

Clearing the Way for God: Taking the 10 Commandments to Heart

We began today's service by praying the decalogue – also known as the 10 commandments. Although most of us know of them, the Decalogue is not something we regularly pray inside of worship. But once every three years on the 3rd Sunday of Lent, we hear also the lesson from Exodus 20. Spoken and documented in a particular time, culture, and place, it is impressive that these laws from God still have something important to say to us. They are as relevant to us and our lives today, as they were then to Israel.

So, now that you've heard it twice, which one caught your attention? Some of these laws may seem obvious, things with which we can easily align, while others of them, although seemingly simple, can be more challenging to follow.

If we look closely, we see that the first four (no other gods, no images or idols, no misuse of God's name, and the observance of the Sabbath) are about us and God. They let us know what God asks and expects of us. The remaining six (honoring parents, no killing, no adultery, no stealing, no lying, and no coveting) speak not only to how we are to conduct ourselves as we strive to honor God, but they call us to the intentional care of our community and one another. Embedded within them are some assumptions: that God is the one true God, that God calls each of us to commune with and rest in God, and that the pathway to peaceful and loving relationship with others is found in expressing gratitude and committing to doing no harm.

So, there were three that caught my attention: Sabbath, Idols, and Coveting. Let's start with the Sabbath. We are called by God to observe the **Sabbath** — one day in 7 when God commands us to hit the pause button; to leave our work, the demands of our lives and the things that consume or define us behind, just for a day. God's intention is multi-faceted: first that we, like God, might rest from our labors. Also, that in that rest we might commune more deeply with God, and last, that in taking our rest, we find ourselves renewed, refreshed and restored — so that we may re-enter our lives with the energy and focus we need.

In the Jewish tradition, Sabbath commences with Shabbat, or worship, at sundown on Friday, and ends at sundown on Saturday. In the most orthodox of Jewish communities, labor of any kind is prohibited, even the turning on of light switches and or cooking. In the Christian tradition, our Sabbath is honored most commonly on Sundays, when believers gather for worship, and then take time to rest, relax and reconnect.

Because Sundays are a workday for me, I have scheduled my **Sabbath** day for Friday. As I depart the office on Thursday evening, I strive to leave the to-do's tasks and responsibilities of my work behind, and to give room for that which will delight and restore me: Dinner with Peter, sleeping in, taking quiet time for myself & God. I might watch a movie, read a book, take a nap or a walk. Whatever seems good in the absence of work. If I honor Sabbath well, I find much needed space to tend to my own Spirit, so that I am better able to tend to others, and yours.

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Still, one of the most difficult things for me to do on my Sabbath is to intentionally disconnect from technology — specifically to not check email, respond to texts or engage in social media. While I use my smartphone for all sorts of practical things like reading, research, calendaring, learning Spanish and sharpening my brain with The NY Times Spelling Bee and Wordle, I became aware this Lent that it has also become an **Idol** that tempts me like a Trader Joe's Peanut Butter Cup! If I am not careful and intentional, I can lose myself, my connection to others and many hours as I fall down the rabbit hole of scrolling through social media apps like Instagram and Facebook.

If an invitation of Sabbath is to consciously “disconnect” ourselves from that which gets between us and God, so that we may “reconnect” with the Holy, then taking a Sabbath from one's phone would be highly recommended. In fact, Statistica.com reports that the average person spends over 4 hours and 30 minutes per day ($\frac{1}{3}$ of our waking hours) using their phone for non-voice activities, and that doing so fosters isolation from others and can cause depression.

In the classic movie, *The Devil Wears Prada*, Andy, played by Anne Hathaway, is a young wanna-be journalist who lands her first job as an assistant to the Editor in Chief of a major fashion magazine in NY City. She begins the job with intrigue and excitement, but soon it becomes all consuming. On call 24-7, the job and especially her boss impose upon her personal life. That causes friction between her, her friends, and her boyfriend, Nate. Feeling trapped, Andy defends that she has no choice. Her wake up call comes when, after once again answering her company phone in the middle of a conversation with Nate, he tells her, “The person whose call you always take is the one you're in a relationship with.”

While the movie has many poignant and funny moments, it shines light on just how easy it is to succumb to the temptation of **idolatry** — you know, the things that feed our egos and give us some sense of autonomy and self-reliance, but distance us from God. Andy's absolute surrender of herself to the every whim of her boss quickly places her boss, Miranda Priestly, upon a pedestal to be worshiped and glorified.

Idolatry is the praise of false or other gods, and can manifest itself in many ways: in work that consumes us and feeds our sense of self-importance; in the ways we vie for status, power, control or wealth; in the way we indulge in what matters to us with little regard for others. Idols pull our attention from God as they convince us that what they give us in return is as or more valuable than what we receive from God.

Still, God is clear: God is to be first in our lives, the only God we worship, and to be honored regularly with our time and presence and in the way we care for others. Over and over again, God invites us to turn from the things that distract and tempt us, and to return to the comfort and assurance that we are beloved, worthy and enough. Can you name something that keeps you from God?

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Ours is a culture of acquisition. Advertisers across all media platforms work hard to bait us, to convince us that they have something that we need or are lacking/ As we compare ourselves and what we have with others —our envy may get amplified. We may begin to perceive others as more fortunate, healthier, wiser, or more attractive. We may succumb to the belief that we need or should have what “they” have. We begin to **covet**.

The 10th commandment names coveting in the context of animals, property and wives. For us today, it might include things like homes, cars, jobs or relationships. (Laurel tells story of coveting an electric car) What we know is that when we covet — when we really want and think we deserve to have what belongs to someone else, we can get caught up in jealousy. And that can breed resentment and make us discontent. Some of us may lose rationale, we may be tempted to pursue the object or our desire at the expense of other things or people. When we covet, we lose sight of all that we have and that God provides; we no longer find contentment here (points to heart), only a hole to be filled. I think its normal from time to time to notice what others have, and to want it for ourselves. Rather than let that longing become a point of contention or harm between us and others, God invites us to surrender our envy in return for contentment and peace.

God spoke to the people of Israel, and is still speaking to us. God has given us the guidance and wisdom we need to flourish in our relationship with God, with our families and with one another. When we love and honor God with intention, God will be found in our Sabbath again and again. When we commit to being people who do no harm, we become people who choose and bear to others life, love, generosity and truth. If we but take time to remember with gratitude all God has done for us and all we have, we will know ourselves to be enough, and from envy we will be freed.

The God who gives us life, who sent Jesus into the world to show us what it means to love God, love others and love ourselves, and by whose Spirit we navigate our way has given us words to live by, commandments that if we try to follow them, will clear the way for God.