

We started a sermon series two weeks ago called “Taking Back our Story.”

The idea is to spend some time in worship – whether you are in front of me right now, or watching me on your computer screen or television, or listening to this days from now as a podcast while you’re walking your dog...the idea is to spend some time in worship in the midst of an extraordinarily noisy time as we get closer and closer to an election – so that we can remember what is most true.

I said this two weeks ago, but it bears repeating: It isn’t a new thing for God’s people to need to concentrate and listen for what is true amidst the noise of the culture and world around them.

There are 39 books that make up the Old Testament. In almost all of them, a major theme is God’s people figuring out how to claim their own, God-given identity in the midst of a world that tries to tell them they should behave a different way.

Each week in this series we are going to focus on a particular story, or mantra, that God’s people would say again and again to remind them whose they were.

Today, we’re going to focus on one of the most famous and well-known of those stories: the Ten Commandments.

Before we hear that Scripture, let us go to God in prayer and then be centered by the choir.

*Beyond the ads, beyond the texts, and yard signs, and rallies, and social media scrolls, and chatter among friends and family – beyond all of that, O God, we pray that by your Spirit you would reach us – and speak to us – so that the words we will hear in a moment from your Scripture might take their rightful place as word of authority that can relativize all the other voices that try to tell us what is most important. We ask it in faith and because we need it. Amen.*

There are two places where the Ten Commandments are listed out in the Bible. The first is from the book of Exodus – a passage that recounts the event itself.

The second is our Scripture this morning from the book of Deuteronomy where Moses reminds the God’s people of that event.

I am reading from the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter. Listen with me for God’s word:

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Moses convened all Israel, and said to them:

Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently. The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. The Lord spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire. (At that time I was standing between the Lord and you to declare to you the words of the Lord; for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain.) And he said:

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 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.

Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 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, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

Neither shall you commit adultery.

Neither shall you steal.

Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbor.

Neither shall you covet your neighbor's wife.

Neither shall you desire your neighbor's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

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Many of us, when we hear about the Ten Commandments, can't help but think about a white-bearded Charlton Heston standing on a mountain top...stone tablets held high above his head...the clouds above him full of God's awesome presence.

For those who might not be thinking about that picture, one reason that others are is because...fortunately, or not...movies tend to make concrete images in our minds. And in 1956 - the Hollywood blockbuster that captured many eyes – was The Ten Commandments.

I don't need to tell you that the white, American, grandfather figure who was Charlton Heston did not actually likely look like Moses – who was by all accounts a middle eastern man. (Heston – who, in addition to the role of Moses in the movie was also cast as the voice of God...which also very likely isn't what God sounds like). The fact that many people did think Moses looked like Charlton Heston and that God sounded like Charlton Heston is proof that the movie made an impression.

I bring this old Hollywood chestnut up in a sermon is to give us some context for just **how much more an impression** the story of the Ten Commandments made on generation after generation of the Jewish people...who, generation after generation would read this story during worship, and recall this story around the table with family, and capture this story in artwork, and tell this story to their children at bedtime.

“There was a time when we were no people – but God delivered us from Egypt – and then gave us the law, which told us how to be God's people.”

The Scripture we heard this morning isn't just **a** familiar story that shapes the identity of Jewish (and, by extension, Christian) people. In many ways it is **the** story that shapes our identity.

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The first summer I was here – the summer of 2013 – I decided we would do a ten-week sermon series on the 10 Commandments.

I think an important quality of leadership is humility, so let me be the first to admit that preaching a ten-week sermon series really isn't a good idea.

**Every** Sunday – for more than two months – we would pair one of the commandments with a text from the gospels where Jesus expands – and interprets – upon that commandment. We even paired the ten-week series with a devotional book. It was All Ten Commandments all.the.time.

One takeaway from the summer – beyond not doing any more ten-week sermon series – was that when you get right down to it...and Jesus does get right down to it in his interpretation of each of these commandments – they are actually harder to keep than you think.

Take commandment number six.

You may think you have kept it...but listen to what Jesus says: *You have heard it said: “You shall not murder.” But I say to you: if you are angry. . . you will be liable to judgment and if you’re you have something against your sister, be reconciled.*

Or number ten.

You may think you haven’t coveted your neighbor’s house, or possessions...but – c’mon. We all know we haven’t kept that one.

In fact, the truth is, we probably haven’t been able to keep many of the commandments. Which kind of begs the question: are the Ten Commandments supposed to be a test? And what does it mean if – try as we might – we fail the test? How does that help, exactly, in shaping our identity as God’s people?

John Calvin (heard of him?) said that there were three uses – or purposes – for the Ten Commandments (or the “Law”):

One use of the law is to serve as a mirror. When we look into the heart of God and see what expectations God has for us, it is evidence of God’s holiness and goodness. When we see the ways we fail to live into those expectations, it is evidence of our brokenness...and a reminder that we are in need of God’s grace and mercy.

A second use of the law is to restrain evil. This is very practical – and it is the reason why laws...even civil laws...exist. Because we know we are not and cannot be perfect, there is a need for limits and accountability. God’s law helps provide that.

The third use of the law is to show us how to live. I’m not going to talk this morning a whole lot about the first two uses of the law, but I wanted to spend a little time on the third.

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The easiest way to differentiate the Ten Commandments as a test that we are doomed to fail from a gift that are grateful to receive is to pay attention to what God says before the commandments start:

*I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...*

Did you catch that?

There is no contingency. It's not, "I will be the Lord your God if you but follow these commandments." Or, "I will be your God if you can at least pull off 50% of this list."

No. The commandments are offered as a gift. Free of strings but full of hope and expectation. God will be our God no matter what – God's claim on us is non-negotiable. And, in the commandments, God offers us a vision for what a life can look like when it is shaped in response to grace...how the commandments can, as Calvin said, "show us how to live."

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There's a scene in another old movie – which came out, not in 1956, but in the early 1990s – that comes to my mind.

It's from the movie *Scent of a Woman*, starring Al Pacino and Chris O'Donnell. Pacino plays the part of a blind, retired Lieutenant Colonel from the army who is depressed and lonely and homebound, living in the guest room of his niece's house. O'Donnell plays the part of a working-class boarding school teenager who takes a part-time job housesitting the Lt. Col. while the niece and her family are away for a weekend. The Col. – whose name is Frank, strong-arms the boarding school kid, whose name is Charlie – into taking him for what he thinks will be a last-gasp trip to New York City.

While Col. Frank and Charlie are there, they go to lunch at an elegant club in one of the City's high rises. They meet, and Col. Frank charms, an elegant woman named Donna who is sitting by herself. There is an orchestra playing – and a dance floor with no one dancing. To everyone's surprise, the blind Lt. Col asks if the woman would like to dance the tango. Delighted, she accepts...Frank takes her by the hand, and hands Charlie his cane.

And then he says, "Charlie my boy...I'm going to need some coordinates."

Charlie let's Frank know that the floor is about 20X30 feet with tables around the edge. They are standing on the long end.

With that, Frank and Donna are off. The dance begins. With poise and grace, Frank leads Donna around every inch of the floor. They promenade, twist, dip, and pivot...and as the music swells...end the dance with a big finish – never faltering once. Frank leads Donna off the dance floor, where Charlie helps him back into his seat...the rest of the restaurant applauding.

“Taking Back our Story: A Shared History”

Rev. Pen Peery

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I find it helps to remember that God’s law...God’s commandments...are not heavy-handed rules...but that they are coordinates that set the parameters for our freedom and joy...for how we can most fully be alive.

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There are lots of different ways to dance on the floor that is defined by God’s grace. Each of our styles are different...shaped by our own experiences and our individuality. Much time has passed since these commandments were first given – and the change that has happened over the course of that time is enough to bend the mind.

Yet even with all of that change – the coordinates are the same...they define a life and a history that we share with all those who are claimed as God’s people...past, present, and future.

It is a life defined by loving God on the one hand (those are the first four commandments), and our neighbors on the other (those are the next six).

Every day, every year, every election cycle we are faced with making choices.

It’s not at all surprising that we make different ones.

Different choices do not mean that we don’t share the same values.

What matters is that we ask whether the choices we make fit on the dance floor.

Do they honor God? Do they honor our neighbors?

There is a lot of messaging and marketing out there right now that is trying to define the choices we are being asked to make in November...there are no shortage of opinions trying to frame what they think this election is about.

As people of faith – no matter the year or the choice – the frame is always the same: God and neighbor. God and neighbor. God and neighbor.

In that space we find our identity and what is true.

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.