

Freedom Bound

Exodus 19:4-6; 20:1-18

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Many of you know that Jane and I enjoy watching British detective mystery television, especially classics like Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, or Dorothy Sayer's Lord Peter Wimsey, G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown, Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse, always set in Oxford, and of course, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes.

As an aside, there are several amateur detectives who are clergy, most in small parishes in small villages. As a local pastor, I'm often wondering, "How many murders can be committed in a small church and small village week after week until someone notices and begins to ask, 'What's wrong with our village?'" ... But I digress.

My reading detective fiction began when I discovered Sherlock Holmes in the public-school library when I was in the 4th grade. I would put on my red baseball cap forwards and then put on my brother's red ballcap backwards, and pretend I was Sherlock Holmes in his deerstalker cap. Our neighbors just dismissed it, as "that Childress boy imagining himself in whatever book he was reading at the time." Of course, they were right.

One of the major premises of crime fiction is the solving of mysteries and a return to order from chaos. I tend to favor those stories in which the crime is resolved at the end, and all is well, where justice is served, and the truth is made

visible. Literary critics point out that crime mysteries attempt to make reality a bit more manageable. The detective characters try to understand, make connections, see patterns in the complex materials of the investigation, and so on. And it all works this way because it is the worldview of the authors, the detective, and the readers. It is why I prefer to read a classic detective story at bedtime because all the unknown and chaos of the crime will be resolved by the end, and I can sleep easily.

But much contemporary and newer crime fiction does not assume such a worldview. Instead, there is disorientation, and often the chaos continues – albeit just below the surface always threatening to erupt again at any moment – and the crime is not always solved, the mystery is not always resolved. Much contemporary crime fiction does not assume there are patterns or order or a world of stability and truth.

I'd love to talk all day about murder mysteries and theology, but I must go on. And I bring all of this up because I think our reading from Exodus puts us right in the middle of a people who are disoriented and feeling overwhelmed by chaos. There are no patterns and all they are accustomed to is disordered.

The Israelites are in the middle of the wilderness, finally free from Egyptian enslavement. For a while they celebrated and celebrated rightly their freedom. After generations of slavery, God liberated them. But after a while, they began to ask questions. Now what? Now they are in the middle of the chaos of the unknown where there are no rules, no boundaries, no patterns. Old Egyptian bondage had its upside, as they looked back wistfully. The food was not great but at least we knew we could depend on Pharaoh delivering it like clockwork. If nothing else, the world of enslavement worked with precision, dependability, efficiency, and rules.

Out here in the desert there is none of that. God promises us manna each day, but we can't store any. No hoarding out here in the wilderness. Instead, we pray for daily bread. We are free but will we survive? We're supposed to be heading to the Promised Land but who knows where that is? We don't even know where we are, now. Moses seems to be leading us in circles and there is no plan. We don't know where we'll be next week, next month, or next year. We're told to trust God but after generations of abuse, I don't trust anyone!

Throughout the Exodus story God says the new land, the Promised Land will be a home of freedom, and they will become a living embodiment of a new way of living. It will be a place of starting over. A new society. It will be a demonstration that God has a different way from the rigid rules and brutal oppression of slavery in the Egyptian empire behind them, and from the Canaanite city-state exploitative, extractive economy in front of them.

You see, whereas Egypt was an empire with one Pharaoh in charge – at the top of the pyramid, so to speak, Canaan was full of city-states, each with their own gods, their own kings, and their own rules, with each city and king in conflict with the others. Each king's authority reached as far into the hinterland as their power allowed, and all the surrounding peasant farmers had to give tribute to the nearby king. The result was an enriched, empowered “urban elite” who clustered around the king and who benefitted from the wealth that trickled up. It was a predatory economy based on cheap labor. And if you were in one of the cities among the urban elite, you pretty much lived according to the whims and desires of the king and whatever whims and desires you had.

So here are the Israelites in the middle of nowhere, where there are no rules, no boundaries, and nothing constant or dependable. Behind them is slavery in an empire and in front of them is peasantry paying tribute to whatever king is in power at the moment, living according to the whim of the moment. Thanks a lot, Moses.

They think they are nowhere, but God tells them they are at a place where they can take a break. In fact, this place is called Mt. Sinai. God says, “Let’s pause here at the holy place and reboot. If we’re going to become a new people and a new society with a freedom that is unlike anything anyone has ever seen, then we’ll begin by talking about bonding with each other.”

Right off, Israel is thinking, “Whoa! Wait just a minute! Bonding is just another word for bondage, and we’ve had more than enough of that!”

God says, “Hear me out. I didn’t liberate you from empire and bring you all the way out here, feeding you every day with manna, just so I could enslave you, and dehumanize you. No, we’re here to talk about and make a covenant. For you to survive in this chaos and this disorder in an inhospitable climate, and for you to be tough enough to survive authoritarianism, we’re going to have to do it together – which is called covenant.

And here is the heart of biblical faith: The only true freedom is found in relationship with God. Freedom is being bound to the true God. Otherwise, we’ll be bound to authoritarianism like Pharaoh or in bondage to our own whims and desires and wonder around in circles.

Being bound to God means being bound to neighbor. The two go together. Out here in a hostile climate of chaos, surrounded by gun-toting individuals yearning for the order and control of Pharaoh, we won't make it on our own. There are no Lone Ranger Israelites in the middle of the Sinai desert. So, God calls the Israelites to covenant there on Mt. Sinai and reminds us, that we Christ-followers are still a covenant people – as Jesus said, “the new covenant in my blood” (Matt. 26:28; Luke 22:20). We are baptized into a covenant community.

There at the foot of Mt. Sinai, Moses tells the people to prepare themselves, to get ready, for God is coming among them. This is no small thing to work into your week if you're in town and if you have time. God who is coming to be with them is the same God who liberated them out of the hand of Pharaoh, the same God who parted the waters of the Red Sea, the same God who has led them across the desert as a fire by night and a cloud by day, the same God who feeds them daily with manna and quail.

So, they get ready, and a great dark cloud covers the mountain and there is thunder and lightning and wind. In terror, splendor, and danger God's massive presence intrudes; God's overriding purpose pervades. And the people find themselves caught up in a presence and purpose more powerful than they can comprehend. The Holy God of liberation comes to them, committing God's own life to them – ongoing life together in covenant.

Moses swallows hard, knowing his job is to go up the mountain into the cloud to find out what a life of freedom with God over the long-haul looks like. For 40 days and 40 nights Moses is in God's presence while God spells out the basic survival guide of their covenantal life together – a survival guide to get them

across the hostile chaos of the desert, a survival guide so they can live in Canaan without succumbing to Canaanite exploitation, a survival guide so they will be God's people, set apart as a priestly kingdom and a holy nation where God is worshiped and people are respected and cared for.

God gives Moses Ten Commandments. Ten Commandments divided up into two sections, or two tablets. The first is about relation to God (commandments 1, 2, and 3), while the second is about relation to neighbor (commandments 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10) with commandment 4 being linking God and neighbor together.

Right here at the heart of the covenant and right at the heart of these 10 Commandments, the people learn there is a very close connection between relating to God and relating to people. The two go together and they are so close, they almost become one. Over the centuries Israel's prophets say that if you show me someone who mistreats people, especially poor and marginalized people, I'll show you someone who worships false gods. Likewise, if you show me someone worships idols, I'll show you someone who mistreats people. The two tablets go together.

God says the main thing, the first thing is to be clear that there is only one God that you worship, that you bind your life to. This is the first commandment that is the foundation to everything else that comes. Number 1 – I am the Lord your God who delivered you out of slavery, you shall have no other gods.

Number 2 – no idols. No worshiping and adding other gods. None of this you go to church on Sunday but worship other gods during the week. No, "God and..." as in God and country, God and guns, God and capitalism, and so on. It's

just plain old, straightforward “God.” Every time someone quotes to you their love of the Second Amendment on guns, you quote to them the Second Commandment about trusting and worshiping no other gods.

Number 3 – This means no taking God’s name in vain. This is not about cussing. It is about using God as a means to something else – political power or money-making or whatever. God will not be used by any political power or leader, or cause, or nation-state. God will not be trivialized.

Number 4 – Keep the sabbath. This connects directly the relationship with God and the relationship with neighbor. For one day out of seven, there is rest, and the worship of God and the enjoyment of God’s creation and the love and respect of people. Pharaoh and Canaan both believe that life is a rat-race of achievement and competition and endless anxiety over productivity. Pharaoh’s model is the state decides who wins this endless competition, and the Canaanite model is the market gets to decide. God’s model is different and sabbath is the day to keep it all in perspective.

Number 5 – Honor your parents. They are your roots and the source of memory of where you came from. Treat them with dignity, especially in a world that no longer considers them “useful.”

Number 6 – Do not kill. Respect each other’s life. Respect your community. Put the weapons up. You tote firearms, you’re tempted to use them. Don’t do it. Don’t kill. It’s real clear and simple. Don’t do it.

Number 7 – No adultery. No running around with someone who is not your spouse. If the covenant community is going to survive in a hostile environment, we have to trust one another. God’s people share their lives together in many ways and in intimacy and close proximity, and to do that means we have to respect and honor each other’s marriage vows. Trust is a big deal if you’re going to survive.

Number 8 – Don’t steal other people’s things. Especially using the sophisticated methods of Pharaoh and the Canaanite kings. People with real lives, real names and real stories are reduced to statistics numbers on a page. Or they become acronyms – visitors to church become a DLR (Don’t Look Right) or PAPS (Project-Affected People), and so on. Or people become part of euphemisms, like “acceptable loss,” “collateral damage,” or they become “invaders” or a “flood threatening our way of life.” All these ways and many others are what Naomi Klein calls “othering” which is a way of disregarding and dehumanizing people so they can be controlled, dominated, dismissed, and which makes it easy to steal their land, their lives, and their future. God says Don’t do it!

Number 9 – Don’t bear false witness. For there to be justice for all there cannot be lying and mistrust in the community.

Number 10 – Don’t covet. Don’t wish for other people’s things and possessions. Don’t start fondling people’s things and other lives in your imagination. It keeps you from resenting others and helps us live simply and trustworthy lives together.

God says here are the ten basics of survival as God’s people in uncharted territory. You’ll develop them more, you’ll learn to edit them, and improvise from

them, but these are the tent-posts in the center of your camp on which you hang your tents on.

These 10 Commandments become the foundation of what is eventually called “Torah” often translated as “the Law” but can also be translated as “the Way.” It is the Way of God. It is the Way to survive the wilderness. It is the Way to make it through life.

Indeed, in Hebrew the chief word for sin is not the word for “breaking the law.” Instead, the primary word for sin (*chatah*) is to “miss the way,” or “to get lost from the way.” When you’re in a threatening world of disorientation and change, to lose the way means to perish. That’s sin.

In the Book of Acts, the earliest identification of the little rag-tag church was “people of the Way.” Jesus said he is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life,” and the small, fragile church seeks to follow Christ. Jesus Christ is fulfillment of all the Law and the Prophets. Christ’s Way shows us the fulfillment of what God started with Moses.

The earliest churches all struggled with this. Paul’s letters are full of trying deal with legalists (often “Judaizers”) who said, “It’s all about the rules! We have to have rules. Keep the rules!” Or libertines who said, “In Christ, there are no more rules! Let’s all do what we want!” Paul letters are all about the New Way in Christ – neither “just the rules” nor “there are no rules.” It’s a struggle. It takes all of us sticking to God and sticking to one another to get through the struggle. Part of this summer the lectionary has us in some of Paul’s letters and we’ll talk more.

Back to where I started. One of the greatest detective novels of all time is Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, first published in 1934 and then made into several film versions, the most prominent is the 1974 version with an all-star cast. It ends much like the original novel with a satisfying resolution to the crime.

The other two outstanding film versions are the 2010 David Suchet version and Kenneth Branagh's 2017 version, though both of which follow the novel, they interpret the conclusion differently from 1934 or 1974. Suchet is theological and Branagh is Shakespearean. Suchet prays and relies on God's mercy, with much grief, much pain, and much suffering. Branagh's version expresses the same sentiment as Suchet's, as his character narrates at the end, "I have seen the truth of the case and it is profoundly disturbing. I have seen the fracture of the human soul, so many broken lives, so much pain and anger, given to the poison of deep grief, until one crime became many." He goes on, "I have always followed order and method and relied on my little grey cells. But now I must listen to my heart... The scales of justice are not always in balance, and we must learn to live with the imbalance."

God's hope and mercy is that together, in covenant, we will learn to live with the imbalance.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.