

The Promises God Kept in Jesus Christ: The Promise of the Law  
Exodus 20:1-21  
John 2:13-22

“Then God spoke all these words....When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, ‘You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.’”

A number of years ago, *People Magazine* did a survey that asked readers to rank the Ten Commandments by degree of difficulty—a kind of gymnastics of sin. First in degree of difficulty was, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." Last was "Thou shalt not kill." Then "readers were asked to estimate how guilty they would feel, on a scale from 1 (blameless) to 10 (guilty to the max), if they engaged in any of 51 activities ranging from murder and spying to embezzlement and nude sunbathing. The beauty of the sin poll," according to one of *People's* crack reporters, "is that it provides concrete answers to timeless questions. To wit: is it more sinful to feel lust in your heart than to lie on your federal income tax form? Would most people feel guiltier about calling in sick when they're not, than going to an X-rated movie? Is failing to vote a greater sin than swearing?" The answers, (respectively) are no, yes, and only in the West and Northeast. Northeasterners, by the way, were the most tolerant of sin, Southerners the least. There were also some jarring behavioral juxtapositions: “Cutting in front of someone in a line was deemed morally worse, for example, than mercy killing and unwed parenthood. Parking in a handicapped zone was even worse.” I would add one last question to the *People Magazine* poll: Are the Ten Commandments words that prohibit us from doing what we should not do or are they words that describe the freedom for which we were made?

We turn to the Mosaic Covenant this morning and are turned, once again, toward God's promises in the middle of a plot already unfolding—and soon to be unraveling--in the wilderness. After God has rescued God's people from slavery and sent them on a forty year

journey toward the future God promised to Abraham and his offspring, God summons Moses, the one who has been set apart to mediate the relationship between God and God's people, saying from the top of Mount Sinai, "Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples." For the first and only time in God's promising, God places a condition on the promise. God does not say simply, "Because I rescued you out of Egypt, therefore you shall be my treasured possession." God adds an "if" to the "therefore," that seems to cast a shadow over the Israelites' future relationship with this God.

What happened, we wonder, to the God who said to Abraham and Sarah, "I choose you; I still choose you; there is nothing you can do to make me not choose you!"? Does this mean that there is something we can do—or fail to do—that will cause God to quit this relationship? Commentators are quick to assure us that this is a covenant *within* a covenant; that God has long been the God of this people; that the words God speaks on Sinai are words spoken to a people already elected, chosen, redeemed and loved by God. I am not convinced!

In response to God's "if," the people answer as one: "Everything that the Lord has spoken, we will do." Right! Granting that Moses comes close to being obedient as anyone since Abraham willingly set out to sacrifice Isaac, God surely knows better. Nevertheless, on the third day, the Israelites are told, God will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. They are to ready themselves for God's appearance by washing themselves clean. But again, God issues a caveat to Moses about the meeting, "You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death.'" The issue is God's holiness.

When the third day dawns, there is thunder and lightning; a thick cloud surrounds the mountain; a trumpet blasts; the people in the camp tremble. *Our* sophisticated minds are not

fooled one bit: this is a volcano erupting, we think, missing, of course, the truth the story means to tell. Then Moses brings them out of the camp to meet God: *TO MEET GOD!!!* The people are warned one last time not to look at God while God is speaking, lest they die. “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.”

There are two ways to hear all the words that follow. Back to *People Magazine*, we can hear them as prohibition or as promise; as words restricting human behavior or as words that redeem our misbegotten lives; as a moral straitjacket or as the shape of human existence lived in response to God’s love. Some find in Scripture a law that operates to keep the lid on the Pandora’s Box of human freedom and fulfillment; others “find in Scripture a law that operates as a sign of promise, and thus as a harbinger of human freedom and fulfillment.”

Not to make light of the difference, but it seems the world is divided into people that see the commandments in black and blue and those that see them in white and gold! Try for a moment to hear the radical difference. Spoken as a threat to people who are prone to do those things that they ought not to do, the words function to set the limits in which we must live *or else*--or else what? God does not fill in that blank on Sinai, but only does so retrospectively in Deuteronomy when the commandments are revisited from the perspective of a people in exile.

Then listen again to God’s words as though they were words of promise, words spoken by God to God’s people as if to say, because I am your God and you are my people, here is the life I am giving you, the future I am promising you: no longer will you be tossed to and fro by other gods; neither will you have any need to fashion other gods out of your imagination because you will have a God who alone is God, whose name is a delight, as is the sabbath; children will honor parents; none will kill or be killed or used as an object for pleasure; you will have all that

you need, so no stealing and coveting and lying.

In sum and according to Christian ethicist Paul Lehmann, “the Commandments are not *prescriptive* statements of duties toward God and one’s neighbor in a world that God has created, redeemed and *will* make new. They are, on the contrary, *descriptive* statements of what happens behaviorally in a world that God *has made* for being human in.” Yet generation after generation, “the obedience that is freedom gives way to a calculus of permissions and prohibitions....The imposition...of limits upon desires and dynamics of the will effectively obscures the freedom for God and one’s neighbor that nurtures a steady and enlarging sensitivity and commitment to what the *human* thing to do simply is.”

To wit: when God finished speaking, the people trembled and stood at a distance and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.” Moses says, in order to comfort them, “God is only testing you, and has come to put the fear of God in you so that you will not sin,” so that you will not live at the distance from God you have just begged to keep. Moses knows that God’s prior “because and therefore” has set God’s “if” in the context of an electing love that never again will destroy, nor will God ever quit this people, no matter how rebellious or idolatrous or cantankerous they [and later we] prove to be.

Subsequent mediators of God’s words have not been so comforting. Religion of every stripe, and Christianity in particular, has spent centuries trying to put the fear of God in those whom religion judges to be living outside the bounds of God’s limits, bludgeoning people into obedience with threats of eternal damnation instead of inviting them into a relationship with the God who has promised, and is still promising in the commandments, a world that is fit for being human in.

Perhaps that is why, at the beginning of John's Gospel, Jesus bludgeons religion! Whereas this story in the other three Gospels comes at the end and is used as evidence to support the charge of blasphemy against Jesus, here Jesus begins his public ministry in Jerusalem, at the temple, on the days leading up to the celebration of the Passover, when God brought God's chosen ones out of Egypt. With the fury of an erupting volcano, Jesus overturns the tables and condemns the unholy practices of religion that were marketing access to God's dwelling place and putting a price tag on those rituals that allegedly mediated the relationship while maintaining the distance between God and God's people. Lest we think Jesus' actions are only against the religious practices of his own people, rest assured that, when he comes again, he likely will burst into a seminar teaching post-modern mediators like me how to market him!

What no one got that day in the temple (and could not get until the God who brought Israel out Egypt also raised Jesus from the dead) was this: the God who spoke on Sinai, terrifying the people and causing them to beg never to let God speak to them again lest they die, is the God whose Word became flesh; the God who pitches a tent with us still, in our every wilderness; who left God's dwelling place in heaven to be God's dwelling place on earth; who quit the distance people once begged be kept by the mediator of God's words to be the mediator of God's Word face to face; who fulfilled the "if" of our obedience by obeying God's voice and keeping God's covenant, even to the point of death on a cross.

"To love God," Karl Barth writes of the commandments, "is to give oneself to [God], to put oneself at [God's] disposal. And when [a person] does this, that person's freedom for love becomes and is a freedom for obedience." You and I do not know this of ourselves, but only really know our human selves in him, who alone gave himself to God, put himself at God's disposal, willed God's will, such that his perfect freedom for love was also his perfect freedom

for obedience. Likewise we only really know God in him, for in him God is love freely given that becomes obedience and obedience returned that can only be received as love.

My friends, we are in the middle of the wilderness of Lent--twenty days down and twenty days to go until Christ's passion—when this relationship with God appears to be, well, black and blue, stuck in a calculus of permissions and prohibitions. But I have it on good authority that, after he is raised from the dead, we will remember all that he has said, and our eyes will see, as if for the first time, the dazzling white and gold of God's glory. Thanks be to God.