

October 20, 2019 The Ten Exodus 20:1-21

I cannot think of a single time in ministry when I have attempted what I have tried to do in preparation for this day. I have done a series of messages on the Ten Commandments (usually a series of ten parts) a number of times during my almost 50 years in ministry. And by the way, I say almost 50 years for this reason...I was ordained by the Presbytery of Superior in Oliver Road Presbyterian Church in the evening of the 29th of August, 1972 in Port Arthur, Ontario, now known as Thunder Bay. Barbara and I met in that church. The Clerk of the Presbytery, The Rev. Clarke Hood, married us. But the fact is I served a 3 point charge, Nestleton, Milbrook and Ballyduff, in the Presbytery of Peterborough from August 1969 to June of 1972 as a student preparing for ministry. I have always said, I learned a great deal about doctrine, the Bible and Church History at Knox College. I learned about ministry serving Nestleton, Milbrook and Ballyduff. This morning I am going to try to say something relevant concerning the first four of the Ten Commandments. I tried to make it all Ten and to put it simply...I failed. Five to 10 will be next Sunday.

The first commandment: God identifies HIMSELF. "I am the God who brought you out of Egypt." What that means is that God identifies HIMSELF in terms the Hebrews can understand. They experienced this God's presence when they were still slaves. They experienced HIS breaking Egypt's grip on them as slaves. They came out of Egypt and not empty handed

you may recall. Their owners gave them gold to convince them to be gone. And they have experienced God's provision for them...from the crossing of the waters and escape from the chariots, to the provision of daily food. HE has been with them from there to Mount Sinai. They know HE is holy. They know HE has power. This God whom they know says, "You will have no other gods before me. It is an exclusivity clause. "I will be your God and you will be my people." The bond is real. It is an exclusive bond. Something we lose sight of...Jesus called the disciples. To you and I Jesus has said, "Follow me." That is how we wound up here. And together. The pledge of faith in Jesus is a pledge of faith in this God of Exodus. The God who accompanies us and opens the way for us. He begins by making a demand. It will be faith or faithlessness. God calls us to an exclusive relationship. That is where everything in the Ten Commandments begins.

The Second commandment builds upon the first. No idols. No images. It was one of the fundamentals of the Reformation that images even of Jesus were not to be items of worship. We do not pray to a painting even if we have one to remind us who it is we serve. We do not give to pictures our worship, our praise. It is not to an image that we present our prayers. This is a tightening of the bond of exclusivity in the first commandment. The key functions are faith and obedience, not sight. We are not called to picture God in our minds. Faith involves trusting Him to the very end of the journey, obeying

HIM even when obedience seems a hard thing to do, in an uncomfortably faithless world.

The Third commandment: HE declares HIS name sacred. We are not to use it carelessly. One commentary says this is a command to not swear that a false statement is actually true, using God's name. I take a more severe position than that. Careless oath speaking, so every day common practice in our time. Stub your toe. Bump into a door, a cupboard door that happened to be open. Stumbling on an uneven sidewalk. I have had to ask forgiveness too many times over just these kind of things for being careless with God's name. The cupboard door can remove skin from the roof of my head. It hurts. Times I am convicted by and ask forgiveness.

The 4th commandment is about yesterday, Sabbath, Sundown Friday to sundown on Saturday. You will search in vain for any injunction to keep the Sabbath in the whole of the New Testament Library. However, as I have many times said, one of the ultimate signs of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus on the 3rd day, the Sunday, is the instantaneous connection the disciples, the followers of Jesus made between the significance of what happened on Sunday morning, and the Sabbath rule...good Jewish boys and girls everyone of them... they gathered in the upper room to worship. And Sunday as the primary time for public worship with the believing community has been with us ever since. There may be other opportunities to gather for this purpose. But Sunday is always

going to be the anniversary of the resurrection, and therefore a special time to gather and praise God's name, to hear the Word, to receive the sacraments. And we do not remove commandment number 4 because we recognize the principle. One day in each week is set aside for public worship. At least one. Here we are, you and I.

It is really important to notice this: Commandments 1 to 4 are about our relationship with God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who is our Creator, our Redeemer, who is our pastoral friend, leading us, guiding us, shaping us, watching over us. We are told that the price we pay for being in relationship with HIM is that HE has an exclusive and unique relationship with us. HE is God and we are the sheep of HIS flock, HIS people. We are disciples following HIM, learning at HIS hand, Serving HIM in the midst of the journey that is ours as first of all real life, and secondly a life to be lived by faith in HIM.

He has an exclusive claim upon us. He has chosen us as surely as Jesus chose disciples, followers, the twelve and that larger number of 120 that gathered in the upper room. That even larger number that responded at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given to demonstrate that HIS power is still in the midst of His people. His gathered people. His assembled people.

We have been called to understand and live within the constraints of the weakness of sight. Seeing is no guarantee of

believing. Moses does not get to see God even as he receives this holy code of Ten Rules from God. In fact the Scripture teaches that to see God in the fulness of HIS holiness would cause us to perish. Would cause Moses to die. We are reminded by Scripture that to fall into the hands of the holy God is a fearful thing. This reality of a real relationship with God is one where sight does not really help. And the fact is that seeing with the eyes does not make faith any the less fragile.

What we have looked at this morning is called the first table of the law. The assumption is that these 4 commandments were inscribed on one stone tablet. That commandments 5-10 were inscribed on a second tablet. Because the 6 commandments that remain deal with an entirely different set of relationships.

One final word. It is often stated by scholars that there is little that is unique in what we have in Exodus chapter 20. They argue that the wisdom of these rules, these laws, is to be found in the legal codes of other religions, and numerous ancient cultures. I tend to take the opposite view. I believe that what we have here is so unique and so important for the created order, for people that God has in HIS wisdom found ways to share these sacred insights with many cultures and even through other religions. Do not misunderstand me. I am not suggesting that religions are all the same. Nor am I in any way trying to undermine the uniqueness of the Church on the one hand, and the Christian faith practiced by many

denominations on the other. The God who is Holy, who saves and sustains (that's a statement about the Triune nature of God), the Living God, has given us some fundamental rules to live by. We ignore what they teach us about God and ourselves at our peril.

Let us pray,

We give thanks for your commandments as part of your word to us. We give thanks that in them you make clear what we often do not see or understand on our own, namely that we need to be shepherded by YOU. Continue to open our minds to the fact that there are absolutes, no matter what people would like to think. Teach us truth. Teach us to receive love and to give it to others. Lead us Holy Spirit, as a small portion of your larger flock. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.