

And God spoke all these words, saying, <sup>2</sup>“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. <sup>3</sup>“You shall have no other gods before<sup>[a]</sup> me. <sup>4</sup>“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. <sup>5</sup>You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, <sup>6</sup>but showing steadfast love to thousands<sup>[b]</sup> of those who love me and keep my commandments.<sup>7</sup>“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. <sup>8</sup>“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. <sup>9</sup>Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, <sup>10</sup>but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. <sup>11</sup>For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. <sup>2</sup>“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. <sup>13</sup>“You shall not murder.<sup>14</sup>“You shall not commit adultery. <sup>15</sup>“You shall not steal. <sup>16</sup>“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. <sup>17</sup>“You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.”

FIRST SCRIPTURE READING: Psalm 121: I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come? <sup>2</sup>My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. <sup>3</sup>He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. <sup>4</sup>He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. <sup>5</sup>The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand. <sup>6</sup>The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. <sup>7</sup>The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.<sup>8</sup>The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and for evermore.

***“Nineteen Comes Before Twenty”***

*This week I was reminded about something I’d not thought about for a while, that is, the epic movie by Cecil B. DeMille called The Ten Commandments! How many of you have seen that either in its original showing or as a rerun? Well, it happened when my sister, Amy, visited and brought me some items that she found and no longer wanted to keep...”some of Dad’s stories,” she told me. Our father was a journalist who worked in the advertising industry as a agriculture specialist. So when I had time to sit down to look through the notebook, and there was one of Dad’s Sunday school lesson plans, and also his biographies of family members. But there was also a copy of a magazine, Checkerboard, published internally by Ralston Purina, the company for whom Dad worked. It was folded open to an article that he wrote called, “Cattle in the Bible”. I was impressed and enjoyed reading it. But then I discovered, stuck in the back cover something else...a copy of a letter that my father had written to Cecil B. DeMille at Paramount Pictures, 5451 Marathon St, Hollywood, CA! In it, Dad was asking for any information deMille could give him about Bible-time cattle since he knew he’d done a lot of research on the subject in making the movie. And then, to my surprise, clipped to this letter was the response from Cecil B DeMille to my Dad! It provided him the needed information and also some wonderful photos, (i.e. “clips”) of cattle taken from the movie. Cool, right? (hold up material). Antiques Roadshow here I come.*

After this, I began to work on my Sunday sermon and, of course, the assigned OT text for the third Sunday in Lent B is Exodus 20:1-17, the story of Moses retrieving the 10 commandments from the Lord. I could not then read without envisioning the Cecil B. deMille production! In my mind, I saw Charleston Heston as Moses up there on Mt. Horeb hearing God’s voice in the burning bush, “I am that I am”. I saw Moses there on the dry river bed and dark clouds swirling overhead, with his staff raised and the walls of water churning on each side. And I saw him also going up and then coming down from Mt. Sinai, with his hair now white, wildly blowing about, carrying the stone tablets of the law, the Torah. I thought how different he looked going up from coming down. More than the fact he’d obviously

encountered the Lord, he'd gone up as the Liberator of the people, and he'd come down as the Lawgiver!<sup>1</sup> What a change that must have been, right?

For the last two Sundays we've seen through the Noadic and the Abrahamic covenants that God promised to enter into our world and love us...no matter what (*repeat*). God promised to love us despite our sorry state. We've read God's unconditional, unilateral promises which require nothing from us in return. "*I shall establish my covenant with you and all Creation that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood,*" God said to Noah. And to Abraham, God said, "*I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and you will be my people,*" But now, here, the "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not" have begun.<sup>2</sup> (4 "thou shalt" and 6 "thou shalt not"). It now seems that the Hebrews and us, by extension, are expected to behave in certain ways. "If/then" conditional language has appeared. (*pause*)

You know, on first glance this is sort of disappointing. It's hard to hear God use the word "if". And I'm sure this is because we are very familiar with this kind of thing from fellow humans. From the time we are little we experience it. "If you perform well, we will love you" say the fans of our athletic team. "If you keep things tidy, I will be so pleased with you," say our teachers. "If you foul up, you are on your own," say the scholarship committee or the domineering spouse. We are used to it and with the conditional language here in the Mosaic covenant too, we find ourselves asking, "What if we can't live up to the if/then of God?" "Will God throw us out and start over?" (*pause*)

Well, the answer to that question is a flat and resounding "No". "No." If we look closely at the context of the story, we see, what David Lose sums up with the phrase, "Nineteen comes before Twenty".<sup>3</sup> We see that the relationship that God has established with the God's people comes first. It is primary. The law, with its requirements on our behavior, is secondary. Listen to God speaking to Moses in Genesis 19, the chapter, before the 20<sup>th</sup> one, vss 4-6 : "*You have*

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor. "*Peculiar Treasures*" In: *Gospel Medicine*. (Boston: Cowley Pub; 1995), 43

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor., 43.

<sup>3</sup> David Lose. Quoted in Rolf Jacobson "*Commentary on Exodus 19:1-6, 20:1-17*" [https://222.2orkingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2113](https://222.2orkingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2113) (accessed 3/1/2018).

*seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you up on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. NOW THEREFORE, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples...you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.* God first established the unconditional relationship. Only then did God make a claim on our behavior. *(repeat)*

And guess what? The claim on our behavior is for our well-being. The commandments, create a shape to our relationship. Not just anything goes. There are ways of life that work and ways that don't work. One commentator compares the promise to a tent and the Law to its tent poles. A tent without tent poles will not stand.<sup>4</sup> The whole point of the Law is to give us a way of life that works, a life worth living. It gives structure for a life that will be joyful and safe. As Diane read this morning in the Psalms: *"God will keep our lives, our going out and our coming in"* and this is what God is doing with the commandments. Ultimately the Law allows us to also have functional relationships with others, and to make the world a better place.

You probably know them by heart, but listen to the fresh way Barbara Brown Taylor interprets the 10 commandments.<sup>5</sup>

1. Have no other gods before me. (Other gods can do nothing for you. I am your God. Don't give anyone else my place in your hearts),
2. Do not make graven images (You don't need them. You have me)
3. Do not take my name in vain (Names are personal things. The fact that you know mine is a sign of our closeness. Do not abuse the privilege)
4. Keep the Sabbath (Stop working for 1 d/wk. Remember: you are more than what you do)
5. Honor your father and mother (Whatever kind of job they did, they are still your roots. Lose them and you lose your place in the story).
6. Do not murder (Life is precious to me. Until you can make it, don't take it)
7. Do not commit adultery (Don't mess around with marriage vows, yours or anyone else's. Sticking with one person is the best chance you've got of growing up).

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, 47.

8. Do not steal (Life may not be fair, but that doesn't mean you can't be)
9. Do not bear false witness (Don't give your word, which is as much a part of you as your arm or leg, on things you know aren't true. Why would you want to do that?).
10. Do not covet (Don't fondle other people's things in your mind. You'll soon resent them for having things; you'll soon resent yourself for not having them. Learn to want what you have and pretty soon you will have what you want).

Now, a final point. God does not force us to obey these commandments. There is no coercion to obey. The 10 Commandments are for free people... *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. They are, as OT scholar, Walter Brueggemann says, "a proclamation from God's own mouth of who God is and how God shall be practiced by the community of liberated slaves."*<sup>6</sup> The law shows us what free lives, which are NOT under the power of sin, look like.<sup>7</sup>

So, that's it. We can appropriately see the commandments as simply part of the promise. God, in essence, says, *"I will bear you up on eagles' wings because that's who I am and I will give you the Law to preserve your lives, because that's part of bearing you up."* And also the God of the gracious promise and the God of the Law are the same. In fact, the covenant of grace made with Moses reveals the same gracious God as the covenants with Noah and Abraham. And in fact this God is the same who also graciously did not abandon Adam & Eve, or Hagar, or David, or Hezekiah, or Jeremiah. In grace, God the Son was born in a Bethlehem stable and went to the cross on our behalf. Friends, ultimately, God's "will for our obedience God's treasured possessions, comes out of God's desire for our love and out of God's gracious love for us."<sup>8</sup>...no matter what. No matter what. Praise be to God. Amen

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann. The Book of "Exodus" in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), Vol 1: 841.

<sup>7</sup>Rolf Jacobson "Commentary on Exodus 19:1-6, 20:1-17" [https://222.2orkingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2113](https://222.2orkingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2113) (accessed 3/1/2018).

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, 49.