

LIVING IN COVENANT: THE WAY TO FREEDOM

A sermon given at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Loveland, Colorado on March 4, 2018 (Third Sunday in Lent)

Exodus 20:1-17

John 2:13-22

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During this season of Lent I am doing a series of sermons on “Living in Covenant.” Just to review, a covenant is a committed relationship in which promises are made between covenant partners. The Bible narrates how God has made a series of covenants with humanity throughout history. The lectionary Old Testament lessons for Lent this year are stories of those covenants. Understanding them is key to understanding our Christian faith. And those covenants serve as models for human relationships as well.

Two Sundays ago we remembered the covenant that God made with Noah and all his descendants (all humankind), and with all land animals, after the great flood – the covenant that God would never again destroy the earth by flood, sealed by the sign of the rainbow. I suggested that covenant with the earth and its creatures invites us to also make a covenant with the earth – to care for it as a precious gift from God and an inheritance for those who come after us.

Last week our Old Testament lesson from Genesis was about the covenant that God made with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. God promised to that elderly childless couple countless descendants, and a land of their own in which to live. In return, God asked to be their God, and they would be God’s people. This covenant was the spiritual origin of the people of Israel – now known as the Jewish people – and later the Christian faith as well. It was the way God has tried to save humanity from their foolish ways.

The biblical story tells that Abraham and Sarah did eventually have a child in their old age – a son named Isaac. Isaac had two sons, one of which was Jacob, and he carried on the covenant tradition. Jacob had twelve sons and one daughter, and they became the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel.

But later, a famine in their promised land caused the people to move to Egypt during the time of Joseph, and they lived there for a while. But a new king of Egypt – known as the Pharaoh – saw them as a threat and as a slave labor force, and so he enslaved them. They cried out to God for help, and Moses eventually led them out of slavery and started them on a journey back to their promised land.

The story of the Ten Commandments takes place shortly after they escaped from Egypt by passing through the sea. God gave the commandments as guidelines for how they were to live as God’s covenant people. These ten are the best known (many of you may have memorized them in Sunday School or Confirmation), but there are actually 613 commandments in the Bible according to Jewish tradition – commandments about how to worship, what to eat, how to work, and how to treat other people with justice.

These commandments are not seen as laws that must be obeyed if one wants to get into heaven after we die (or else face eternal punishment), as they have often been taught in some Christian churches. These are more like the house rules for living in God's household. Our parents had rules for us when we were young. And if we broke them – our parents might have gotten angry with us, or told us how disappointed they were with us. We might have gotten punished or grounded, but we were probably not thrown out for eternity. We were still their children.

These commandments are like that.

I think the setting in which these Ten Commandments were given is important. The people had just escaped from slavery to Pharaoh – a very cruel and stubborn man. Historians really don't know exactly which Pharaoh this was, and when this may have happened. And maybe that is intentional. Perhaps Pharaoh in the Bible represents anything that could enslave us – anyone or anything who might usurp God from the center of our lives. Because it is easy to fall for someone or something that seems to offer a better life than God: more pleasure, excitement, profit, power, security, even love.

But I believe these Ten Commandments were given to keep us from becoming slaves of anything less than the God of Love and Freedom.

“You shall have no other gods before me.” The gods we worship aren't necessarily the ones whose church we attend. What are we willing to serve and give to? What do we believe will save us and make our lives better? It is easy to believe something else besides the God of covenant offers us a better deal. You know the usual suspects: wealth, power, violence, drugs. Who or what really controls your life? The problem with false gods is that they may seem at first to offer us something desirable, but ultimately they will ask for more and more from us, and never feed us. They will suck the life out of us. Only the God of the covenant wants life and health for us.

“You shall not make for yourself an idol...” Followers of ancient religions (and some modern ones) often made little carved statues that represented the gods they believed would bring them happiness and prosperity. We may think that is a quaint, outdated custom, but you might be surprised. We can get terribly attached to things like buildings, or flags. And our mental images of God can become idols as well. If the God you worship looks like an old, white man of European heritage, and you get offended by anything different, you may have an idol. The author Anne Lamott once wrote, “You can safely assume that you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”

“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord...” This commandment has an interesting history in Jewish tradition. The God of the covenant actually does have a proper name. In the book of Exodus, when God spoke to Moses out of a burning bush and told Moses to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let the people go, Moses asked what God's name was. And God told him. It is a strange Hebrew name that no one really knows how to pronounce (Yahweh or Jehovah are two incorrect approximations). Whenever Jews read from the Bible and come across that name (it appears many times in the Bible), they do not say it – they say “Adonai”

instead (a Greek word that means “Lord.”). Why? So they don’t accidentally make wrongful use of the sacred name.

Making wrongful use of the name of God is to co-opt God for our purposes and agendas. Many of us were taught never to curse anyone in God’s name. But I think it is also wrong to put God on our side – to suggest that God blesses our nation, our weapons, our race, and does not also seek to bless others as well.

“Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.” The tradition of keeping a day of rest has become a quaint relic of the past – those days when stores were closed on Sundays are mostly gone. Actually, the original Sabbath day was Friday night until Saturday night. Part of the problem may have been that people didn’t really understand the purpose and necessity of Sabbath rest. This commandment is intended to keep us from worshiping the gods of productivity, and busy-ness, and the illusion that the world would stop turning if we stopped working all the time.

“Honor your father and your mother...” It is easy when we are young to believe that we have all the answers to life’s challenges. Parents are not perfect to be sure. But it does seem like they know everything when we are five years old, they know nothing when we are 16, and they are awfully wise when we are 40. Maybe this is a particularly American problem – many cultures honor their elders much more than we do. This keeps us from worshiping youth and fads. “You shall not murder.” This is to keep us from believing that violence is the ultimate power in the world and the answer to all our problems. But many people honor the god of death.

“You shall not commit adultery.” This is more than in our marriages. It is about all of our committed, covenant relationships. Prophets in the Bible often accused the people of Israel of committing adultery with God by chasing after gods – the gods of fertility or beauty or prosperity or power. This commandment keeps us from chasing after the latest attraction. Our God is a God of steadfast love and faithfulness.

“You shall not steal.” This is to keep us from worshiping ourselves and our desires, with no regard for others.

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” This is really a legal commandment – that you will never tell a lie in court that could get someone wrongfully convicted of a crime and punished. It is tragic how many times people in our country spend decades in prison for crimes they did not commit just because someone felt pressure to get a conviction for a crime; or was willing to blame another because they were too ashamed to tell the truth. Our God asks us to be people of truth, and justice. Maybe it also suggests we shouldn’t make unfounded claims or generalizations about others: all Muslims are terrorists; all immigrants are criminals, etc.

“You shall not covet...” This is to keep us from believing that happiness is found in having lots of stuff – even other people’s stuff. It reminds us to be grateful for the many good things God has given to us.

The commandments are not just about living moral lives and keeping people in line. They were not given to be posted in our courtrooms to show what good people we are. They were given to show us what it means to live as God's covenant people – who believe that the Holy One is able to provide for us and care for us and lead us to life. We believe that the God of Abraham and Sarah and Moses and Jesus can save us – from our own anxieties and need for control if nothing else. Rather than being a burden, these covenant commandments show us the way to fullness of life.

Amen.

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