**October 8, 2017**

**Exodus 20:1-20**

In Hebrew, the Ten Commandments are also called “the ten words.” That *word* is “debar,” which means “*word,*” but can also mean “message” or “report”, or even “gift” or “promise.” So whereas we hear “The Ten Commandments” and think about the list of strict rules and guidelines that are about to be enforced, Hebrew listeners hear “the ten words” with expectation and hope and the possibility of good things that are about to come their way. And when this happens, the disciplinarian voice inside our head disappears. It’s almost as if the genie in our lamp, who might have given *us* 3 wishes, turned around and said, “here are my **10** things for you.” The Ten Words become inviting and intriguing. The Ten Gifts are wondrous. And the Ten Promises induce thanksgiving.

For they had reason to give thanks: God had liberated them. “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery…” God liberated them from slavery in Egypt (through the help of Moses, God’s unlikely sidekick). And before that, God liberated them from hunger in the midst of a famine (through the family of Joseph). And before that, God liberated them from a flood (through Noah’s family). The Israelites had good reason to give God thanks. They had been set free from the literal and metaphorical chains that bound them. Time and again. But at this juncture, God’s people were wandering in the wilderness, experiencing an identity crisis. Who were they now? What should they do? Where should they go? At which point, God reminded them that they were here because God freed them from their taskmasters in Egypt. God freed them because they were God’s holy people, and God freed them to live as such. The Israelites’ God was (and is) one who brings liberation and life.

So, in this sense, the commandments are liberation statements… Following these words will enhance their freedom, but ignoring these words, or breaking these promises will return the Israelites to slavery. Slavery the world knows. And ultimately, slavery in sin and death.

Because they are God’s, because they have been created and named and claimed and loved by YHWH God, the Israelites are freed from the need to worship other gods. They worship the liberating God; following another god would return them to enslavement. Bound by false promises and empty rituals.

Because they are God’s, because God is bigger than any image or picture, because God cannot be contained in any man-made item, they are freed from the need to create or invest in idols or statues or pictures. God will not be there. Time should not be spent there.

Because they are God’s, they are freed from working themselves to death. They are freed to rest. They are freed to play and enjoy life. For life itself is a gift.

In these first 4 commandments – in these first 4 words – God established relationship. God stamped on their hearts and minds whose they were (God’s) and who they were (God’s people). And from this foundation, God showed them how to be in relationship with others. The last 6 commandments were meant to enhance life. God freed them to live with family and community and property and wealth, then taught the people how to care for those gifts. These words were boundaries meant to keep God’s holy people *from* harm. And they remind us that God gives more than life; God sustains and enriches.

Note that the commandments are not about punishment. They are not even about us, so much, but about how to be in relationship. Because our life-bringing, generous God is primarily a relational being. The consistent biblical witness is that God seeks us out again and again and again. When we walk away, when we fail, God gives second chances, and explains things again, and tries and tries to help us know God. Again and again, God teaches us how to treat God’s self, and how to care for God’s creation. God is not a deity who maintains strict boundaries between heaven and earth; instead, God moved heaven to descend to earth. God never abandons or leaves creation to our own devices. Instead, God trains and coaches us. God calls out the plays on the sidelines. God teaches us how to treat one another, for God is committed to our having successful, meaningful relationships. In some ways, the Ten Commandments are actually a self-help manual: *A Practical Guide for Personal Freedom*, *How to Live an Awesome Life, The 10 Habits of Highly Effective People*, *Choosing Me & We*, *How to Win Friends & Influence People*… it’s right here.

The natural consequence of following the law is that our relationship with God deepens. We show our neighbor that they matter to us. We show our neighbor that they are worthy of our time and attention and care. And then our community grows stronger. Our parents, our family, our neighbor, our community. Bound together by God. So that as we follow the law, our lives are transformed. We move “from me to we.” We are transformed from some people to God’s people. We are freed from the chains of the world, and gifted with a life-giving identity and sense of purpose.

There is a lot of responsibility here. This isn’t just an intellectual exercise. The commandments aren’t about thinking, but are about doing. Following God is a call to transformative action.

God freed the Israelites to live in a holy way, and God frees us to do as such. But we are not free for freedom’s sake. We are not free to live and do and say as we choose. Especially for Americans who cling to patriotic freedom, it is important to understand that the idea of freedom to do anything and everything is not who we are, nor is that the type of freedom God promises. In the name of patriotism, we claim that we are free to make money and spend money however we choose. In the name of patriotism, we claim that we are free to own guns and use guns. In the name of patriotism, we claim that we are free to say whatever we want to whomever we want. We post disrespectful things online. We harm others with what we say. We create systems that allow some to take what they want, while others are kept from what they need. We work 60 and 70 and 80 hours a week. We distance ourselves from parents and family and friends and community. All in the name of freedom, shouting “it’s my God-given right!” As if we can do whatever we want just because we are alive. As if we can say whatever we want just because we are Americans. And yet… when events such as the shooting in Las Vegas occur, we see how we are living in chains. We see how our “freedoms” shackle us to the earth. We see how our “freedoms” disrupt community. We see how we value patriotic freedoms over God’s freedom. We see how we are wandering in the wilderness. We see how we are desperate for God to liberate us and give us life. We see that we are desperate for the transformation God promises, the relationship God brings.

As wilderness is transformational time, this is the training time. God was teaching the Israelites how to be God’s people. But what is God teaching us now? And are our hearts open to receive what God is saying and doing? As a country, as a church, as a person, how are we transforming?

The Presbyterian Church of Sweet Hollow celebrated our 150th anniversary in 1979. From a group of 30 people to a congregation of hundreds, this church has reveled in God’s transformations. We have moved buildings and baptized babies and buried friends and family. We have started programs that nurtured families and couples – road rallies and Sunday Schools and pageants. And we have ended programs as our membership and our needs have changed. 38 years ago, people gathered and talked about “this old” building and by the grace of God, here we are, still together and worshipping in “this old” building. God has transformed us through the years. We look different from who we were. We think different thoughts. We see different challenges. We have different worries. What is God teaching us now about how to be God’s faithful people?

Don’t be scared of the wilderness in which we wander. Look for the gifts of God, given to us along the way. Be nourished by the bread and water God sends. Uphold the words God offers us, life-bringing, sustaining, and enriching. For we are God’s people, liberated from the chains of the world. Liberated for a holy life with our Triune God. God was at our beginning, and God knows our ultimate end. Our life and our liberty is in God’s hands. Thanks be to God. Amen.