

## Narrative Lectionary: Hear, O Israel

October 6, 2019

Today we have a story that comes after the people have been delivered from slavery and have walked through the wilderness for 40 years. They're about to enter the Promised Land. Here's the lighter side of the journey. (Show cartoons)

The people have wandered around the wilderness for 40 years, because they were disobedient. (not because Moses wouldn't ask for directions). In fact, everybody who left Egypt has died, and Moses is now traveling with their children and grandchildren. Moses is standing with all the people on the Plains of Moab, to the east of the Jordan River

But before the people cross the river, Moses gives them the commands of the law one more time. After all, Deuteronomy means the "second law." Moses is like a great coach at the halftime of a football game, reminding his players who they are and what they're playing for and how they play the game.

He recites again the law that was given at Mt. Sinai, in Deuteronomy called Mt. Horeb. And as I said, none of the Hebrew people who were slaves in Egypt are in the audience. But listen to what Moses says: "Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently. The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today." We hear that and we say, Well, that's not true. God didn't make the covenant directly with these people; God made it with their parents and grandparents.

But this is the way God speaks to the faithful community: This covenant is with *you*. This message is for *you*. These laws are for *you*. It's why in the language of the Passover Seder, the leader says, "In every generation each Jew should regard himself as though he personally went forth from Egypt."

It's why we read Scripture every Sunday, because it is *our* story. When Jacob fights with his brother, *that's our story*. When he wrestles with God, and walks away with a limp, *we're the ones staggering off*. When the people are delivered

from slavery in Egypt, we know the ways *God has delivered us from sin and death, from addiction and despair and brokenness.*

So Moses says to the people, even though they weren't literally at Mt. Sinai when the law was given, "Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us alive here today."

Moses reminds them what God had said on Mt. Sinai: "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." Notice this about God- God is the One who always begins the relationship. God is always the One moving towards us. It is why we Lutheran and Episcopalian and Roman Catholic Christians have no trouble baptizing infants, because we believe that God starts the relationship. A little one comes in the arms of people of faith, who say, We want God's gifts for our child. And God begins the covenant with that little one. God begins the action, and we respond.

God says, I am the Lord your God. And what am I all about? I am the One who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. God is the One who saves. God is the one who rescues. God is the One who delivers us from the forces that bind us and brings us into freedom. If you are in recovery from an addiction, you know what it is like to be delivered day by day. The One whom 12-steppers call the Higher Power delivers from slavery.

So God says, Because of who I am, because I did that for you, and because I do that for you daily, Here are some rules to live by in community. First of all, I don't want you to have any other gods. This is the first of the Ten Commandments. God says, Don't put anything in front of me.

Now before we start talking about these Ten Commandments, I need to say, We aren't made right in God's eyes by how well we keep the law! The law serves a couple of different functions, but it doesn't make us right with God. Only God can do that for us. You've heard me say this before: The law provides order for society. It keeps chaos in check. We know what the rules are in a marriage, and if we obey that sixth commandment about being faithful to our spouse, we have a better chance for our marriage to survive. We will have less chaos in our marriage. The law provides order for society and for our relationships.

And the laws we have in scripture drive us to Christ! We try to obey them, we try to keep them as well as we can, and we fall flat on our face. We realize we can't do what God wants us to do: we don't honor our marriage vows; we don't love our enemies like we ought to; we harbor resentments in our heart. We realize we can't do this on our own, we need a Savior, and it drives us to Christ. So the first use of the law is that it provides order in society; the second use is that it drives us to Christ.

So God explains what we call the First Commandment. Don't have any other gods before me. Don't even think about doing what some of your neighbors are doing, carving out little statues of heavenly or earthly or marine-like creatures, and then bowing down to them like they can do something for you.

I don't suppose we have modern day versions of that, do we? Well, maybe we have a few things that we "bow down to": sports, money, drugs, technology, the quest for more and better stuff, our political ideologies left or right. Anything can become a god if I let it dominate my decisions, if I let it capture too much of my time and energy and checkbook. What's the first thing I think about when I wake up in the morning? What do I turn to when I'm in need? What do I talk about, dream about, and spend most of my day thinking about? How would I fill in the blank- All I need is \_\_\_\_\_ to make me happy. Maybe those are good questions to consider whether something has become so important in my life that it's crowding out my connection with God.

God says, Don't have other gods, "for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generations of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments."

OK, stop right there, you say: That's not fair! Why should children and grandchildren be punished for the sins of their parents and grandparents? Maybe the old King James language is better here: Visiting the iniquity of the parents on the children. And isn't that what happens? The failures of parents are often visited on their children: How often do addictions get passed from one generation to the next? How about child abuse? In a study of 301 inmates in a New York prison, 68% said they had been subject to child abuse before they were 12 years of age. Almost 7 out of 10 inmates had child abuse in their background. (U.S Department

of Justice, *Early Childhood Victimization Among Incarcerated Adult Male Felons*, April 1998)

Are the failures of one generation often visited on the next? Of course they are. And the exception is when intervention occurs from one generation to the next; when people receive therapeutic healing; when God is allowed to work in a transformative way; when hearts and minds are changed.

I don't have time this morning to go through all Ten Commandments, but I'll call our attention to several. How about the Third Commandment, "Observe the Sabbath, and keep it holy." Take a day to rest, God says. Get your work done in six days. In fact, in the first story of creation in Genesis, God creates this universe in six days, and then rests on the seventh, so if God needs to take a day off, so do we!

I believe taking some time for Sabbath rest is a faith statement. It says that we trust God enough that the work will get done. We trust God enough to believe that God doesn't need us fixing the world 24/7. And Luther says, Don't forsake gathering together around the Word and Sacraments. Set aside personal and family and community time to hear the Word and pray and sing.

Now, fewer and fewer people are connecting to what we do Sunday morning. I heard a researcher talk about that this week, and he said the interesting thing is, so many of these folks are seeking spirituality in other ways: they're taking walks in the woods, and practicing yoga and meditation, and doing works of charity. He said, They are looking for a connection with God, they're just not looking to institutional religion for that.

So I am envisioning Prince of Life as a place where people can link up with us on the spiritual journey, and maybe they don't show up here Sunday morning, but we will be on a journey together with people in our community who want to deepen their spiritual lives. They want to encounter the Divine. So do I. We can work together on that.

Or how about commandments 5-8: You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." God is saying to the people, you live in community! I brought you out of slavery into freedom, but it's not so you can hurt your neighbor! I brought you out to live in community with a group of people. And I want the rest of the world to see Me in you. So that means you treat people a certain way.

The 5th Commandment says, You shall not murder. And we say, Well, I haven't done that, so I'm ok. Martin Luther in his explanations to the Ten Commandments always adds a positive admonition to each commandment, not just don't do this, but have you done this? For the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment, he says, We are to fear and love God so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life's needs. So we need to ask, Have we *helped* our neighbor? Are we proactive about keeping our lifestyles to a certain point so that we can help our neighbor in need?

I saw an article about scientists who studied neural activity by measuring brain waves. It said that, "Hard as it may be to believe in these days of infectious greed and sabers unsheathed, scientists have discovered that the small, brave act of cooperating with another person, of choosing trust over cynicism, generosity over selfishness, makes the brain light up with quiet joy." God has designed us so that it even *feels* good to help our neighbor!

After the Ten Commandments, Moses offers a kind of distillation of the commandments. He says, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you ate at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise up." (Deut. 6:4-7)

When someone asks Jesus what the most important commandment is, he recites this one, and he adds, Love your neighbor as yourself. Love God and love your neighbor, as you love yourself. If you do that, you will obey all the commandments.

What does it mean to love God with all your heart? The heart in Hebrew thought is the place of the will- the place where you make decisions. Love God with your choices. It does have a sense of emotions as well, so love God full-throatedly with your choices!

Love God with your soul. In Hebrew soul is the vital life-force in us. It's the source of vitality. We might associate that with our personality. Love the Lord God the way *you* love God, with your life-force, your personality, your being. And love God with all your might- with all your senses, with all your physical being.

Mary Jo Tyler gave me a book of her photography and poetry several weeks ago, and I found a poem beside this picture of a beautiful yellow rose bush. It's a poem

about experiencing and loving God with more of our senses: Morning, sitting, listening, for your voice within. Instead you come as a fragrance, floating on the breeze and deeply I inhaled. If I had seen, it would have been with my own vision; If I had heard- with my own ears, but coming as a fragrance I could only receive you. Perhaps, traveling on my breath, you could reach places within that sight or sound could not.

Moses says, Love God with all your heart and soul and strength, and Jesus adds, love your neighbor as yourself. By the way, love doesn't have so much to do with affection as it does with commitment. Whether you feel like it or not, do the work of love. Be committed to doing the actions of love.

Let me close with a story. The movement against slavery got started in the British Empire in a print shop in London in 1787. Twelve men met there, including a number of Quakers, and one man who was a Tory member of Parliament. People in the Empire were beginning to enjoy sugar at that point, and it was hard for them to see the connection between the sugar they were enjoying and the cruelties of keeping another person in slavery. Nobody had a vested interest in seeing the end of slavery. But these twelve Christian men believed in the policy statement of their leader Jesus, who said, Love your neighbor as you love yourself. And they began to tell the story of slavery, to tell the true cost of the sugar that people were enjoying.

These twelve men changed their world, because they loved God and their neighbor with a commitment for change. How will we change our world this week? Maybe not in some big way, but how will we change our middle school, our workplace, our neighborhood, because we loved an enemy, because we forgave somebody, because we reached out with a hand of generosity, because we sent an email to an elected official, because we didn't hate somebody in return. We won't do it by our own strength. We'll do it with the Spirit's help. Amen.

