocking to many in the media, for it flew in the face of the popular view of the country as a multifaith, multi-ethnic “liberal democracy.” And yet, horrifying though it was to many, the view of these “Christian nationalists” is hardly novel. In fact, it was the belief of most Americans from the country’s founding in 1787 until well after World War II. It’s true that the US is not defined as “Christian” in the Constitution, nor was it “Christian” in character, but it was nevertheless “Christian” in custom, in aspiration. The country was held by many to be a “shining city upon a hill,” and people championed the US as a “Christian nation” over against “godless communism.” Such a view lives on today in a minority of politicians, but also in the calls for a return of prayer in school and for posting the Ten Commandments in courtrooms.

It's this last effort, promoting the Ten Commandments, that shows how mistaken, well-meaning but mistaken, Christian nationalism is. By that I don't mean that it's wrong in light of the First Amendment, or in light of the religious diversity of the country, but rather it's wrong in light of Scripture. It's a perfect example, you see, of the error we were warned about in seminary, namely, that “A *text* without a *context* is a *pretext*.” Posting the Ten Commandments in a courtroom or classroom wrenches these words from their context in the story of Israel in order to make them into something they're not, into rules intended for everyone.

To see what I mean, we have to go back several chapters in the book of Exodus, long before God gives the law on Mount Sinai. Abraham's descendants, the Israelites, were enslaved in Egypt. God hears their pleas and remembers his covenant, his promise to Abraham and acts to deliver them from slavery, instructing Moses to confront Pharaoh and tell him to “Let my people go.” Pharaoh resists, God sends some plagues, Pharaoh relents, and Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt through the Red Sea into the desert. There in the wilderness, they are faced with adversity and have to trust God—The Israelites grumble about food, so God sends manna and quail. They run out of water, so God provides water from a rock. They are attacked by a local tribe but God grants the Israelites victory. Each time they face a challenge, God provides for them. Until finally they arrive at Mount Sinai and Moses goes up to talk with God.

Which brings us to our first reading this morning, where God says to Moses on the mountain, “*Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’*”

That's the context of the commandments—God choosing Israel out of all the nations to be his people, not because they were inherently better than other peoples, but because God made a covenant with their ancestor Abraham, and because of that, God delivered them with a mighty hand and now holds them as a treasure, intended for a special role, to be “a kingdom of priests, a holy nation,” serving and worshipping the Lord. Indeed, throughout the tug-of-war between Moses and Pharaoh, God demands that Pharaoh release God's people, not just that would be free but so that they could be free to worship him.

And now that the Israelites are finally free, how are they to worship? God answers with the Ten Commandments “Don't have any idols,” God answers. “Honor your parents.” “Don't steal.” “Don't have sex with someone you're not married to.”

Hearing that, Moses surely thinks, *This doesn't sound like any worship service I've ever attended.* And indeed it's not. We take for granted that God would have something to say about how we behave, but that is not what the ancients believed about their gods. Their gods frankly didn't care about how their devotees lived their lives, so long as they made the proper sacrifices. “Do whatever you want, just make sure you sacrifice a bull or sheep in my name. Then maybe, just maybe I'll do what you ask.”

That was how other gods operated. But not the God of the Israelites. As the Israelites were now learning, to worship this God meant sacrifice, yes, but not just of bulls and rams but also their own lives, that is, their actions, their behavior. They were to “sacrifice” those ways of life that are bad for them, the ways they learned in Egypt, the ways that would undermine their burgeoning society, and get in the way of their calling. Israel is to be special, God says, set apart from the other peoples, to be a “model nation,” to show the world what it looks like when God has his way with us, when we are freed from our destructive ways.

What this means is that God's commandments cannot be understood apart from worship, nor can they be separated from Israel's call to freedom.

This is important because one of the problems with the commandments or any divine law is that, outside of a relationship of love, a relationship with God, they come across as finger-wagging ‘thou shalt’ and ‘thou shalt not,’ as if God is just looking to stop people from having any fun. Freedom—that's what we care about, freedom to do whatever we want. “If it feels good, do it.” Liberty as liberality. So when God tells us not to do something, we resent it. It comes across as unwelcome and burdensome restrictions.

But that's not how God's commandments are received here, in the context of the story of the exodus. God delivers his people from slavery, but in order that they don't fall back into it, God gives them these Ten Words, to be Israel's guide to continued liberty. The Israelites have just been freed from the house of bondage, having spent over 400 years under the thumb of a tyrant. It was the only life they knew. And they were repeatedly tempted to slip back into those ways, if only because they were familiar. So, God gives them ten clear, strong rules to preserve their freedom, to keep them from falling back into bondage, so that they could live as God's liberated children.

This is why, when God gives the commandments, he doesn't say—"Here are ten rules. You had better obey them or else!"—but instead he reminds them of their freedom: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery," and here is how you remain free. Rather than unwarranted limitations on our liberty, these laws are the pathway to true God-given freedom. They are "rules for freedom," as paradoxical as that may seem. Or as the letter of James has it, "the law of liberty," laws that are necessary in order to help guard our liberated living.

Some years ago a friend shared with a colleague of mine how he came close to engaging in an extramarital affair. But, just at the last minute, he resisted the temptation and remained faithful to his marriage vows. When asked what kept him from breaking his vows, he replied, "I guess I figured out that fidelity makes you happy. In staying faithful to my marriage vows, I'm staying faithful to who I am and who I want to be."

That strikes me as close to what I'm trying to say about the Ten Commandments here. In the context they are given, God's commands are not heavy, burdensome, back-breaking, spirit-stifling demands; they are God's gracious gifts to his people, showing how to keep faith with God, to walk with him as a free people.

And God's commandments, these "rules for freedom," continue to be important for God's people, because, as humans, we are continually in danger of succumbing to slavery. Maybe not to Pharaoh but certainly to sin. Jesus made that point in last week's Gospel lesson. Arguing with the Pharisees, you'll remember, he said, "everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin." But as Paul says, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." God's laws, his commandments, Jesus' teachings, then, are not given in order to ruin our fun, but in order to make us free, free from bondage to sin, from enslavement to our desires and appetites, our selfish instincts, so that we might live with God as a free people, people who are free to love, to give themselves, to live the truth of God.

A colleague was visiting a church kitchen that serves meals to the homeless. There, an older woman was working away, spreading sandwiches. My colleague thought to himself, "What a beautiful Christian witness." But when he finally caught up to talk to her—she was so busy—and praised her for her Christian commitment, she replied, "Oh, it's nothing much really. I work down here because most younger people are too frightened to come into this neighborhood early in the morning. They find this to be a scary place." "You don't?" my colleague asked. "Why should I be scared? I've been going to this church for over 50 years. Would you guess that I am 87 years old? If somebody wants to beat me up or kill me, what do I care? That will only take a month or two off my life as it is! God has given me so many blessings, God has given me such a rich life, I sure want to use my remaining days to share some of that with people for whom life has not been as pleasant as mine."

Now there was a woman who was free. She understood the freedom she had in Christ, the freedom she had as part of God's people. This is the kind of freedom God wants for us, the kind of freedom God's commandments are intended to preserve and protect.

Here we see why posting the Ten Commandments in courtrooms is so wrong-headed. The commandments do not come to us as a universal code of conduct or a list of laws people of goodwill can agree upon. Rather they come as part of the covenant God has made. As such, they name the peculiar way of life of God's people, a way that is only possible as part of a community who knows God and his goodness and desires to honor him. Following the commandments is only possible—indeed, only makes sense—in the context of such a community, a covenanted community, a community that knows who they are and whose they are, and that practices the commandments as a way of life, and when we fail to live up to these laws (and we will), has regular opportunities for confession, forgiveness, reconciliation and refreshment at the table. Only in this context do God's commandments make any sense or have any power.

As much as we might think the commandments are good guidance everyone should follow, they mean so much more. The commandments are not simply a list of rules to follow, but a sign, proof that God has not left us to wander alone but has acted to redeem us and deliver us and teach us how we are to walk with God as a free and holy people. God's laws are a gift to us, indeed they are Good News, for us and for our witness to the world. Thanks be to God!