

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

**Third Sunday in Lent • March 4, 2018**

**Exodus 20:1-17 • Psalm 19 • 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 • John 2:13-22**

It's easy to get the Ten Commandments all wrong. Most of us aren't quite sure what to do with them. Some of us try to make them into a ten-step self help guide. If I don't covet my neighbor's house, if I try to honor my father and mother, if I try to rest on the Sabbath, then life will have to start going better for me. Some of us think that because Jesus frees us from the law and we live by grace, there is nothing to be learned from reading them. So you can take Exodus 20 and just cut it out of your Bible entirely. And some people just like the idea of the Ten Commandments. They like to think that all the world's problems would go away if people just took the Ten Commandments seriously. But ask those people to name the Ten Commandments and they will give you four or five tops.

There is, to be fair, one group, one group in Wyckoff no less, that gets the Ten Commandments right. That doesn't make the same mistake we do. And those are the folks over at Temple Beth Rishon. And if you want to see why, I would encourage you to go over to the temple sometime and find Rabbi Stephen and ask him a question: "What's the first commandment?" And Stephen will probably raise an eyebrow and say, "Your pastor couldn't tell you that? What's the matter with him?" But eventually Stephen will say, "The first commandment is 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage.'"

Do you notice what's different? If you go to Luther's Small Catechism at the back of your hymnal and look up the first commandment, it'll say something else. It'll say that the first commandment is "You shall have no other gods." That's a very telling difference.

If the first commandment, the one that sets up all the other ones, is "You shall have no other gods," then the commandments are just that. Commandments. Law. Rules. And since rules are hard to follow, we try to get a handle on them by making them a self-help guide. Or a legal code. Or just get rid of them entirely. The problem we have with the Ten Commandments is that we don't count them right. And because we don't count them right, we don't read them right either. We forget what the folks over at Beth Rishon know, which is that the Ten Commandments are all about covenant.

During this season of Lent, we are getting a whirlwind tour of God's covenants from the Old Testament. So far we've heard about God's covenants with "all flesh" after the infamous flood and about God's covenant with Abraham's descendants. And today the circle of God's covenant making gets a little tighter. This new covenant includes one branch of Abraham's descendants, the people we call the Israelites.

And the Israelites, this offshoot on Abraham's family tree, were enslaved in Egypt. They were under the thumb of pharaoh. They always had to be producing more, something of value for the king. Their entire life, their relationships, their sense of history, their sense of meaning, their sense of identity, were all wrapped up in their identity as slaves of their Egyptian rulers. Of a people living under domination. Of being made subservient. Of experiencing life as an endless series of commands. Their entire existence was hearing "No" over and over again. And so the Israelites "groaned" out to God. And God heard their groaning. And so God led them out of slavery through the Red Sea into freedom.

End of the story, right? The Israelites lived in slavery, God led them out of slavery. Problem, solution, done. Not quite. Because when the Israelites make it across the Red Sea into freedom, there's nothing on the other side. They get to the promised land eventually, but it takes forty years. When they cross the Red Sea, it's just a desert. It's just wilderness. And so people start to

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complain. Maybe they should just go back to Egypt. Why did they listen to Moses anyway? What were they thinking?

And God responds to their complaints, to their insecurity about what lies ahead, by calling them to Mount Sinai. And at the base of this mountain, with all the Israelites gathered around, God speaks. “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” God says, I am the one who liberated you. And I am still present with you. Where you look out from the Red Sea and see nothing, no possibility, no growth, no direction, I see my covenant with you. To a people who are so used to hearing, “I am your master, do what I say.” “I am the Pharaoh, do it now.” “I am the king, stop complaining.” They now hear, “I am the LORD your God.” Instead of being met with another command, another set of instructions, they hear an announcement, a word of good news about the God who led them out of slavery.

And that initial declaration of who God is changes everything that comes after. It’s telling that Christians call these the Ten Commandments, but the Hebrew Bible calls them the Decalogue or the “ten words.” Because they aren’t commands like the ones they used to hear back in Egypt. Because these words from God are an invitation to be a part of God’s covenant relationship and a community oriented not toward the whims of Pharaoh or any other leader, but toward the steadfast love of God.

The commandments about God, the words about God, aren’t about keeping the right doctrine so much as honoring their relationship with God. Having no other gods isn’t just about not having idols. It means acknowledging God’s singular role in liberating the Israelites from slavery.. Not taking the name of God in vain isn’t just about misusing God’s name. It means not using God to baptize our own desires or our own agendas and calling them holy. And honoring the Sabbath isn’t just about not working. It means remembering that all of your life is totally dependent on God’s generosity, not on your own achievements. The God of Mt. Sinai, the God who gives these commandments, is a God who is not satisfied to be an “it.” This is a God who always wants to be a “you.”

Just as an aside, we saw one legacy of this in our confirmation class last week when we talked about psalms of lament. The psalms which make up most of the book of psalms that are about the struggles in our lives. And they’re all a little different in their own ways except for one thing, which is that they’re all addressed to God. They believe God isn’t someone to be talked about but someone to be talked to. Whenever some tragedy happens, we’re often left wondering why God let this happen. And so we ask a bunch of people who seem smart and wise. And there’s obviously nothing wrong with asking that question, but, according to the psalms, you shouldn’t ask other people until you’ve asked God. The most radical, the most surprising things about the psalms of lament, isn’t that they talk about suffering. It’s that they take their grievances directly to God. They take God’s invitation to relationship seriously.

And because God wants to be in relationship, wants to be addressed as *you*, all of the relationships within the community change. All of the commandments about life in community are addressed to “you.” Which is unusual. The other legal codes, the other ways of organizing society, of mediating conflicts in the culture around the Israelites, none of them were about “you.” They were all about “someone.” And because they were all about “someone,” they never put any claim on you. As long as you didn’t do something wrong, they didn’t concern you. And, not only that, they were all about punishment. If “someone” steals your property, this is the punishment. If “someone” lies about someone else, this is the punishment. And so the entire setup is about courts. It’s about holding people responsible for their actions against the welfare against the community.

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This is not how the Ten Commandments envision life in community. The Ten Commandments don't see community as a problem that needs to be contained, they see it as a gift of God. That's why they're all addressed to "you." Because God's covenant with us and our community with one another is a gift. It's something that stakes a claim on us. It's not something we can stand outside of, as well this isn't about me, it's all about "someone."

If you want a super tangible example of that, look at the last commandment: "You shall not covet... anything that belongs to your neighbor." All of the behavior the other commandments talk about are public. If you kill someone, somebody else will notice. If you steal someone's property, that person will notice. If you commit adultery, someone else will notice. But if you covet something in your head? If you fantasize about hurting someone? If you commit adultery in your heart? No one will notice. Every other legal code, every other society, would say that it doesn't matter. Because you didn't actually harm anyone. You didn't actually do anything. But the Ten Commandments are about building up communities that reflect God's graciousness and mercy with us. Not with containing the damage we do to one another. The Ten Commandments are God's "Yes" to life lived in community. And they envision what it means to live in communities that are formed by gratitude for God's steadfast love. So that we can be as gracious with one another as God has been gracious with us.

The Ten Commandments are about people. They are about community. But, as Rabbi Stephen will be the first to tell you, they are first and foremost, about God. About how God has decided to be for and with the Israelites. About how God has redeemed their community from slavery and brought them into freedom. And hasn't abandoned them to the perils of the wilderness but promises to continue to be their God. As we come closer to Easter, we remember that same covenant, that same transformation that God makes in our lives. How God brings us through death into new life. And doesn't abandon us to the wilderness of our lives, but inaugurates a new covenant of blessing and a new community of mercy.

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