

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.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

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The reading from Exodus this morning might be the most famous passage of scripture in the world. And what it brings up for people can range from images of Charlton Heston or Supreme Court arguments to Sunday School or confirmation classes. For too many people, it just stimulates guilt.

We are dead center in the season of Lent. Two Sundays behind us and two more before Holy Week. And here in the middle of the Lenten desert this morning, first we get the Decalogue followed by a collect saying that “we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves.”

And then we hear this reading from Exodus that can sound like a list of the rules that we routinely break and, apparently, just generally disappoint God.

It may be a little excessive, I'll admit. We can start to imagine that the church wants us to *know* that we are, as the 1928 Book of Common Prayer put it, "miserable offenders." And nothing more.

To be fair, taking inventory of our character and behavior during Lent is good. Holding ourselves accountable to a moral code is fine, especially when so many of us seem to have forgotten the basics: Don't touch without permission. Don't lie. Mostly tell the truth. Don't take things that aren't yours. Don't call each other names or hurt each other. You know, the kinds of rules our grandparents taught us.

The list that God gave Moses is not bad: Honor dad and mom. Of course, that's about maintaining the right of future generations of Israelites to inherit their parent's property. At least it's a bit more clear than "You are not to take up the name of YHWH your God for emptiness...", which we completely misinterpret and have turned into "don't cuss." And then we do that anyway.

How about "Don't steal?" That actually refers to kidnapping, but still... Don't adulter – well, that one's not really for kids. Right, well, at least there's "Don't make idols or let your parents make idols because, well, God is a jealous God who punishes children for the iniquity of their parents."

OK, maybe our grandparents do have a better starting list.

The truth is, the Decalogue was intended to be much more than a simple checklist of moral behaviors. "Decalogue," by the way, is just a Latin version of the phrase in Hebrew that means "ten words" or "ten utterances." And we don't recite them on every Sunday morning in Lent to instill self-loathing.

We hear them and pray for God's mercy because God *continues* to inspire the Ten Utterances with liberating insights. It's our human

misunderstanding that shrinks them into constraining rules that, at best, reveal our sins and our need for redemption.

When we reduce them to a list of rules, we often drop the most important words from the very beginning. “God spoke all these words.” Please notice: that’s “words,” not “commandments.” What follows is God’s direct address to the children of Israel and the introduction is essential to our understanding: “I am YHWH your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from a house of serfs.”

YHWH is not some earthly, legalistic tyrant. YHWH, *your God*, liberates slaves and becomes their sovereign *only* with their consent. The Ten Words are not a code of laws meant to stand alone without context.

Ten weeks after escaping Egypt, Moses and the people have finally reached Sinai. They have a vague, undeveloped sense of common purpose, as well as a few stories about their common heritage and a reinterpreted harvest festival for a ritual.

Moses tells them that they have three days to wash their clothes and purify themselves in preparation for meeting with God. Daybreak on the third day comes with thunder and lightning, a heavy cloud on the mountain and an exceedingly loud blast of the ram’s-horn trumpet.

And as the people take their place at the foot of the mountain, Mount Sinai is covered in smoke because YHWH, the God of Israel, has come down in fire. All the mountain trembles exceedingly. And in the midst of this overwhelming spectacle, the Holy One speaks the Ten Utterances that form a new covenant with the people. And the utterances begin with: “I am the Eternal One your God.”

Now, this not the first new covenant that God has made. On the first Sunday in Lent, we heard about the promise to Noah. Last Sunday, we heard about the covenant with Abraham. There will be renewals at the end of Moses’ life and again during Joshua’s life, and then during reigns of Hezekiah and Josiah. And yet another covenantal renewal will come after the Babylonian exile.

There *is* a difference in the Sinai covenant. God did not ask Noah or Abraham for their agreement. Here at Sinai, God made a fully mutual covenant, not with one prophet, but with all the people. The Ten Words, you see, are *first* about *who* the Israelites *are* and *secondly* about how they might behave because of who they are.

With the Ten Utterances, our grandmothers and grandfathers in the faith entered a reciprocal relationship with the Eternal One, a partnership that depends on human consent. This is a Jewish notion that many Christians have only recently begun to accept and explore.

And yet, we can trust that this covenant is also given for us because of what comes immediately after Moses delivered the Decalogue. “Now all of the people,” the Torah continues, “*all of the people* were seeing the thunder-sounds, the flashing torches, the ram’s-horn sound, and the mountain smoking.”

Rabbinic teachings say that the Torah specifies “all of the people” to remind us that the event at Sinai transcends time and place so that the revelation is available to everyone willing to engage in spiritual practices that lead them to their place at the foot of the mythical Mount Sinai.

Rabbi Menachem Schneerson explains why the people were “seeing” the sounds of the thunder and the shofar. What we see is the world outside ourselves, Schneerson says. What we *hear* is inside us. *Seeing* is of the physical world, *hearing* of the spiritual world.

The people *saw* what was normally *heard* as the spiritual became as tangible as the familiar world of physical objects. “Indeed,” the Rabbi writes, “the Essence of God was revealed to their eyes, when they heard the words, ‘I (the Essence) the Eternal (who transcends the world) am thy God (who is immanent in the world)’.”

The revelation of the Ten Utterances, if you see what I’m saying, allows us to see the paradox of our true human relationship with the Divine, which is this: The essence of *our* being is not *other than* the

essence of Being-Itself, the Holy One, *and yet* we are both distinct in the freedom and integrity of our otherness.

Our God, the Holy Eternal One, gave humanity the Ten Words to guide us by keeping this great mystery always before us.

Instead of legalistic consequences for misbehavior, these utterances offer the gifts of a covenant of unity with the God of grace. Obedience to these Words is not transactional (this for that); obedience is relational. If we will see them with humility, the Ten Words remind us of our true dependency on the Holy One *inside* the spacious liberty that God has granted.

The Ten Words guide our practices by reminding us of God's Holy Essence, the essence that is also ours. Our practices of prayer and study and worship help to prevent us from idolizing anything that is not God. To keep us yearning only for God. The Ten Utterances teach us to approach God's Holy Essence in creation and in other people with deference and compassion.

We don't do it in exchange for what God will do for us. We do it because we are God's children.

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I am also indebted to conversations with my friend, Rabbi Olivier BenHaim, for insights into this passage.