

A VITAL CONNECTION WITH THE HOLY ONE

Exodus 20:1-17

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Third Sunday in Lent, March 15, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

Then God spoke all these words:

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 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. You 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, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

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

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

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When we look at the Old and New Testaments from the highest vantage point – say from Mars – we notice at least three ways God relates to people and people come to know God.

The first way is found throughout Genesis, the book in which God makes his debut as a character. In Genesis, God displays human characteristics:

- He speaks to Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Abraham and Sarah.
- God gives commands, rails in anger, draws back in patience.
- God appears and then disappears for long periods of time.

The commands God gives are specific, time-bound, and situational:

- “Build an ark of Gopher wood.”¹
- “Go to the land that I will show you.”²

¹ Genesis 6:14.

² Genesis 12:1.

With the exception of the requirement that males be circumcised, God leaves few permanent laws. Rather, he appears, commands, and leaves humans alone to do what he has commanded.

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This same pattern holds through the early life of Moses. But as soon as Moses leads the people of Israel out of slavery, God establishes a new way of dealing with his people – the way of the law. This is the second way we notice in our view from Mars.

Appearing to Moses and then to the people on Mt. Sinai, God speaks into being the Ten Commandments, and then follows them up with thousands of additional laws that cover virtually every aspect of human life.³

About these laws Jewish scholar James Kugel writes:

In all the little encounters of daily life—between children and parents, customers and shopkeepers, beggars and almsgivers, natives and foreigners—the [first five books of the Bible] set out the precise form of behavior that God has prescribed...

There were rules about

- vows to God you might utter in a moment of panic
- what God had ordered you to do in case you contracted a...skin disease
- rules about festivals and pilgrimages and fasting... [bodily functions]...

...it seemed...there was no area of life about which the Torah did not have *something* to say.⁴

But behind these rules lie promise and hope.

In doing each thing according to the way God had prescribed, a person could...turn life itself into a constant act of reaching out to God...

[W]ithout having to retreat to a monastery or a mountaintop, one could live each minute in a state of holiness and sanctity, creating a living, vibrant connection between one's little life on earth and God in heaven.⁵

The way of the law – “a vibrant connection with the Holy One.”

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Our view from Mars reveals a third way as well of knowing God, a way most familiar to us: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Though Christ came “not to abolish, but to fulfill” the law,⁶ his followers, led by the apostle Paul, came to view the law as a temporary measure through which God's people have to pass on the road to maturity, a schoolmaster whose tutelage we need until we reach full Christian freedom and responsibility.⁷

Paul saw the death and resurrection of Christ as freeing people to follow the spirit rather than the letter of the law.⁸ Paul helped fashion a Christianity which values the Old Testament as a part of Scripture equal in value to the New. Its stories, poetry, and wise sayings provide an “infinitely rich, infinitely textured fabric of divine teachings,” teachings in which Jesus was steeped, teachings he passed on to his followers, us included.⁹

³ These laws are found from the middle of Exodus through Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

⁴ James L. Kugel, *How To Read The Bible: A Guide To Scripture, Then And Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 261.

⁵ Kugel 261.

⁶ Matthew 5:17.

⁷ Galatians 3:23-29, especially 3:24.

⁸ II Corinthians 3:6, cited by Kugel 277.

⁹ Kugel 276-277. Indeed, in the Presbyterian Church today, all our ministers, elders, and deacons vow that we “accept the Scriptures of [both] the *Old* and *New* Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal, and God's Word to [us].” This wording comes from the Presbyterian Church USA Book of Order, G-14.0405b (2), the Vows for Ordination for the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. The vow for ordination of elders and deacons is identical.

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In this context – of a God who has spoken directly at times, a God who has provided the law as a vital connection with himself, and a God who has become flesh in Jesus Christ – where do the Ten Commandments fit? What status do they have for us today as Christians? How are we to use them?

Drawing on this concept of an “infinitely rich, infinitely textured fabric of divine teaching,” I invite you to join me for the next several minutes as we hold the Ten Commandments in front of us as if they are a mirror, as we look to them to reflect on our own lives, as we ask penetrating questions about who we are, what we think and feel and believe, how we act.

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The First Commandment: “*You shall have no other gods before me,*” or in an equally valid translation, “You shall have no other gods *besides* me.”

“Before me” is easiest. It acknowledges that several things in our lives are important, several things function at the level of being a god:

- the achievements for which we strive
- the intelligence with which we have been born and the knowledge we have never stopped seeking to acquire
- the importance to us that our children flourish, in their learning, in their work, in whatever shape and form their personal lives take.

If the commandment demands that we put our commitment to God above all these – “You shall have no other gods *before* me” “ahead of me” – it may be hard for us to do but we understand and accept the task.

If on the other hand, the commandment asserts that that these other commitments cannot even exist *alongside* our commitment to God, if it implies that we cannot be committed to God and also committed to our work, our families, our education, then we face an entirely different theological and personal challenge: namely, eliminating from our lives all that may be important to us except our commitment to God.

If the commandment says “You shall have no other gods besides me,” “no other gods *except for* me,” it sounds as if we are being called upon, like Abraham,¹⁰ to sacrifice before God that which is most sacred to us, our Isaacs. Not likely for Presbyterians. Not likely for Americans. Not likely for any but the most committed – or insane – of humans.

Perhaps the best way to hear this commandment is to ask:

- Will my commitment to God remain if my achievements do not materialize, if my knowledge proves flawed, if my family does not turn out as I had hoped?
- When other gods die, will my commitment to the one true God remain?
- Whether “besides” or “before,” will my commitment to God be undying, even if I lose the one who for me is as precious as Isaac?

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“*You shall not make for yourself an idol...*”

I’m not very artistic. The only class I was ever expelled from was seventh grade drawing. I worship in a Presbyterian tradition in which icons are about the only thing we do not usher to a seat and hand a bulletin. When we serve communion through intinction, many of us are awkward coming forward; there is probably little danger that we might actually bow down to some physical representation of God.

But perhaps the deeper questions the mirror of this commandment asks individually are these:

- Is it possible for me to worship a God whom I have never seen?
- It is possible for me to believe in a God whose voice I have never heard?
- Am I willing, week in and week out, to get up on Sunday morning, drive to Cameron Mills Road, put on a choir robe, make twenty sandwiches for the bag lunch program, give a significant portion of my income to an institution which cannot point me to a place I can see or touch or hear or smell or taste or quantify the reason for its existence?

¹⁰ Genesis 22.

The danger for us is not so much bowing before a graven image, but, in the absence of an image, not bowing at all.

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“Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy...”

Oh I can “remember” the day. I can set *some* time out of it for matters of the soul.

There is, after all, the early service, and it lets out by 9:15.

But what do I do when even what little I carve out for Sabbath ceases to be meaningful?

- When the kids are restless and the minister isn’t “on” and the hymns are unfamiliar and nobody seems to know my name...
- Is it really worth it for me to keep my children out of sports, my teenagers away from the one morning they can sleep in, when the service is at best a challenge for them?
- Can’t I simply remember the Sabbath on my own?

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“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God.”

I remember this one. It used to be worded “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain,” which meant of course we shouldn’t curse or swear, or if we did, we should limit our vocabulary to euphemisms or scatological references rather than divine nomenclature.

But “wrongful use”.....what’s that?

Perhaps wrongful use is claiming the Lord’s blessing on what is nothing more than a human enterprise:

- The school to which I apply
- The candidate I support
- The home I seek to purchase
- The Tower of Babel I work on daily in my backyard.

We must ask:

- Is “wrongful use” something like believing there’s no way we could ever be wrong, whether the “we” is an individual, a political ideology, a religious movement, a nation?
- Is “wrongful use” thinking “God is on our side” when maybe “sides” are not the only lens through which God views a human dilemma or conflict?
- Is “wrongful use” thinking that “a plague on both your houses” was insightful of Shakespeare but not helpful to our current situation?¹¹

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“Honor your father and mother...”

Of course. Of course.

We honor our parents, our grandparents, even our ancestors for all they do and did, much of which we can never know.

We honor our father and mother for the traits they instilled in us that have served us well, for the times they admitted they didn’t have all the answers, and even for their mistakes we have vowed not to repeat.

- But what do we do if our mother and father were not much a part of our lives?
- What do we do if they abandoned us, or neglected us, or abused us?
- Can we honor the office of parenthood without having to bless everything the occupant of that office did in our life?

¹¹ *Romeo and Juliet*, Act III, Scene 1, 90-92.

- Can we honor what parenthood should be instead of what it was for us?
- Can forgiving our own parents' failings be a form of honoring them, or honoring the office they held?

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“You shall not murder.”

Oh, I thought it said, “Thou shalt not *kill*.” Well, it used to be translated “Thou shalt not kill,” but even when it was translated that way, the word “kill” meant “murder.”¹²

Of all the commandments, this one is least likely for us solid, upstanding Presbyterians to violate. My guess is that the percentage of Presbyterians charged with murder in a given year is about the same as those drafted into the National Hockey League.

But it does happen, this thing called “murder,” and it happens even to us, or from us.

- As a minister, I have served four Presbyterian Churches. Over the years, at least one of my members has committed murder and been convicted.
- In another church, a member's father killed her mother in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the country.
- At least two other people in congregations I have served have lost immediate family members to this crime.

The culture and education and refinement we possess do not insulate us from this sad and heinous crime.

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“You shall not commit adultery.”

Would that the instances of adultery among Presbyterians were as infrequent as murder, but my sense is they are not.

As we hold up the mirror of this commandment to the marriage vows we hope to take, plan to take, or have taken, we must ask:

- Is the love I have for this person I am about to marry strong enough that as the years pass and the body changes and the children make demands and the work overwhelms I will keep my vow?
- What conditions must I create – we create – so that my desire to be faithful flourishes in the marriage I have entered?
- If the thought arises, or the door opens, for me to give my body to someone in violation of the one to whom I have made a sacred commitment, what in my faith besides guilt and shame will lead me to close the door so the cold wind doesn't rush in?
- And if adultery is a door through which I have already walked, what can I do to dead-bolt it for the future?

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“You shall not steal.”

I am tempted to wax eloquent

- about “stealing from the poor through our greed and excesses”
- about “stealing from future generations through the debt we lay on them”
- about “stealing from other nations and from the earth itself by consuming a vast portion of the earth's resources.”

But you do not need me to wax eloquent on such thievery. Read editorials, turn on C-Span.

But what about stealing, simple stealing? Taking an answer off someone else's paper, a quote out of someone else's article, a computer out of someone else's locker?

- Some of our stealing is just poor ethics, almost bad manners.
- Some of it comes from trying to get ahead in the classroom, the graduate program, the law firm.

¹² In our faith we may not believe in killing of any kind – the death penalty, self-defense, killing in a time of war. There are places in the Bible that support such pacifism, but not this verse, for this verse simply prohibits murder.

- Some of it arises out of a psychological problem.

Many years ago. Friend of my mother's. In her forties. Married. Small business owner. Kids in college. Arrested for shoplifting. Shoplifting. From a K-Mart.

She was arrested, as she should have been, tried as she should have been, convicted as she should have been.

But instead of sending this pillar of church and community to jail, the judge sent her to treatment. Treatment. For she had an illness.

She didn't use her illness as an excuse. She did her community service. But she also did her counseling, and she took her medication, and she held her illness at bay for the rest of her life, as if it were a thyroid problem or hearing loss.

"*You shall not steal,*" even if you are ill.

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"*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor,*" or, as we have come to interpret it, against anybody else.

As you know, there are people and institutions and modes of communication today that seek facts and quotes and images that, standing alone, do not convey the truth of who we are or the truth of who someone else is. Such misuse of information, even when factual, bears false witness about another human being.

To convey information on that is damaging but not crucial, to convey information that is damaging but not verified, is to engage in gossip, pure and simple. And gossip honors neither its purveyor, its recipient, nor its object. Gossip is false witness for everyone involved.

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Finally: "*You shall not covet.*"

The word "covet" literally means "to lust after."¹³ This word speaks of intensity of desire more than object of desire. It speaks of desire that consumes, desire that obsesses, desire for that which is beyond the realm of our right or capacity to possess.

As we hold the mirror of this commandment up, and look through it at our own life, we are compelled to ask:

- What is the source of the emptiness within me that leads this fever of desire to rise into dangerous territory?
- What is the source of the itch that I scratch by trying to possess that which belongs to someone else?
- From where does this fever come?

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The Ten Commandments form a wonderful set of laws, a terrific compendium of wisdom and divine teaching. Taken together, they give shape and form to a life worth living *for* God, *under* God, *through* God.

Meditating upon them day and night, striving to embody them, centuries of Jews have found vital connection with the Holy One through them.

Following in their stead, we who worship God and claim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior come to see that his life affirms these commandments, his teaching encompasses them, his death and resurrection do not render them a relic of the past. Christ came "not to abolish, but fulfill" them.

These Ten Commandments are a star that can lead us, like the magi,¹⁴ to the place where Christ was born. Upon our arrival we present him our gold, frankincense, and myrrh; he in turn presents with these Ten as a gift from his Father who sent him.

Amen.

¹³ The Hebrew is *khamad*. See Exodus 20:17n in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version With The Apocrypha*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003).

¹⁴ Matthew 2:1-12.