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Exodus 19:3-7, 20:1-11
Rhythms of Life

Over the past month, we have been walking through texts from the Narrative Lectionary. A theme throughout these scriptures has been God's faithfulness to the people – to Noah, to Abraham and his descendants, Isaac and Jacob, to Jacob's children, including Joseph. Two weeks ago, Rebekah shared how after Joseph was exiled to Egypt his ability to interpret dreams helped to save the Egyptian people from famine. It also helped to reunite Joseph with his Hebrew family, who joined him in Egypt when famine struck their lands. This story of the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith is told in the first book of the Old Testament, Genesis. In the opening lines of the second book, Exodus, we learn that the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied, becoming numerous in population. We also learn that the Egyptian pharaohs, who once relied on the Israelite Joseph for guidance, now feared the Hebrew people. The fear was so great that the Israelites were enslaved by the Egyptians, forced to make bricks for vast building programs. Into this world of harsh labor and cruel treatment, a liberator was born – Moses. God called Moses to challenge the Pharaoh and ask for the freedom of the Hebrew people. When Pharaoh refused to let the people go, God through Moses visited plagues on the people of Egypt, until finally Pharaoh relented (temporarily) and Moses led the Hebrew people out of slavery.

In Exodus chapter 15 the Hebrew people begin their journey from the Red Sea to the promised land of Canaan through the desert. It doesn't take long for their whining and complaining about lack of food and water to begin. The Lord generously provides and yet the people continue to grumble. How soon they forget that the Lord bore them up on eagles wings, liberating them from slavery. We pick up the story here, three months after the Israelites left Egypt, as they are camped in desert in front of Mt. Sinai. Hear now these words from Exodus chapter 19, verses 3-7.

Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the Israelites: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you 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. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites." So Moses went, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him.

The story continues in Exodus chapter 20. The Lord descended to the top of Mt. Sinai and called Moses to join him at the top of the mountain. Hear now these words that we now know as the beginning of the Ten Commandments, from Exodus chapter 20, verses 1-11.

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 serve 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. Six days you shall labor 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. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

The Ten Commandments – or the Decalogue – Greek for the Ten Words – are familiar to most Americans even those who do not come from a Judeo-Christian background. Whether it is through Charleston Heston, Mel Brooks or Harrison Ford or the debates about displaying the commandments in public places, our society has come to know the Ten Commandments as laws or rules to live by. And yet when people are asked to name the Ten Commandments and whether they follow them, the four I read this morning are often overlooked. On the TV show *Family Feud*, when people were asked to name one of the commandments, the survey answers were: thou shall not kill, shall not steal, shall not lie, honor thy mother and father, no adultery, and thou shall not covet.¹

In a recent survey, 1700 Great Britons were asked the question which of the Ten Commandments do you believe are still important principles to live by today. At least 60% agreed that the five “thou shalt not” commandments” and the “honor thy parents” are still good commandments to live by. On the other hand, less than a third agreed that people should not worship idols (defined in the survey as statues or symbols), should not take the Lord’s name in vain or use the name of God as a curse, have no other Gods before the Lord or keep the Sabbath Day holy.² Similar results were found in a non-scientific survey conducted by the Mt. Deseret News, a Utah newspaper affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. While the percentages were a bit higher, the first four commandments came in last place with respect to their relevance for our world today.³

Are the Ten Commandments – especially the first four – archaic vestiges of a bygone era? A.J. Jacobs in his book *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* sets out to answer this question. Jacobs was a keynote speaker at the stewardship conference I attended two weeks ago. His talk was so thought-provoking and humorous that I bought his book. Jacobs, a self-described secular Jew at the beginning of the writing process, wrote down every rule, every guideline, every suggestion, every nugget of advice he could find in the Bible. As he says, “It is a very long list. It runs 72 pages.

¹ <https://www.familyfeudinfo.com/question.php?id=112076>

² <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/society/articles-reports/2017/10/25/most-brits-only-think-six-ten-commandments-are-sti>

³ <https://www.deseret.com/2018/3/28/20642391/poll-are-the-ten-commandments-still-relevant-today-americans-and-brits-differ-and-millennials-stand>

More than 700 rules. Some rules were wise, some completely baffling. Some were baffling at first, then wise. Some were wise first then baffling.”⁴

Jacobs found some rules easy to follow. For example, you shall not marry your wife’s sister was easy, especially since his wife does not have a sister. Living in an apartment in New York City, he was easily able to plant containers with different kind of seeds so as to not violate Leviticus 19:19: “You shall not plant your field with two kinds of seed.” He also found it easy to not consume eagles, vultures, kites, ravens, owls, hawks, ospreys, herons or bats.

Some rules were harder to follow than others, and into this category came our first four commandments. Jacob comments that it is hard not utter the name of another God – one of the ways we worship God, because English is filled with the names of pagan gods – even the days of the week are named for them: Thursday, for the Norse god of thunder Thor.

The second commandment was also challenging, but became somewhat liberating for Jacobs. He said, “No images. If you interpret the second commandment literally, then it tells you not to make a likeness of anything in heaven, on earth, or underwater. Which pretty much covers it. So I tried to eliminate photos, TV, movies, doodling. It made me realize we’re too visual in this culture. It made me fall in love once again with words, with text.”

Likewise, the fourth commandment to keep the sabbath was hard, but also rewarding. He confesses, “As a workaholic (I check my emails in the middle of movies), I learned the beauty of an enforced pause in the week. No cell phones, no messages, no thinking about deadlines. It was a bizarre and glorious feeling. As one famous rabbi called it, the sabbath is a “sanctuary in time.”⁵

For Jacobs the rhythm of his life – and that of his family - was completely changed by this year of living of biblically. Jacobs wrote the book in 2007 and during the Q & A following his talk, one of my fellow conference attendees asked him how the experience had changed him and if there were any rules he was still following. Jacob reflected about adopting a posture of gratitude and the new book he has written on that topic. He commented on how keeping sabbath time, whether a full day or parts of days throughout the week, had helped his family to grow stronger. However, it was his comments on the importance of gathering in community that really struck a chord with me.

Jacobs joined us at the conference via Zoom, as the day before he had been at the synagogue celebrating the Jewish New Year – Rosh Hashanah. While he acknowledged that he has not become a weekly attender, he has appreciated having a shared connection with others and raising his children within a community of faith and values.

I think Moses would resonate with this sentiment. It was a rag-tag group of people that Moses led out of Egypt. While there was some common experiences in their daily lives as slaves, the Hebrew people had not been shaped into a community. In the book of Genesis, God had established relationships with a family – the descendants of Abraham, and the farther removed from that time, the farther the memory faded of the promises – the covenant – God

⁴ A.J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*; Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2007.

⁵ These examples and quotes can be found on the Jacob’s website: <https://ajjacobs.com/resources/the-rules/>

made to bless Abraham's family. The threads weaving the families together became more tenuous. The rhythm of the nomadic life, the shared meals, the stories passed down from generation to generation while gathering water at the well or herding the animals was replaced by a rhythm of forced slavery. Brick upon brick; beating upon beating. And now the people had been liberated from that rhythm of bondage into freedom. And while they were freed from slavery, the Hebrew people were thrust into a life of the unknown – walking toward this Promised Land of milk and honey. Their destiny lay in trusting in God's providence. And friends, that is easier said than done.

The Lord recognized this challenge and gave the Hebrew people a gift – a promise – a covenant. As we heard in chapter 19, the Lord said, "Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." The covenant the Israelites were asked to keep are the ten words or commandments. While we often think of them as rules or even as burdens, I think they are better appreciated as providing a new rhythm of life for the Hebrew people. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, puts it this way: "[they are] not a series of rules, but a proclamation of who God is and how God shall be practiced by this community of liberated slaves. The God of the commands intends freedom and well-being in communion."⁶

Talk about a new rhythm of life. For the Hebrew people, they are called to embrace the one who led them out of oppression – to worship the Lord God – to have no other gods before their Lord; to trust a God they can not see or hear; cannot touch like the statues and idols of the other religions practiced in the area; to value the name of the Lord with such esteem that the Lord's name is not misused; and to dedicate the most valuable of commodities – time – to rest and enjoy the Lord. The remaining commandments gave shape to their communal life – how to care and respect each other as fellow children of God.

Likewise for us, these commandments can give a rhythm and shape to our lives that frees us from those idols to which we are enslaved. They can move us from a narrow existence of scarcity to a larger existence of abundant life. They move us from worshipping the lesser gods of power, money, beauty, prestige, influence –all transient in nature – to worshipping the eternal creator, redeemer and sustainer. They move us from thinking only about ourselves to thinking about our relationships with each other. What a gift!

I want to end by sharing a prayer attributed to OT scholar Walter Brueggemann that speaks to the parallels experienced by the Hebrew people wandering in that desert so long ago and to us in our 21st century world.⁷ Join me in prayer:

The demanding, relentless brick quotas
 kept arriving at daybreak for our ancient mothers and fathers.
They faced the harshness or harassment;
 the heat of the kilns,
 the bristles of straw collected.
And then, abruptly, all of that ended...

⁶ Walter Brueggemann. *The Book of Exodus. The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 1.* Abingdon Press, 1994, p841.

⁷ Prayer by Walter Brueggemann on reading Exodus 20:1-6

because you, Lord of liberty and justice, in an instant on a dark night,
you led our mothers and fathers out of bondage in singing and dancing, and in joy.
We remember that ancient bondage. We recall the flash of your emancipation.

We know that bondage now among us:

bondage of our caves of self-preoccupied, insular living,
bondage of our tribes of the like-minded in fear of all others;
bondage of the market and our mad chase after more;
bondage of theatre where we live make-believe lives.

But we ourselves also know the flash of your emancipation.

And because of that flash,

we know who you are,
we know the future you would give us;
we know your passion for justice;
we know your deep love for us and for our world.

And so we love you back, wholly, without compromise or distraction,
with all our heart, all our mind, and all our soul.

We will not so passionately love any other,
because you are the source of our life and our future.

We give you praise for your ancient deliverances.

We give you thanks for your liberating presence with us now.

We give you honor and glory for your good future to which you summon us.

You are the one who make us "free at last." And we love you! Amen.