

The Great Eight Core Stories of the Bible ~ Story #3 ~ "The Sinai Covenant ~ carved in stone?"

JIM SHORT

Ladner United Church –
0900 and 1100hrs

Sunday February 28th, 2010 –



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SCRIPTURE LESSONS FOR Sunday February 28th, 2009

Our lessons are selections from the Hebrew Scriptures, the book of Exodus and Deuteronomy. These passages concern the third of the great eight core stories of the Bible, the Sinai covenant.

God spoke to the people of Israel once they had entered the Sinai desert, a place of desolation and beauty. The people camped at the mountain also called Mount Sinai or Mount Horeb for 11 months while Moses went up the mountain to receive the gift of words that would shape how this community was to live in relationship to God and one another. Because of the name of the place, this experience is called the "Sinai Covenant".

Reading from Exodus 19:

At the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. ²They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. ³Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, 'Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: ⁴You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.'

Hear these further words of introduction Moses came down the mountain bearing the Ten Commandments written on stone tablets. These words were addressed to the people - God's treasured possession.

The Ten Commandments are commonly conceptualized in two major divisions. The first division, consisting of commandments 1-4, concerns how human beings relate to God.

The second division, containing commandments 5-10, deals with how humans relate to one another.

The Ten Commandments are commonly thought of as moral law, while the additional ordinances for temple worship and common life that come later in Israel's history are thought of as civil law.

The Ten Commandments serve as the foundation for many of the legal systems of the Judeo-Christian world.

Reading from Exodus 20

Then God spoke all these words:

2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before ^{*} me.

4 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. ⁵You 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, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation ^{*} of those who love me and keep my commandments.

7 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.

8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹For six days you shall labour and do all your work. ¹⁰But 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. ¹¹For 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.

12 Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

13 You shall not murder. ^{*}

14 You shall not commit adultery.

15 You shall not steal.

16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

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

Further words of introduction: Theologian Walter Brueggemann says "The ten commandments constitute the bottom line and reference point for Hebrew scripture thinking about ethics. The ten commandments generated and continue to generate a radical social imagination that seeks to bring every aspect of life – personal and public – under the governance of this covenant making God who enacts liberation."

Reading from Exodus 24:

Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, 'All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.'⁴ And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. He rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel.⁵ He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt-offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of well-being to the LORD.⁶ Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins and half of the blood he dashed against the altar.⁷ Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.'⁸ Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, 'See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.'

Hear these further introductory words: Jewish people refer to the following verses in Deuteronomy as the "shema" which in Hebrew means both "hear" and "obey".

They constitute a basic faith confession, prayed twice a day by observant Jews.

The 'shema' reminds us that our relationship to God is not rote, unthinking duty. God has sought us in love and graces us with a relationship. It begins with God's love and our response is to return that love through all that we are, body, mind, spirit and strength.

Reading from Deuteronomy 6:

6 Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy,² so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long.³ Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe

them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.* 5You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. 6Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. 7Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. 8Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem* on your forehead, 9and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

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Prayer:

Gracious God may the meditations of our hearts and the words of my lips, if they be your words, be worthy and acceptable unto you and may your word come to your people know either through me or despite me." Amen

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The question the text raises seems to be one of whether the promise of covenant comes before law or after – in other words is God's love come for us first as a gift – or does keeping the law come first from which God then will love us or not...it's the question of the relationship between "grace" and "law"....

We are guilty in the Christian Church of presenting an image that our faith in God is a type of legalistic fascism...

That it consists in living out a kind of joyless rigid code...

A long list of thou shalt nots...that people are to wear as a kind of heavy burden...

And when communicated or shared with others becomes a graceless and joyless belief...

It's all about a list of things you can't do and nothing more and if you can somehow shoulder the burden then you will stand in favour with God and somehow be better than others...

And the Ten Commandments – standing alone and taken out of their context – often become the “poster child” for this kind of graceless law oriented religion...

Reflecting back upon my growing up in a Christian community – I think I became much more aware of the things that Christians did or did not do before I became conscious of the concepts of covenant and grace...so when I was a young teenager – if you asked me what it meant to be a Christian – I probably would have responded by saying Christians do and don't do certain things...

and if the Christian Faith and the life of being fully human in Jesus is portrayed like this ...rather than bringing comfort, hope and new life...instead it will trigger our greatest human fear...

That we are not lovable...

That there is nothing we can do or be that can ever live up to ultimately God's expectations...

We can not look at life now or into the future and trust that God loves us and is in relationship

One way to look at the people whose stories are told in the bible is to see them as people struggling with what it means to trust God and can they trust God...

And we will come close to that only as so far as we can be perfect...and keep all of the burdens...which by nature of being human...we cannot...

That life is an unending treadmill about earning and proving that you are lovable...

its our greatest human fear – in the 1970's – a Jesuit Priest named John Powell wrote a number of books I was fond of – in one of them he expressed it like this:

“My greatest fear is that if you really saw me for who and what I am – that you would not love me and if you do not love the me that is me – that is all that I have.”

That being loved unconditionally for who we are – will somehow be taken away from us for ever

Because we are not worthy or we do not live up to someone's expectations...

That is probably true about everything from the Olympics Games to daily living...

that's the great fear in every relationships...am I of value and of use, will you love me for the me that is me, can I trust you or am I just being used...

And the challenge is to “trust” – can I trust that this person will love me unconditionally...

we know the effect of that – for example on a child if a child grows up in a family or a community where they learn that they are loved unconditionally vs. someone who grows up learning that they are only loved if they fit into everyone else’s expectation and desire...

That’s really what makes marriage different than living together...

It’s the promise or vow which we make – I will love you

For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health until death do us part...

You can trust that...

I will not just love you if you meet my expectations or do what I want or act the way that I believe you should...

when we use religion as a tool to hang over people’s heads in a kind of fearful controlling way... that if they don’t live up to the expectation – God will not love us...

That gives to people those fearful images of God as some distant cruel unfeeling tyrant who will only love us if we aspire to perfection...

When something bad or unfortunate happens to us – what have we done to offend God and how are we punished...

Because of that – this is why this core story is so important...because the YHWH of the Hebrew Scriptures and of Jesus Christ is so very, very different...

Because through it – we are freed from approaching God in fear to understanding that for no other reason than love God approached us...

And the role and understanding of the 10 Commandments has to be placed with in and seem not as a stand alone set of 10 rules but rather part of a graced relationship

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When we looked at the call of Abraham and Sarah a few weeks ago – we learned...

That a loving God who had created the world – all that was in it including human beings...

Choose Abraham and Sarah...made a covenant with them...

By God’s initiative brought them into a special relationship in which the end result was that

YHWH would be their God and they would be YHWH's people and the end result of that relationship would be a blessing to the whole world...

People would be as the story says – a treasured possession of YHWH...

Notice what is not included in this covenant:

There are no conditions for Abraham and Sarah to meet

it is unconditional covenant – there is nothing such as you have to do this for me before I love you or you will be worthy...it cannot be bought and because of that it is:

Liberating and good news...

There's no offer of financial or material reward for Abraham and Sarah

There is no "instructions included guide" or "road map" as to how this conceiving a child in old age and being a blessing will happen...in fact...

There is no special reason why Abraham and Sarah were chosen – they are not gold medal winners neither are they rich and famous...they have not gone higher, straighter or faster than anyone else...

There are two older people living the end of their lives in some small place far away from the great political centers like Egypt...

And then last week we spoke again of how...

How God remembered that covenantal relationship when the people had been enslaved and were being ethnically cleansed by the Egyptian Empire and raising up Moses – brought the people out of that slavery into Egypt...

And into the desert of Sinai...

And after 430 years they had freedom...but it was not too long before they were grumbling

Forgetting the covenantal promises of God...

Overwhelmed by the hardships...and beginning to prefer their old slavery because at least there they had food...and they began to grumble....

Why Moses did you bring us here out of Egypt – was it to make us, our children and our livestock die of thirst...

Trust – it's always about trust...

In the third month – Moses brought the people of Israel to the bottom of Mount Sinai

And there they camped... for 11 months....

While the people camped below – Moses went up the mountain and spoke with God...

The conversation has three parts:

The First thing God did was to remind the people of Israel of what God had done and the covenant God had made

Exodus 19

‘Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: ⁴You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.

Notice that after the people grumble and lose faith in the desert and forget the covenant – God does not begin the conversation with a berating of them that throws in everything including the kitchen sink around what they have done going all the way back to the time of Adam and Eve...

God begins by affirming – despite their behavior – God’s mercy and unconditional love...the relationship...and again there is nothing special about Israel – this is not the nation who wins the most gold at the Olympic Games...

They are the in the one athlete group in their world...

God’s choice of Israel was “an arbitrary act of God’s grace, for Israel had done nothing to deserve selection. In fact, if anything Israel’s actions out to have dissuaded God. But such actions had not so dissuaded God. God had chosen them. And God had chosen them precisely because they were the poorest and weakest nation at that time on the face of the earth. (internet)

b) And then God said:

Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.

They will be a group of people holy – which does not mean better than others – but rather – set apart and a priestly people...

In religious systems – Priest are those people who stand before God on behalf of people and make intercession for them...

In this case YHWH has chosen Israel (the church of Jesus Christ) to have a mission or vocation of being YHWH's light to all the other nations...

The rest of the Hebrew Scriptures will be how these people understood that vocation to unfold...

c) And then and only then –

These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.'

And then the 10 Commandments are given... (Decalogue – Greek – deca is ten and logos – word)

They are set in the context of the covenant of grace – keeping them or not does not change the covenant relationship...

Internet – “they were never intended as generic ethical principles or as foundation precepts of a rigid system of law....none of them were originally intended to be a set of universal morals to be applied or forced upon all people...they are a gracious invitation to a life open to and supported by the blessings of God.”

This is a God you can trust...

And to define this relationship of trust – here are some defining principles and characteristics...

Barbara Brown Taylor

- in her Sermon “Peculiar Treasures”
- We like being loved unconditionally by God and we need then a way to make that a reality in our relationships with others.
- if the tent is the covenant...then the law is the tent poles
- “Sink these ten posts in the center of your camp, hang a tent on them and together you may survive the wilderness...guard your life together. Guard your life with me.”

These commandments create trust...and frame our obedience and shape our lives...

And helps us make choices...good choices that extend the covenantal relationship from God to us from us to each other

Walter Brueggeman – “We have always lived in a world of options, alternative choices, and gods who make powerful, competing appeals. It does us not

good to pretend that there are no other offers of well-being, joy and security. In pursuit of joy, we may choose Bacchus; in pursuit of security we may choose Mars; in pursuit of genuine love, we may choose Eros. It is clear that these choices are not YHWH that these are not gods who have ever wrought an Exodus or offered a covenant.”

Gabor Mate a medical doctor from the downtown Eastside, speaker and author identifies as many others do that the – powerful growing pool of addictions in our society – are not life giving but life taking...

They are a substitute for emptiness and lack of spiritual purpose...

What we give our “worship to” our worth – ship – our self and value to will determine who and what we have become

They have already forgotten...and for the people of Israel without the tent poles chaos reigns...

These stories are great medicine for those times we say if only God would speak to me or do some miracle and then I would believe and trust...

Three months into the wilderness – the people of Israel have already forgotten the magnificent events of the Exodus and are longing affectionately for slavery and for brick making because it’s easier and they had food to eat and a shelter over them...

It’s never enough...at some point – we need to lay ourselves in the arms of trust...

What the commandments acknowledge is that there are alternatives to worshipping God

the people have to choose (not it does not say that the covenant is broken or eradicated if they make the wrong choice –even the death of God’s son could not break the covenantal love God had for people)

Tablet #1 – gives guidance on keeping the first great commandment of the Shema – to love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength

They can worship a different God but that is not what YHWH asks for.

They can worship an idol – worship something less than God and which God has ultimately made because God created everything

A third choice is to trivialize God by forgetting God's name is holy – taking the name of God in vain

The fourth is to make Gods of ourselves by not remembering the Sabbath day

Breaking the Sabbath – well – its saying that we have so much that is important to do the world cannot get along without us...

Think about that commandment not as a restriction on fun and pleasure but as advice against workaholism – both the kind practiced by individuals who get so consumed in their work that they destroy and lose the other aspects of their lives...or from the perspective of companies for who the profit margin encourages them to drive employees to do more and more for less and thus impedes the quality of their employee's life...

Remember God created everything and said it was good...and delighted it in ...God knows that "Sabbath" and keeping it – the tent poles – keeps every one in healthy relationships...

instead in our society – destructively we have lifted the value of workaholism to something holy and to be admired...and thus we wreck damage in the lives of people...forgetting the tent poles...and making ourselves out to be God...we somehow know better...

Tablet #2 – gives the guidelines for loving our neighbours as ourselves...

honour parents and families, to Not murder, to Not commit adultery, to not Steal, to not Bear false witness, to not covet

Without those tent poles – there is no trust and community and relationship because we live in anxiety and fear – always looking over our back and life becomes a matter of needing to be stronger than others and exploiting of the weak...

Can't have trust without them – anxiety and fear

10 ways we express our love of God and others...

SO understand that God called Israel (the church) to have a covenantal vocation to bless the world...

And then understand that at times – during the great Game of Colonialism that the empires played in the 18th and 19th Century in South America, Asia and Africa and even in Canada with our First nations people...

It was the game of colonialism and now in foresight – making colonies, draining away the wealth of nations, slavery, exploitation, not respecting indigenous culture – and thought the church as a partner in that system did...

10 ways we express our love of God and others...

The Internet: The Text This Week

“Consider two examples: The first command “you shall have no other God’s before me” is not just good for God, it is an act of love for my neighbour. Why? Because it is good for my neighbour for me not to make money or power my god; it is good for my neighbour for me to maintain the gracious, forgiving YHWH as my God; it is good for my neighbour that my God is the creator of all people, all nations, all sexes and not some tribal deity. Second example; certainly it is loving to my neighbour that I not kill him or her; but the sixth command is just as certainly about loving God. I must not kill my neighbour, not just because my neighbour won’t like it but because God is the giver of my neighbour’s life. I cannot be loving God if I kill those who belong to him”

Many good things – much of its work and its vocation as a blessing was lost in that system

then the Shema – hear and obey in Hebrew...what Jesus used to sum up all of the laws...what is required of me in response to the initiative of God...how do I find life...

This is what is required:

4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.* 5You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. 6Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. 7Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. 8Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem* on your forehead, 9and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

in closing it is always the Covenant that comes first...God’s initiative...

I love this verse from Psalms...it is indeed worthy to write upon your heart and your home’s door frames...

it touches deep fears and needs...

Psalm 27:10“If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.”