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“God Comes First”

Exodus 20:1-3

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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.

Exodus 20:1-3

The Ten Commandments have a bad reputation. The movie they show every Easter does not help. Cecil B. DeMille's 1956, *The Ten Commandments*, is four hours without a single subtle moment. Charlton Heston climbs the mountain for a face-to-fiery-special-effects talk with God who speaks King James' English. Down the mountain Edward G. Robinson leads the suddenly scantily-clad Hebrews in the only R-rated scene my mother ever paid to see. It is Cecil's fault that some think of the Ten Commandments as God's angry response to Yul Brynner.

As if the movie is not enough to make the Ten Commandments seem dated, once in a while, some politician who could not name four of the ten, but wants to get his name in the news, will make a disingenuous argument for displaying the commandments in government buildings. By using holy scripture for political gain, these politicians are breaking at least the first three commandments.

What would happen if a Muslim judge in Mississippi decided to post the Qur'an in his courtroom? Or what if a judge decided to hang all of Exodus 20 on the wall? The last two verses in this chapter quote God saying, "Do not build an altar for me with steps leading up to it. If you do, you will expose yourselves as you go up the steps." Those peculiar verses do not make it on to nearly as many Bible bookmarks as the verses that precede them.

Hanging the Ten Commandments on the wall seems like a particularly ineffective way to change behavior.

Someone argued, “Hanging the Ten Commandments on the walls of public buildings to correct behavior will do about as much as putting more Gideon Bibles in hotel rooms to stop adultery.”

But the biggest problem with the Ten Commandments is the name—“The Ten Commandments.” “The Ten Values” or “The Ten Suggestions” would be better for most of us. Or maybe, “Ten recommendations that are open for discussion.” Commandments are anachronistic, antiquated, old-fashioned—especially 3,400-year-old commandments.

Some of us grew up with a “thou shalt not” version of Christianity that made following the rules feel like avoiding everything that is interesting. Faith was presented as old and joyless, mumbling in the corner and casting sour looks at the young people’s fun: “Let’s find out what the kids are doing and make them stop.”

Those of us who grew up with negative religion, but feel like we have since been set free by God’s grace keep our distance from commandments. We question authority. We do not like rules. We think calling someone a legalist is as bad as an insult can be. We tend to think of the law as telling us only what we cannot do.

Laws might keep us from being our worst, but they cannot help us be our best. If it is law versus grace, we know which side we are on. We believe in tolerance and acceptance.

Every Sunday we have an assurance of forgiveness. We never have an assurance of judgment. When people ask us to describe Plymouth, we say, “Our church is big on love and grace.” We do not say, “Our church is big on laws.”

We want a church that is more happy-go-lucky grace

than law-infested judgment. We have a negative view of laws—until we need one. “Live and let live” sounds wonderful, until we encounter a moment when we realize how incomplete disdain for the law is as a philosophy. Something frustrating makes us want rules. We need some rules. We love some rules.

Do not walk slow on a busy sidewalk. If you are in a group, do not walk side by side and take up the whole sidewalk. The walk signal is a suggestion. Jay walking is a birthright. Let us off the train before you try to get on. Never get into an empty subway car.

Black is the new black and it goes with everything. If you see a celebrity, you did not see that celebrity. Be cool. Wear ear buds. Stay on the right side of escalators. If a bodega does not have a cat, do not eat there.

We need accepted standards of behavior—especially when a twenty-year-old parks his jeep in a handicapped spot. When you are at a basketball game and the person in front of you insists on throwing his arms up in the air every time his team scores. When your office has only a tiny refrigerator and one co-worker takes up half the space with twelve cans of Diet Coke.

We need rules when you are in a crowded movie theater, the cell phone of the person seated behind you starts ringing—honest mistake—but instead of turning the ringer off, she begins a conversation, “I’m at a movie. No, go ahead. I’ve seen it before. We’re at the part where we meet the murderer, but we don’t know she’s the murderer.”

When you are in charge of a meeting where someone walks in thirty minutes late and asks, “Did I miss anything?” When you are listening to a sermon that took the preacher a long time to write and the people in front of you are

whispering. When we are feeling free, we do not want guidelines, but it is never long before we need some helpful hints.

We need rules, shared understandings, and a common sense of how to get along. We do not welcome rules when we are thinking only of ourselves, but we need instructions if we are going to act like Christians. We love freedom so much we do not recognize that freedom at its best is not heading every direction at once, but using our freedom to actually go somewhere. One of God's best gifts is the gift of focus.

The Hebrew people had a wonderful taste of freedom, and then they had to figure out what to do with their freedom. You remember the story. Moses—a murderer minding his own business out in the wilderness—sees a burning bush and hears a voice that tells him to lead the people out of Egypt, where they have been in slavery for 400 years. Moses protests. God insists. The Pharaoh resists, but the people escape.

They assume everything is perfect now, but it is not. They have the freedom they have always wanted and do not know what to do with it. They do not know how to be a community. Getting out of Egypt was long-overdue. Now they need directions to the Promised Land.

Notice that God did not start by giving the Israelites the law and telling them to follow it. God first shows them grace, then the people want direction. They are not listening for restrictions that will hold them back, but for instructions on how to live with purpose.

They listen for God and this is what they hear God say: "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.”

The first commandment is that we do not use God. We worship God. We should not try to get something out of God. We should bend our lives toward God. In worship, in this constant, weekly, repetitious bending of our lives toward God, we are moving toward freedom and away from the idolatries that threaten us. In worship, we realize how serious our inclination is toward ignoring God.

William Sloane Coffin suggested a new first commandment. He said the commandment for Americans should not be, “You shall have no other gods before me,” but instead should be, “You shall have at least one God.”

The problem for us may not be whether we choose God rather than the other options, but whether we believe in God at all. Most people in the church would say they believe in God, but the idea that our lives are claimed by God who demands our allegiance is hard to take seriously. We disobey the first commandment not with a defiant decision, but by vaguely drifting away.

Annie Dillard writes this line in one of her stories: “A woman of the Roman Empire had a wastrel son—a grown son, intelligent and spirited, ‘who was throwing away his life on the deep misery of idle pleasures.’” Isn’t that a wonderful, painful phrase, “throwing away his life on the deep misery of idle pleasures”?

Our mistake is not worshipping any God at all. We live without a sense of anything bigger than we are, because a thousand small things get in the way. Our interior lives are a muddle of to-do lists, good intentions, guilt, and greed. We do not deny God. We just lose interest. Those trivial things we hold on to keep us from holding on to what is

more important. The purpose of the first commandment is to invite us to hope.

Martin Luther said the meaning is: “See to it that you let me alone be your God and never seek (a terrible substitute).”

We live in a city famous for being secular. We are tempted not to notice that we still have a longing for authenticity and a hunger for meaning. Without paying nearly enough attention, we still have moments of wonder, often uncalled for and inexplicable, that invite us to the Mystery of God.

What would happen if we were intentional about listening for God? We might experience God leading us to the love at the center of our souls. God’s hope will shape our lives, make demands, and show us joy. God knows how great our potential is, and how tragic it is when we invest ourselves in what is unimportant.

We long for God—even when we are not sure what that means. Paying attention to the yearning we feel deep down is itself following God’s dreams for us. When we are dissatisfied with shallow lives, it is because God wants more for us. God offers obscure, mystical intuitions that there is truth more wonderful than we have imagined, grace beyond what we have suspected, and hope greater than we have dreamed.

Martin Luther King, Jr, preached about the hope of focusing on God, “I still have a dream that with this faith we will be able to adjourn the councils of despair and bring new light into the dark chambers of pessimism. With this faith . . . It will be a glorious day, the morning stars will sing together, and the children of God will shout for joy.”

If we listen, we will hear in this first commandment the echo of Jesus saying that the greatest commandment is, “Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind.”

When we love God, life is less random, more focused; less chaotic, more meaningful. I was not paying enough attention to catch the name of the conductor, but a commentator on a classical music broadcast described an orchestra’s conductor by saying that he “devoted his life to the direction of his orchestra with a single-minded dedication that went out of style decades ago.”

That commentator may be right. Single-minded dedication may be out of style, but if that is true, it is a pity. Because we still have the hope of a single-minded dedication that leads to a fulfilling, focusing, joyful devotion to truth.

Our hope is that we will look for purpose as well as freedom, and in so doing see that the way to be truly free is to make God our hope. Listen to God’s dreams. Take God’s kindness seriously. Make God’s love our priority. Find our vision in God’s hopes and our freedom in God’s grace.

If we listen carefully, we will hear God say, “I am the Lord your God, who brings you out of slavery to your own short-sightedness and into the freedom of a bigger, better way. You should let me lead you to the best kind of life, a life of freedom, a life of grace.”

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