

3rd Sunday of Lent
Sermon 3.3.24

Exodus 20:1-17

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.

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. You 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, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

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.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But 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. For 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.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

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

John 2:13-22

The Passover ... was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. (519)

I don't know why Jesus is so angry here. No one does, not for sure. This event, the so-called cleansing of the Temple, is remembered in all four gospels, so it's as good as happened, and is thought important. John's telling of it, though, stands out. It feels most severe. Jesus seems most angry. Yes, all four gospels speak of Jesus having driven people out of the Temple, *driven* them, which is the same word used to speak of the Spirit driving Jesus to the wilderness where he would be tempted by Satan, and is the same word often used to describe Jesus driving an unholy spirit out of an afflicted person. This is to say, there's something of force happening here, in the Temple—and not just material force (overturning tables, dumping jars of coins on the floor). There is something perhaps of spiritual force as well. There is something in this Temple that needs to be *driven* out.

And then there's this: the whip. Only in John do we get the whip, and even Jesus making the whip. Braiding those cords.

Did he take his time?

Was it a quick reaction?

The thing is, everything happening here was fully sanctioned. So, really, what did Jesus expect? It was the time of the Passover and Jerusalem had become crowded with pilgrims. Several hundred thousand more people in the city than usual.

What's more, they were there for a religious festival that required the offering of sacrifice—an animal without blemish. But pilgrims would've had difficulty bringing their own animals from their own flocks, if they even had flocks. It was a long journey for some, from the hinterlands to the city. Getting an animal all the way there, and still without blemish: that would have been nearly impossible. So, animals were provided there in the courtyards for purchase, doves for those who needed a cheaper choice, lambs for the wealthy as these were the sacrificial animal par excellence, even cattle.

This means moneylenders and changers would also have been useful to have on hand, in case people came with only imperial money to spend. Imperial coins couldn't be used in the Temple. Caesar's head was on those coins. An imprint on the other side declared Caesar was the son of god.

No.

All this, then: it was all fully sanctioned. There was actually no way properly to worship at the time of the Passover without all this accrual of goods and rites and monetary exchange.

The thing is, the Temple was itself an accrual. It wasn't at the foundation of this faith. It wasn't at the foundation of this people.

Here's what was: an utterance. A mere breath almost.

The Ten Commandments, they've come to be called, but they're referred to in actual scripture as "words," though "commandments" makes them sound much more substantive, much more significant. But get this, I've been told an even better translation of this is "utterance," as in the Ten Utterances. Hardly even words.

But typical for a God who is himself breath. YHWH, this God named himself to Moses, when Moses asked, "Whom shall I say sent me? What is your name?" He asked this of the voice that had come from a burning bush, a bush that burned though was never consumed, the very appearance of being, sustained and sustaining being. The voice came from this burning bush, answering with what is practically unpronounceable. Translated, "The Lord," Y-H-W-H is, in pronouncing, to make the sound of breath: "YHWH."

This Lord, then: he is utterance, and his law for life together in community is utterance, ten of them, issued on another mountain top, later in the legend. Sure, Moses cast them in stone. But they came from the Lord God as utterance: Don't lie. Don't steal. Don't murder. Don't grab after your neighbor's things, which is akin to grabbing after your neighbor's being. Honor your past, what brought you here. Remember the Sabbath, a day of rest.

It wasn't much to go on. Honoring, remembering, basic proscriptions: it really wasn't much to go on. We've made a lot more of it. Moses was but the first to cast it in stone, but many have followed in this perhaps misguided way. Statues of the Ten Commandments are all over the place, from marble plaques in sanctuaries and courthouses and even some classrooms to marble monstrosities whose installation in their place requires heavy machinery.

Absurd. Talk about missing the point.

Utterance. Breath. Light as light. Light as time.

We're taking a survey tour of the covenants this season. Lent, Year B has us on a journey revisiting the old covenants of God. This six-week season prior to Easter, in preparation for Easter, began with the covenant with Noah. On the first Sunday, revisiting that mythical rainbow as a sign following the flood, we remembered the Lord's promise never to revert the world to its primordial state of watery chaos, dark non-being, never to give up on it, as if it never was. On the second Sunday, we heard once again the promise to Abram and Sarai, now made Abraham and Sarah, to walk with them and to grant that they'd be the parents of multitudes. By them, the Lord would

bless the world with people. On this, the third Sunday, we're with the first part of the covenant that is the Law, the Torah, which makes possible life together and which begins with these barest ten.

They would hold for a long time. The people would hold them, and nearly only them, for a long time. On those stone tablets, in a box with poles by which they could be carried, the so-called Ark of the Covenant, the Law would carry the people through their long time in the wilderness, to when they settled in Canaan.

They would lose it in war. The enemy would take the Ark and its stone contents, war booty; and the people would yearn to get them back, which at last they would, generations later, when David was their king, their mighty warrior king. He would rescue it from the Philistines, and he would deliver it to the capital city, Jerusalem, the city of David, (the city of peace, an aspirational name if ever there was one. Jerusalem, the city of peace.) He would dance naked before its entrance at the city gate, leading it to where it would find rest in the tent of meeting, erected for a final, a lasting time.

The thing is, through all this, the people remained a people, the people remained gathered as by the Law. So, to keep the Law, and to be kept by it: it seems you don't actually need the tablets. You might *yearn* for them; you might *yearn* for some emblem of it all, a token that aids in your remembering, your honoring. But for it to work its magic of communal binding, responsible and responsive relating, you don't actually need the emblem. To honor, to remember: this is something done irrespective of what you literally carry around with you, and irrespective of how grand a container you actually make for it all.

And the container became pretty grand. The Tent of Meeting would become, under Solomon's reign, a Temple. It would have an innermost sanctum, and an inner sanctum, and an inner courtyard, and outer courts, and stables with stalls for keeping all those animals, and a grand mount and many steps for climbing that mount. It was magnificent, apparently. Nothing like it anywhere else in the whole region.

Which only increased the warring over it all. Babylon would take it, destroy it. The people would build again. Assyria would occupy, until Rome came along. They would loot and eventually destroy. On and on. You know how we are, what happens when we let loose and covet *all* our neighbor's goods.

But then there's this, hidden in plain sight, this other realm for coming close to God, this other dimension, which is so much less about conquering, so much more about surrendering. It's

also not so late an addition, is indeed right there at the foundation of it all. Time. Time provides the temple that is at the very heart of things. The Sabbath, the fourth utterance. Take time. Give yourself time. Give yourself over to time, for a time. See what happens. See what encounter might come.

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote what's become a classic for me personally at least. Published in 1951 and entitled *The Sabbath*, it's a short read, but you really shouldn't rush it. No, with this especially, you should take your time—this defense against time becoming completely a realm to be justified in terms of production and productivity.

By the point of Heschel's writing it, he'd been living in the United States for over ten years. A Polish rabbi who fled the Nazis, Heschel witnessed in America a different compulsory toil at work. The industrial revolution had completely won, and wealth-building had thoroughly become the project of the Modern West. "Technical civilization...is humanity's triumph over space," he wrote. "Time, however, is beyond our reach, beyond our power. We can overcome distance but can neither recapture the past nor dig out the future. Time is both near and far; time is intrinsic to all experience but transcending all experience."

I'd add to all this, time is also hardly a respecter of status or privilege. Though we who have money can hire help to free up our time, we cannot buy more time per se. Though access to good health care and healthful goods and services is crucial, a rich man might die young while a poor man might live to see his grandchildren have children. Time doesn't care about what all we can buy, not entirely.

Here is Heschel again, "Time is humanity's greatest challenge: we all take part in a procession through its realm...but we are unable to gain a foothold in it. Space is exposed to human will, but time's reality is apart and away from us. [Time] belongs exclusively to God..."

Time belongs exclusively to God.

Powerful people will fool themselves otherwise. Fascist regimes harbor fantasies of owning the future, their reign stretching into eternity. Tech bros harbor fantasies of programing the world so they'll outlive us all. But what seems more enduringly the case is that time will have its way with us each and all, a Temple that holds us and molds us and ever defies our compulsion to conquer and to dominate. For this, time is a truer temple than any patch of land could possibly allow for. The Sabbath is in Heschel's mind a palace in time, time entered as sanctified. For this, time is a truer temple than any bricks and mortar could possibly be, no matter how beautifully arranged, no matter how invulnerably built or carefully defended.

We'll fight over land. We'll make war over what we've managed to build in place, what we've managed to make of the realm of space. Monuments, mighty cities, private property: so driven are we to conquer what we can, we'll fight to the death to continue that it might be so. But time is an altogether other realm, an altogether different substance, at least in our experience of it.

I don't know why Jesus is so angry here. No one does, not really. The disciples give it their best guess, or perhaps our gospel writer gives it his best guess, though in the voice of the disciples. Citing that line from that psalm, "Remember it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.'" But that doesn't seem quite right, given the explanation Jesus himself is remembered to have offered: "Destroy this Temple and in three days I'll raise it up." That doesn't seem like someone who has a lot of zeal for this particular Temple. That sounds like someone whose zeal is for a different temple, indeed an altogether different *sort* of temple, the one from of old, the one that endures as more true.

And I gotta say, I'm with Jesus on this. I trust this sort of temple more than I trust what's more commonly recognized as a temple. These days, of course, our so-called temples take up *a lot* of my time as pastor. The meetinghouse in Monterey, now up for sale, has demanded my attention in a whole bunch of ways. The meetinghouse on the hill in Lenox, moving ever-so-slowly toward historical restoration and (more compellingly) community resource, has a small group meeting nearly every week to keep the even-slow-movement going. Each is a different course to a common goal: that we, the church, might return our fuller attention to our truer temple, time together; that we, the church, might freely enter time set apart and sanctified for a sure encounter with God.

An ancient utterance and an enduring desire.

Thanks be to God.