

Covenant: Down From the Mountaintop

Exodus 19:3-9; 20:1-17

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Who knew when I planned this sermon series months ago, that this would be the week Louisiana governor, Jeff Landry, would sign into law a bill requiring all elementary and secondary schools as well as state-funded universities to post the ten commandments on every classroom wall. I didn't plan it, but I'm happy to comment on it. Not only is this law unconstitutional, it contradicts one of the basic values this country was built on. Here in the United States, we separate church and state, and we do so because of the chaos and brutality our ancestors witnessed and experienced when religion was used as a tool of the state and vice versa. I'm already planning a sermon series on the dangers of Christian Nationalism later this year, so for today, I am only going to juxtapose this new law in Louisiana with the theme we have been exploring in this series - the covenants God has made with humanity because of God's deep desire to be in relationship with God's people.

Two weeks ago we looked at the covenant God made with Noah, a promise that God would never destroy all of creation again. Then, last week, we focused on God's covenant with Abraham in which God promised to make a nation out of the descendants of Abraham and Sarah - a covenant which included God's promises of prosperity, land, blessing, and protection. Each covenant reflects humanity's struggle with evil and God's ongoing desire for people to turn their backs on sin and embrace the wholeness and goodness for which God created them. This week, we advance several centuries to the covenant God made with God's people through Moses.

But first, a quick summary of the events leading from Abraham to Moses. Just as God promised him, Abraham went on to have many children. He is called the father of Israel through his son Isaac, whose mother was Abraham's wife, Sarah. He is called the father of the Arab world through his son, Ishmael, born to Hagar, Sarah's servant. Isaac went on to have two sons, Jacob and Esau, and Jacob had many sons including Joseph, widely known for his amazing technicolor dream coat. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers and landed in Egypt where he became an advisor to the Pharaoh. Years later, Joseph's many brothers and their father moved to Egypt, as well, and profited from Joseph's connection to the Pharaoh. They had children who had children and, as promised, Abraham's family grew and grew. Unfortunately, the Pharaoh died and his replacement didn't hold Joseph and his extended family in such high esteem. Soon, all of the people of Israel became slaves to the Egyptians.

For some centuries, the people suffered, they prayed to God for help, they cried out to God in fear and grief. Finally, God called Moses to lead them out of Egypt and to the land God had promised would be theirs so long before. Moses led them to freedom through the Red Sea and into the wilderness where they wandered for decades, always searching for the promised land.

A lot of things happened out there in the wilderness. The people were hungry, tired, and generally miserable. They behaved badly, frustrating both Moses and God. But, at last, they made it to the foot of Mt. Sinai where God made this covenant with them.

The first two covenants we've talked about - the covenant with Noah and that with Abraham - were God's promises made without expectations from humanity. They were covenants of grace - God's declaration of loving God's people unconditionally. Yet, this third covenant is more like the political treaties common in the Near East at the time in which the more powerful party promises care and protection to the less powerful but then expects obedience and loyalty in return.

We hear this expectation in what God tells Moses to say to the people. The covenant is, "If you faithfully obey me, you will be my holy nation and serve me as priests."

It's interesting how with each covenant God reveals more of God's self and God's purpose. With Noah, God is the great Creator. In the covenant with Abraham, God reveals God's vision of a nation of people, made in God's image, who will bring godliness to the world. Now, with this covenant, God reveals what that godliness looks like. The ten commandments, and all of the Law, are meant to teach Israel how to reflect who God is to the world by how they live as a counter-cultural community.

Terence Fretheim writes, "God's saving actions have drawn the people of God into a new orbit of life and blessing, to which the people respond by giving a certain "commandment shape" to their lives. (The commandments) have to do with the shape of daily life on the part of those already in relationship with God. They give shape to Israel's vocation." That vocation is to be a holy and pure example of godliness, a people set apart by their faithful obedience to God's commandments. If they obey, they will be blessed. If they disobey, they will be cursed. However, nothing they do can break the covenant. God will, as always, be faithful.

Fretheim goes on to say: "Moreover, the Commandments were not thought to be transmitted in a never-to-be-changed form. They were believed to require adaptation in view of new times and places."

I think this is critical as we question the role of the commandments in our modern society and public schools. The ten commandments, and the additional 600 plus laws which follow them, were given for a people living in a context completely different from our own. The laws were intended to protect Israel, keep them healthy, and keep them pure. Today, we understand that many of them are no longer appropriate for our context. For example, many of the dietary laws were meant to protect the people from food-borne illness. However, now we know how to prepare foods like pork and shrimp so they do not harm us. Other examples include, as President Bartlet reminds us in my favorite scene of the hit show "West Wing", that we no longer sell our daughters into slavery, punish those who wear garments made of two different materials, or execute people who work on the Sabbath.

So, am I saying that the ten commandments are not relevant to us today? Of course not. Many of them have become basic tenets of civic morality - particularly those that promote a safe and healthy community life. To live together peacefully, we accept that we should not commit murder or adultery, steal or covet our neighbor's possessions, or bear false witness against a neighbor. In principle, we believe that we should honor our parents, but our society has changed enough to recognize that for children who are abused by their parents, this could be challenging if not impossible.

The remaining four commandments all have to do with how we practice our faith, and they are perhaps the most important to adapt to our modern age. For example, we don't know the ways in which Israel took the Lord's name in vain, but we know today we often hear people use God's name to justify or promote the beliefs or desires of a particular person, group, or country - even when those beliefs and desires contradict the very values Jesus teaches us.

Similarly, while we don't make literal idols like the Golden Calf, we do make idols out of so many other things. From football to fitness to expensive cars and houses, the opportunities to worship other gods rather than our one God are plentiful in these United States. And it's so tempting because it is normalized in our society where success is measured in material wealth and beauty rather than in kindness.

In order to reach that success, we have all but obliterated the Sabbath. Where once the Sabbath was twenty-four hours without work or obligations, at best keeping the Sabbath holy now means going to church for one hour on Sunday. And that means we have so little time to reflect on our lives - the decisions and choices we make, what we value and why, where God is at work. So little time to rest and gain perspective. So little time to just be.

So, yes, the commandments which undergird God's covenant delivered by Moses at Mt. Sinai are still relevant. For those of us who embrace the Judeo-Christian tradition, they are worthy guides to living a faithful life particularly when adapted to our time and culture. But, to require schools to post them on classroom walls without regard for the exclusion and prejudice that action represents, to pass this law while at the same time refusing federal funding to feed hungry children this summer, this is to ignore the rest of our story, God's actions through Jesus Christ. Tune in next week as we celebrate that in Christ, God created a new covenant - a covenant embracing all of God's people and grounded in a new commandment. Jesus said: I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

May it be so. Amen.