

If you've traveled near St. Columba's recently you may have noticed the message on two signs at the corner of 42nd and Albemarle, posing a question and answer for us and for all. One sign asks "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons?" and the other replies, "I will with God's help!"

This excerpt from our baptismal covenant was posted on signs for our Renewal of Vows celebration last year. The Holy Spirit brought us together for Pentecost despite the pandemic: we got sprinkled with holy water as we drove or walked by, reaffirming our vows.

Seeing the signs this winter, I've thought of that afternoon last June while also remembering that we are called to affirm our relationship with God and our neighbors every day, not just on special Sundays. Our faith covenant is not a relic of another era that hides in a book for most of the year. It is lively evidence of an ongoing conversation with and about God and why it matters that we are God's people.

This conversation began as our ancient ancestors grappled with how to live with this same God, who is determined to stay in relationship with us despite the forces within and around us that resist God's purposes. On the past two Sundays we've heard God's gracious words announcing a covenant bond first with Noah and next with Abraham and Sarah – promising to be their God and to bless them with life and generations of offspring while asking little in return from humankind.

But today as a restless people travel with Moses in the wilderness after escaping from bondage in Egypt, God offers an updated vision of covenant life. We have come to know this most famous list of moral rules as the Ten Commandments. The Bible never actually gives them that title and goes on to offer a far more extensive body of laws for God-guided living.

Yet the scene at Mount Sinai – God coming in a cloud to address the people in the company of their intermediary Moses – is a foundational moment in our faith story. The commandments are not only core religious teachings but are understood to be the ethical basis for our civil law system: Moses the lawgiver is among the revered sculpted figures who appear above the entrance to the U.S. Supreme Court.

I learned about Moses in Sunday School and did my best to memorize the commandments. But, perhaps like many Christians who came of age in the 20th century, nothing I learned at church about the Exodus would ever be as vivid as the Hollywood epic *The Ten Commandments*, with Charlton Heston as Moses watching in awe as the fiery finger of a formidable God etches words onto stone tablets.

While confirming the importance of God's law, the film left me with an impression of its being given more as an assertion of authority than an act of love. And recent legal debates about whether the commandments should be posted in public places has, for me, served to reduce them as props for the scoring of political points rather than to elevate them as sacred wisdom.

The Ten Sayings, or Decalogue has been a central part of Christian worship, and was once required to be posted on the walls of Anglican churches. It was recited at the beginning of the Eucharist in many Episcopal churches until the 1960s, but today we pay much less attention to it. While grateful for the moral legacy of the commandments, we may find the Beatitudes of Jesus to be more engaging. The gospels invite us to see him as a new Moses, offering an alternative way of living rather than a list of behaviors to be avoided. Might the commandments now be a relic of another era that hides in a book during our walk of faith?

Today at the mid-point of Lent we can rediscover an unbroken link between the people who encounter God on Mount Sinai and our community wandering in a 21st century wilderness. Like them, we are a weary and uneasy people. Weighed down with sorrow about the toll taken by the pandemic; anxious about economic distress and inequities; troubled about the violent legacy of the sin of racism and divisions that seem to block the work of justice-- we can feel unsettled and adrift, not sure how to relate to our surroundings or whether we want to live as neighbors among some whose values we can't understand or accept.

We need the guiding hand of a compassionate and justice-seeking God just as urgently as did Moses and those whom he led. The book of Exodus tells us God came to them with "thunder and lightning...a thick cloud...and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled" (Ex. 19: 16). We may not experience God approaching in that way. But the first words God speaks to them still have the power to bring us up short: "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" (20: 2).

I haven't always appreciated how momentous this encounter is—how thrilling yet daunting to realize that God is not aloof. Unlike earthly rulers, or other deities that are detached from human experience, this God comes offering a personal bond—"I am *your* God"—and defines the relationship in terms of liberation: "I brought you out of the land of Egypt." Before the people are given rules to live by, they're reminded about the character of God—this God who had "observed the misery of (the) people...(and) heard their cry" (3: 7) before delivering them from abuse and sustaining them with bread in the wilderness.

Now, Pharaoh can make no further claim on their allegiance. They have a new identity as God's delivered people, and all the rules that follow are designed to help them build a society to foster God's shalom-- community harmony that reflects the love of God. The first four stress our need to honor God, and the last six focus on our relationships with one another. More than a set of rules, this is a vision for how God's people can flourish together in what one leading scholar calls God's "dream of a neighborhood" where our energies are directed toward the common good*. As we look around it can seem hard to recognize that we're in God's neighborhood, yet it is a gift to remember that God remains our companion on the way to building it and that these commandments are an early yet enduring blueprint. I'll always need the reminder to resist idols that can stand in the way of my connection to God and others,

and to avoid misusing God's name to suggest that God thinks what I think and wants what I want.

God's order for a work-free sabbath is a plea for us to break away from our culture's cycle of productivity and stimulation in order to rest in the rhythm of God's creation and nurture family and community bonds.

God's neighborhood can prosper only if we place the integrity of relationships above self-interest. The command to honor our parents affirms our responsibility to respect and show gratitude for all those who have helped to shape us. God's admonitions against violence, stealing and dishonesty name actions that threaten community and family harmony; they also remind us of our responsibility to reform laws and systems that perpetuate injustice.

The command against coveting resonates today as a reminder of our tendency to store up treasures and to fulfill our desires for comfort, security and status no matter how this affects our neighbors or creation. The impulse to acquire more, more, more reflects a lack of trust in God's capacity to meet our material and spiritual needs.

Recalling the commandments and the scene at Mount Sinai helps us to mark the moment when God and God's people began to belong to one another in a new and world-changing way. That relationship is based on our covenant identity as delivered people and God's identity as our deliverer.

In reviewing the story this year I've wondered to what extent I, as a white man of privilege, can relate to the experience of suffering and the yearning for deliverance that makes the Exodus narrative resonate so powerfully among oppressed peoples and especially many African Americans. Exodus was a central theme in Dr. King's writings during the civil rights movement. As racial injustice persists, I recognize a need to examine the ways in which I have been complicit in an oppressive system that stubbornly delays God's "dream of a neighborhood" from taking shape in our country.

But at the same time, as I trace the experience of shame, family dysfunction and social isolation which have been part of my life journey, I, too, look to God as my deliverer, giving thanks for burdens lifted, barriers overcome and for God's guidance though the wilderness times I know lie ahead. I pray that all of us can recognize ourselves and others as people loved and in need of deliverance. I also pray that we can keep building God's neighborhood by seeking and serving Christ in all persons, listening for the cries of those who still wait for the love and justice of God.

Amen.

*Walter Brueggemann, (2021) "Journey to the Common Good" p. 23