

Rules for Life – Exodus 20:1-17 – March 4, 2018

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On this third Sunday of Lent we continue to look at the covenants found in the Old Testament. The first covenant came in the story of the great flood. The story tells us that God had created everything in the world and called it good, but over time, corruption had crept in and distorted what was once called good. God was especially frustrated that humanity, specifically created to be in close relationship with God, had turned away, embracing violence.

God choose one man, Noah, and his family to start over. And we know the story of Noah building the ark and bringing aboard a male and female of every type of creature on the earth. The flood decimated all animal life on earth, except those safely sheltered in the ark. Following the flood, God hung the colorful bow in the sky as a promise to all humanity that God would never again destroy life in a flood. Out of God's great love for the creation, God was willing to give a second chance, even if creation, and especially humans, choose to turn away from God's offer of relationship.

A second covenant came when God chose Abram and Sarai to be the parents of multitudes of nations. God still was longing to have a relationship with humankind and found this couple to be righteous and upstanding. God sent them away from their tribe into a new land and promised them a son. In their advanced age, the couple where mystified by this promise, but never gave up hope.

Years later, God returned to them, changed their names to Abraham and Sarah, and forged a covenant with them. Through this covenant, God would bless them with offspring more numerous than the sands on the beach. The elderly couple laughed, but still they believed. God sealed this covenant with the sign of the circumcision of Abraham and his male descendants, who would belong to God forever.

The promise to Abraham and Sarah was fulfilled, and their progeny through Isaac and Jacob became the tribe of Hebrews. The Hebrews were eventually enslaved by Egypt, but God raised up Moses as a deliverer of the people. Moses led the Hebrew people into the wilderness in search of the land God had promised to them. It was in the wilderness, at Mount Sinai, where God forged another covenant – what we call the Ten Commandments.

God still longed for relationship with human beings, but God also knew that they needed direction. What we find in the Ten Commandments is not simply a list of rules to follow, but instead we find directions for a way of living life that is based on relationships of love and care. In fact, before God even sets out listing the commandments, God prefaces the list with the reminder of the relationship that has already been established with the people. "I am the Lord your God" - God is already their God, "who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house

of slavery” - God reminds of the love shown to them through releasing them from their oppressors so they might live a more full life.

The first four commandments reinforce humanity’s relationship with God and show them a life that is quite different from they have known and experienced under the oppressive rule of Egypt. They begin by emphasizing putting God first in our lives, not human rulers. They involve worship and honor of God alone over any other, they call for respect for who God is and how God works in the world. The institution of the Sabbath reminds the people of God’s role as creator and the seven days of creation and, like God, expects humanity to take the seventh day as a day of Sabbath rest.

Humans are not equal to God, but that doesn’t mean we can’t have a relationship with God. The first four commandments lay the basis for loving God as Creator and Savior. These commandments lay out a framework of a community that is based on a mutual relationship between God and the people – a relationship of love.

These first four commandments then naturally lead to the next six, which spell out how we as humans are to relate to our fellow humans. If one is to love God, then what flows out of that love is love for neighbor. It is a respect for other human beings who are loved and cared for by God just as we are. God has brought us into a life of freedom, out of bondage, how then can we imagine, intentionally hurting or abusing or taking advantage of someone else. And so God spells out for us what it means to respect others – don’t dishonor them, don’t hurt them, don’t cheat them, don’t take their stuff, and don’t envy their stuff. These all add up to pretty basic outline for civil society. But oh how easy it is to slip into our habits of putting ourselves first.

It is fitting then, in this season of Lent, where we are called to examine our sinfulness and repent of it, that we are reintroduced to these basic rules for life. And if we really think carefully about them, we may become discouraged by the reality of how many of them we tend to break on a regular basis, especially if we consider them in light of what Jesus taught us in the Sermon of the Mount. It’s not only the action itself that is sinful, it’s the mental consideration of the action as well. We probably will never kill another person, but have we ever had dark thoughts about someone else?

And this is not to say that we are in fact condemned because we can never live up to the expectations that are put upon us. But what these commands do is to help us refocus, to get back on track. Yes, we slip up. Yes, we treat others with disregard, we put worship of other people and things before our worship of God. But when we are reminded of the commandments, we remember that we don’t have to continue live in a way that is less what God hopes for us.

This is the same message preached by Jesus. He often spoke of the Kingdom of God coming near. This kingdom is described as one in which God and humans share completely loving relationships with one other. All people are released from the bonds of those things that keep us from living lives of wholeness. Jesus summarizes the commandments when he says to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.

So I encourage us all, as we continue our Lenten journeys of introspection and self-reflection to consider the Ten Commandments. Think about those habits we have that cause us to fall away from the very best that God has meant for us to experience in life. Where can we draw closer to God and closer to neighbor? Where can we strive to more fully live out our part of this covenant we have with God as the beloved people of God?