

Sermon - Lent 3, Year B
The Ten Commandments
3/3/24

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the 19th chapter of the Book of Exodus, the Bible tells us that Israel is coming into the wilderness of Sinai on the “third new moon” since they were delivered out of slavery in Egypt. They have known freedom for just three months. The Lord proclaims: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.”

In these fresh, first days of freedom, God calls Moses to be the herald of his continuing love and care, and there, in chapter 20, upon the mountain, God gives Moses a gift: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me... You shall not murder... You shall not steal... You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor...” It is here that Moses receives what we know as the Ten Commandments. A gift. A gift of freedom.

The word “commandment” can seem to rest uneasily with the idea of freedom sometimes. I don’t think many of us hear the word “freedom” and imagine something like a list of instructions. Aren’t these just rules? And aren’t rules just...restrictions? And isn’t this just another sort of list of things that I will inevitably fail to do, thus setting myself and my community up for disappointment, judgment, and despair?

Perhaps a list of rules is not so very freeing when the rules come from human hearts and human minds. But the great gift that Moses receives in the twentieth chapter of Exodus is not a list from his local police force or his second grade teacher. This gift is from God — who just three new moons ago declared, “I have born you on the wings of eagles and brought you to myself.”

The Ten Commandments are a gift of freedom, because when we look to the heart of them, they show us a truth of inestimable beauty: they show us that there is enough.

Think about this: when we are afraid, or feeling angry or lonely, or when we are anxious, there is always, at the very foundation of these worries, a question of scarcity. We are worried that we don't have enough money, perhaps. We don't have enough power. We don't have enough value. We don't have enough beauty or enough good health. We fear that we do not have enough of the things we were supposed to achieve by this season in our life, or perhaps that the things we once had and treasured are gone for good. We worry so easily and so often about having enough. And this is like building our souls into various prisons, brick by brick, burying us behind walls that cause us to feel alone and even to harm one another.

And so God gives us a gift. First and foremost, "you shall have no other Gods before me." Sometimes it can feel like God isn't enough. The Israelites felt that way – not long from this very chapter, they become impatient with Moses who seems to be taking his time up at the top of that mountain, and so they decide to take measures into their own apparently empty hands. They make a golden calf – ah! Now, *here* is something we can worship and control. Perhaps our golden calves are different: when God seems to be distant or not enough, we turn to other things we can worship and control, other things to fill our apparently empty hands: money, power, or even distraction. But God never, ever stops handing over his gifts. *I am enough for you*, he whispers and he shouts. *I am more than enough. So unimaginably more that there is nothing at all you could need that I will not give to you.* When God tells us to worship only him, he pries the idols of fear and scarcity from our apparently empty hands, and he fills them with his grace.

"You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God." This is a gift. The words you know, the language you have received, your beloved human capacity for expression – these are enough. You do not need to use God's name frivolously. You have the words, and the music, and the heart to say what it is you need to say.

"Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy." Your days, your hours, your work, and your years: these are enough. Yes, it can be good to be busy, but with this commandment God

seeks us out and takes us by the hand and walks us to places of peace where we are invited to rest. Though the rest of the world insists otherwise, your hours are enough.

“Honor your father and your mother.” Did God not realize how *complicated* family relationships can be? The gift is in the word “honor.” To honor someone is simply to recognize someone as a person who God made who God loves. Sometimes this is easy and joyful for us, but even when it is not, when we honor someone - we are simply entrusting them to God’s care. When we entrust others to God’s care, this is enough.

The last five commandments are the “shalt not” commandments. You shalt not murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, or covet. Each of these activities are things that human beings do when we are afraid that we do not have enough. We kill when we do not have enough power or control. We steal when we feel that we do not have what we deserve. We commit adultery when the relationship we have been given does not feel like enough to us. We covet – well, we covet just about all the time. These commandments are a gift. Each one insists that we are loved by a God who gives us enough.

Of course we will not get things right all of the time, but when we read these commandments and let God write them upon our hearts – when we genuinely begin to see that we do, after everything, have enough – that is freedom. It is freedom from the slavery of anxiety and fear. It is freedom from the prisons of judgment. It is the freedom of people who know ourselves to have been born on eagles’ wings and drawn right into the very center of the heart of the living God. It is the freedom the God will bring to Israel and to the whole world in the abundance of his own Son, Jesus. To him be the glory.

Amen.