

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 22, 2025
10am

Texts: Exodus 3:13-15 & 20:1-3; John 11:17-26

Theme: Words of Life: Yahweh: No Other Gods

[prayer]

A reading from Exodus 19:

On exactly the third-month anniversary of the Israelites' leaving the land of Egypt, they came into the Sinai desert...2 Israel camped there in front of the mountain 3 while Moses went up to God.

9 Then the Lord said to Moses, "I'm about to come to you in a thick cloud in order that the people will hear me talking with you so that they will always trust you."

16 When morning dawned on the third day, there was thunder, lightning, and a thick cloud on the mountain, and a very loud blast of a horn. All the people in the camp shook with fear. 17 Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their place at the foot of the mountain. 18 Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the Lord had come down on it with lightning. The smoke went up like the smoke of a hot furnace, while the whole mountain shook violently. 19 The blasts of the horn grew louder and louder. Moses would speak, and God would answer him with thunder.

[20:1] Then God spoke all these words...

At the end of Lent, we left off here in our study of the Book of Exodus. The scene has now been set for the giving of the Decalogue – the Ten Commandments that form the basis of the Law – the religious code that ordered life in ancient Israel.

Notice that Exodus does not use the word “commandments” to describe the Decalogue. Instead, it calls the Decalogue “words” – specifically the words of God

for the people of Israel (sound familiar?). These words form the basis of God's self-revelation to Israel. They are not simply a set of rules to be followed. They are a proclamation from God's own mouth about who God is and how God should be worshiped.

We have a recurring debate in our country about publicly displaying the Decalogue. Currently lawmakers and courts are debating several state mandates to display the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms. Proponents argue they are part of our civic and cultural heritage. Opponents argue a public display violates separation of church and state. I would like to point out that not even the ancient Israelites publicly displayed the Ten Commandments; the stone tablets that contained them were kept in the Ark of the Covenant in the temple's Holy of Holies, a space only the high priest had access to.

To be frank, I think it is disrespectful to treat the Decalogue like a prop for political agendas. These words are sacred. But it is the red-letter words of Jesus, as well as his life, death, and resurrection, that are the most sacred of all. He summarized the whole of the Law as this: *"You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind.* This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: *You must love your neighbor as you love yourself.* All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands" (Matt 22:37-40 CEB). As we shall see, the Decalogue can be divided into these two categories: How to love God, and how to love our neighbor.

Jesus has also declared that he did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it (Matt 5:17). He did this by radicalizing the Law, meaning he went to the root – the *radix* – of the Law. Jesus looked behind each commandment in the Decalogue to the condition of the heart it is trying to address. He taught that for every "thou shalt not" there is a corresponding "thou shalt." He demonstrated that God's love is so much more than a list of rules. God's love is an invitation into deep discipleship that transforms us and by extension transforms the world.

For the next ten weeks we will study the Decalogue, verse by verse, through the eyes of Jesus. We will consider its importance for our lives today – not as an object of political debate or an antiquated moral code, but as words of life that help form us as disciples so we can take part in building God's kingdom.

We begin with the first commandment: “I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You must have no other gods before me” (Ex 20:2-3). This command, together with the second, which Emma will preach on next week, is called “the essential commandment.” All other Old Testament laws are based on it.

Why is this commandment so essential? Because it distinguishes the God of Israel from other gods. And yes, there is an implicit assumption in the Book of Exodus that other gods exist. The Israelites knew the names of hundreds of Egyptian gods. But centuries living in a foreign land under the lash of foreign rulers and their pantheon had extinguished the memory of the God of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. With this first commandment God is reintroducing Himself to the Israelites. He gives them the name by which he should be called: “I am the LORD.”

In the Old Testament when you see the word “LORD” spelled with all capital letters, it is a substitute for the Hebrew word “YHWH,” pronounced “Yahweh.” God has many names in the Bible, but this one is the most sacred and personal. It is the same name God revealed to Moses in the burning bush when He said, “I AM Who I AM” (Ex 3:14). In Hebrew, I AM and Yahweh are variations of the verb “to be.” With this name God is making the claim that He is our Creator – the Source and Sustainer of everything, the ground of our very being, the one who causes us to be. He is existence itself, including the new existence that Israel receives outside of slavery in Egypt.

Perhaps this revelation stirred something in the people’s blood, a memory of who they once were, of an ancient promise long kept. When God declares, “I am the LORD *your God* who brought you out of Egypt” He is making a profound and powerful claim. This is not a God who creates and then steps away and watches what happens. This is a God who is actively involved in the lives of His people. The “your” in this statement is singular. God is not just the God of the nation of Israel. He is the God of individuals – the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Miriam – the God of every single person gathered at the base of His holy mountain – the God of you and the God of me.

With these words God claims Israel as His own. In Egypt they were unwanted by gods and men alike. But no more. This God wants Israel – not because of anything they have done, but because of His steadfast faithfulness to the covenant He first

made to Abraham generations ago. Israel's liberation from slavery includes the affirmation that they have been called and chosen by the Creator of the universe.

We call that affirmation grace. The first commandment is fundamentally about God's grace. When we hear the first commandment read, we are reminded that God has chosen us as well because we have been grafted into God's covenant with Israel through the blood of Jesus Christ. This is what we celebrate at our baptisms – the love and favor God has extended to us not because we have earned that love and favor, but because God, in His loving kindness, wanted to give it to us. "We are God's accomplishment," Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians (2:10).

God is a God who redeems us (literally purchases our freedom) from our own versions of Egypt and delivers us into communities of belonging where we are known and loved and formed into the righteous children God has called us to be.

This gift of grace is free. But God still longs for an exclusive relationship with us. "You must have no other gods before [besides] me," He says (Ex 20:3). Note again that God is implying there are other gods. Other gods in the sense that we have always lived in a world of options, alternatives, and choices that make powerful, competing appeals for our affection. In baptism we celebrate that God has chosen us. But in baptism we are also making our own choice – the choice to choose God above all else. God desires our fidelity, our loyalty, our faithfulness.

Repeatedly in Scripture we see Israel's infidelity toward God on full, heartbreaking display. Before Moses had even descended Sinai with the Decalogue in hand Israel was tempted away from God, tempted to turn to other "gods," whether foreign gods or the gods of their own pride, greed, fear, and hatred. This unfaithfulness grieves God.

In the first commandment there is an expectation that we will concentrate all our energies, in every sphere of life, on a single loyalty. We are prone to practicing a kind of henotheism, meaning we let different gods control different spheres of our lives. Money is a good example: *God is sovereign in my life...except over my finances*. Politics is another: *God is sovereign in my life...except over the way I vote*. The first commandment insists on the unity of God's sovereignty. Whenever something else takes the rightful place of God in our lives, we break the first

commandment. And the god we are most prone to put before the LORD is the god of self – our own egos.

But when we truly love God with all our heart, being, and mind, then we do not leave any room for other gods, not even the god of self. Rev. Adam Hamilton writes,

“Loving God and giving our highest allegiance to him enlarges our hearts. It deepens our capacity to love. It transforms our values. It strengthens our commitment...As we place our trust in God and seek to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, we become more likely to love our neighbor, to do what is right and just, and to experience the good and joyful life. This commandment is the key to fulfilling all the rest.”¹

As disciples of Christ, we know the good and joyful life that God has promised through the person of Jesus. “I am the resurrection and the life,” Jesus told Martha (John 11:25). By this Jesus did not only mean he had the power to raise her brother Lazarus from the grave. Jesus’s I AM statement echoes the divine Name given to Moses and the Israelites. Jesus is claiming that he and the Father are one; they fully share the same divine power, including the creative power of life and death. As the resurrection, Jesus frees us from the fear of death. And as the life, Jesus grants us the gift of eternal life – in the future, yes, but also in the present, right here and now as we learn to love God and love our neighbor. Just as Israel was liberated from slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land, through Jesus we are liberated from our slavery to sin and death into the kingdom of God.

This liberation is God’s gift of grace. And grace is received through faith alone. In the first commandment God poses the question to Israel: *I am the LORD your God...Do you believe this?* Jesus poses the same question to Martha: *I am the resurrection and the life...Do you believe this?*

Do you? Do you believe that the LORD is God and no other?

Living a life of faith is not about following a list of rules. Rules like the Ten Commandments exist to help us set and keep boundaries, to discern right from

¹ Adam Hamilton. *Words of Life: Jesus and the Promise of the Ten Commandments Today* (New York: Convergent Books, 2020), p. 36

wrong, and uphold the common good. But faith is about a relationship – the relationship we have been called to with our Source and Sustainer. This relationship is meant to transform us so we can have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10).

Each of you has been given a postcard with the Ten Commandments. On the card each negative command – each “thou shalt not” – has been paired with a positive virtue. I encourage you to put this postcard somewhere you will see it every day – maybe your bathroom mirror or your fridge. Deuteronomy 6:6-8 says,

“Write these commandments that I’ve given you today on your hearts. Get them inside of you and then get them inside your children. Talk about them wherever you are, sitting at home or walking in the street; talk about them from the time you get up in the morning to when you fall into bed at night. Tie them on your hands and foreheads as a reminder; inscribe them on the doorposts of your homes and on your city gates” (The Message).

I pray that by the end of this summer these words will be written on your hearts, and in the writing you will find life.

Amen.