

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

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Rest Up

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Let us pray . . .

The most common lament I have heard and continue to hear is, while walking with you all is something like, “The world’s a mess. Where is God?”

It’s an understandable question. So this morning, in continuing with topics you’ve expressed interest in, we’ll revisit the Ten Commandments.

The story of the Ten Commandments comes from the Book of Exodus. This book is 40 chapters long and right smack in the middle is chapter 20 where God reveals the decalogue, or the Ten Commandments to make a new covenant with His people. The placement of these commands in the center of the book was an intentional literary choice signaling their importance. Like being central to the Book of Exodus, so too were these commands to be central to the Israelites' lives.

Now the reason God needed to make a new covenant begins with the story of Moses.

Moses' life begins as an Israeli infant but he becomes a potential heir to an Egyptian — Pharaoh's throne. You see, Pharaoh had heard that a deliverer would be born amongst the Hebrews and so ordered that all children under age two be killed.

Moses' mother — Jochebed — saves her baby by floating him down the Nile, toward Pharaoh's palace. He is rescued from the

Nile and Pharaoh's daughter Bithiah raises him. Moses grows to become a mighty builder in Egypt and is promised everything from Pharaoh as a result.

However, Moses learns that he is a Hebrew — he is of the very slaves whom he drives. In an unexpected twist — because God works in unexpected and twisty ways — God helps Moses carry out the release of his people from their slavery to the Egyptians by providing him instructions on what to say and what to do along the way.

When they are finally free and also safe from further threats from the Egyptian Army, Moses and the Israelites begin their journey into the wilderness and eventually find themselves lost on many levels.

Displaced, wandering and suffering.

Discouraged, hungry, and thirsty.

Scared, anxious and mad.

Their world is a mess. They even question the Lord's presence. As a result, Moses ends up spending time going up and down Mount Sinai, spending time with YHWH, trying to sort things out and get reoriented. This time with God eventually leads to the Ten Commandments.

Since the fulfillment of the Israelites' liberation from slavery to the Egyptians was completed in the giving of these commandments, the law, the Israelites were — in turn — obligated to obey. By agreeing to these commands, they entered into a covenant with God. And the covenant was conditional: keep and obey the Lord's laws, receive the Lord's favor. Which means have less of a messy life.

The information I'm working with comes from John J. Collins' book Introduction to the Hebrew Bible and also from the work of contemporary Jewish scholar Rabbi Benjamin Blech.

I like to think of the Ten Commandments as a manifestation of God's ability to create order out of chaos. Much like that Holy hovering God did in the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

It's a familiar scene for God. Only this time, the formless, empty, darkness was within the hearts of the Israelites looking to find meaning.

And so, hovering over another way of organizing the people, God created the commandments as a covenant between God and humanity. Notice that in this covenant, God comes first in order to establish the order of things. So, the first four commands deal with Israel's obligation to Yahweh, to God.

1. I am the Lord your God.

Collins writes that this is to identify the Lord as the Lord of the Israelites. This command was bold and new — declared where there was not yet monotheism and declared at a time where the existence of other gods was not denied. But here, God was doing a new thing by saying out of all the other Gods, He is the real and only deal.

In terms of today, Rabbi Blech writes that, “We live in an age of cultural relativism. Secularism has turned morality into no more than a personal preference. Sin, evil, wrongdoing are words that have lost all meaning in a world where there are no absolute truths.”

Some of my closest friends are lovely people who lead good lives while denying absolute truths like belief in God or the usefulness of religion.

Does that mean that the value of their lives are somehow different than mine because we depart on what we may or may not believe in? I hope not.

That's why I love this opening command to this covenant with God. God is simply making a statement. God is saying, "I am God and I am yours." The command isn't thou shalt believe in the Lord your God, because we all know we can't command beliefs. Beliefs are deeply personal and complex for all kinds of reasons.

This ancient command, this rule, is I am God and I am yours. I find this command deeply comforting — it reassures that in all that is, there is first a reliable and orienting source — a *more* — that is present and available.

2. You shall have no other gods before Me.

The ancient near east was not a monotheistic culture. Many gods competed for worship, adoration, influence and so on. This restriction of worship to one god was new and exceptional. This

command was part of clarifying the chaos. Golden calves brought forth from the psyches of people aren't the location of the seat of our souls. God is.

And yet, not much has really changed today. Across our collective selves, we still worship different gods. These gods have names like status, money, the accumulation of material things, comfort, the self, sports, fame, media.

If you want to know what you worship, look at what you surround yourself with. Look at where and how you spend your thoughts, your money, your time and your relationships.

Rabbi Blech writes that, "To believe in God requires us to reject all the false gods of our society that seek only to still the voice of our conscience and the stirrings of our soul."

And finally, in making it very clear who God is to God's people, the third commandment says:

3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

Originally this referred to false or frivolous oaths which were considered offensive to God. Things like swearing on God's name you would do something for another. Today is no different but because of the way culture and society have rolled out, we must seriously consider this command. Otherwise we align and attribute all acts — from foulness to violence — to the name of God. From swearing in anger to declaring God's name as a bomb goes off still offends what is sacred and Holy.

So, this command is given to keep what is Holy, holy and to be clear on the separation of what God intends, as distinct from what we might declare in the name of God.

So, there we have the first three commands with God making things very clear as to how things are laid out: I am the Lord, your God.

You shall have no other gods before me and don't take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

With it now clear that God is God, in what I believe is an epic and gorgeous move, God does something invitational and potentially transformative, commanding that we

4. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.

The word Sabbath has its origins in *shabath*— a Hebrew word meaning “to rest.” We recognize this command to rest as originating from the story in Genesis where God created the heavens and the earth and every living creature in six days, and on the seventh, God rested.

While taking a Sabbath was — and still is — a distinctive characteristic of Judaism, it became a source of mockery to pagans in antiquity who viewed it as laziness. But I see this command as I said as epic, gorgeous, invitational and potentially transformative. It's God's way of saying, “Hey you, Beloved one of mine. Come close. Rest with and in me.”

Regular work stoppage and rest can in fact be transformational as it gives us the opportunity to be still and remember that first command — that God is ours and that by joining God in work stoppage we remember that we are God's.

In the ancient near east this command was for simpler times. But today, with all the ways we are plugged in and the speed at which we can zoom around, it seems now more than ever we need to stop. Need to be still on a regular basis, so that we can know that God is God. It's our quiet time, our down time, our reflective spiritual practices that help us grow our souls.

So those are the first four commands re-establishing God and Israel's obligations to God, to Yahweh. The remaining commandments concern obligations in relation to each other:

5. Honor your father and your mother.

This was a fundamental element in near eastern wisdom literature, including the book of Proverbs. Ancient Rabbis said that this command, to honor parents, appears on the same tablet set aside for commandments between humanity and God. Why? Because, the Rabbis answer, just like God, our parents shared in creating us.

Now, if your relationship with your parent or parents was strong, this is an easy command. However, honoring them can be difficult to follow if your relationship with one or both of your parents has been difficult or abusive. God understands this.

In the bigger picture, this is a command to respect and care for all the elders in our lives. All those who have led the way and need us to look out for them as they enter old age and dependency.

So these are the two things you must do: take a sabbath and honor your elders.

Now the commandments take a turn as to what shall *not* happen.

Beginning with the **6th commandment: You shall not murder.**

The Hebrew verb *rasah* is often used for murder and sometimes for unintentional killings. The effect of this law was not to prevent all killing, but to regulate the taking of life and to make it subject to community control.

Maybe we can understand this in light of self defense or even, God forbid, a war. These can be a difficult discussion to have, especially in the face of our Just Peace pursuits. But is it possible that sometimes peace and justice are achieved only as a result of a community-determined killing? Would the war in Ukraine stop if someone took out Putin? This hard stuff is necessary to wrestle with if we want to try to understand ourselves and the unrelenting violence of others.

7. You shall not commit adultery.

This command was concerned with sexual violations of marriage. Polygamy was permitted in ancient Israel with Solomon being one of its most famous practitioners — remember his obsession with Bathsheba?

Either men or women could be guilty of adultery. However in the ancient near east, if either committed adultery, a man offended the husband of his partner and a woman offended against her own husband.

Rabbi Blech writes that there was a time when people understood that true love was a necessary prerequisite for intimacy and that *kiddushin*, the Hebrew word for marriage as a form of holiness, was the ideal way to describe the perfect union between two people who love each other. Adultery defiles this sacred bond.

Rabbi Blech reflects that for today, from casual sex and hookups, to adulterous unions, contemporary America has traded the seventh commandment for a lack of sexual restraint and immorality – only to pay the price of broken homes, unfulfilled fantasies and the grief

that comes from breaking the divine laws God taught us for achieving true happiness.

8. You shall not steal.

While this is a general command, Rabbi Blech says that for the Talmud — the primary source of Jewish religious law — theft means far more than the taking of someone else’s property: We steal from others whenever we don’t live up to our obligations, whenever we do not give full value for any work for which we receive payment. Whenever we’re distracted in a way that takes us away from being present to another. Think of all the phone scrolling that happens when we’re with others. When we’re not conscientious enough to fulfill an obligation to the best of our ability or to be present, we are in violation of the eighth commandment.

9. You shall not bear false witness.

Bearing false witness is on the same tablet as the sin of murder. This law was based on the importance of truth in witnessing as illustrated by cases where someone was put to death on the basis of a false witness. How many stories have we heard that a man — often a black man — was falsely imprisoned, losing his whole life and meaning because someone was a false witness. Yet, this commandment goes far beyond testimony given in a courtroom. Our use of words on a daily basis by way of harmful speech, spiteful slander, malicious rumors and hurtful gossip can destroy reputations, and kill friendships. They can hurt the victims of their cruel barbs in excruciating ways. How many times have we heard of a youngster driven to suicide over cruel words on social media? Blech reminds us that gossip is no less than social sewage for the ears. Yet our culture today makes it the major focus of our media and a constant theme of our conversations. For the Torah, it was more than a sin; false witness was sickness – a disease similar to

leprosy, requiring those guilty of slander to be punished with isolation.

And finally, the 10th commandment. You shall not covet.

Here the directives against adultery and stealing are supplemented by this law by forbidding even the coveting of another's goods.

Commentators explain that just as the first law — I am the Lord your God — is central to all the other laws, this last commandment is meant to bring us to the highest level of holiness. It demands not only that we control our actions and our speech, but even our thoughts. It addresses a universal human failing and obviously believes that we can overcome it.

As Blech writes, “if the desire for something is based on need, then fulfillment brings contentment. If the goal, however, is simply to have more than everyone else, then we are doomed to disappointment and to ever-greater dissatisfaction. There’s always

somebody who has something we don't — which is enough to stir up within us envy to prevent us from being content with what is ours. That's why coveting consumes its practitioner. In the most profound sense, those who covet fail to acknowledge the powerful truth that there is enough in this world to satisfy everyone's need but there's never enough to satisfy people's greed."

So these are God's ten commandments — originally given to the Hebrews, the early Israelites, to help them get back on track with YHWH.

They still hold up today, still stand out of a profound and irrevocable love and concern that we get our humility right and tend to our souls. The point of God's commands are to keep us close to God and in right relationship with each other. The degree to which we engage the commandments gets reflected out onto the world.

When we stray from this Holy guidance, the consequences can be quite messy. We might find ourselves feeling empty, isolated, fearful, anxious, jealous, violent, greedy, indifferent, name your pain.

I'd say we're struggling deeply and separated from God on a collective level. It's understandable that people want to know why the world is a mess and where is God.

God never left the covenant and we often do.

So, given our humanness and our capacity to fall away from God, or thing Holy and sacred, how do we stay on track as best as possible?

In the email for this morning, I said I'd spend a wee bit more time on the 4th Command: *Thou shalt take a Sabbath* because I join

many others in believing a sabbath is how and why we might be more faithful to the other commandments.

As I said, coming from the Hebrew *shabath*, meaning “to rest,” the origins of resting after working is made clear in Genesis 2:1-3: *Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. 2 And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. 3 So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.*

God even directs that seventh day as a day unto its own.

It's not just good like the other six.

God sets apart the seventh day as blessed and hallowed.

God declared the seventh day HOLY.

So the intent of taking a sabbath is ultimately to remember Yahweh.
And in taking a sabbath we too are invited to be Holy like God.

Holiness is resting and resting is holiness.

Also, as noted, the placement of the 4th is in-between how we are to be with God AND how we are to be with each other.

What work stoppage does is tend to an in-between space. In between the Divine and the human. As an aside, that's where Jesus Christ dwells. So, work stoppage helps us go inside for stillness and quiet and it is in that space where we can hear God's voice speaking to us.

It's what Moses did when he went up the mountain. He was still and quiet and as a result, he could discern God's voice, becoming Holy in return.

Being still and quiet helps us to remember the first command,

I am God and I am yours.

And just as God gave Moses the guidance he needed to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, so too does God give each of you the guidance you need to help lead you out of our own places of lostness. So when the world or your own impulses and choices might drive you crazy, first make sure you believe and feel it when God says *I am God and I am yours*, and then check to make sure you are taking a regular sabbath — a time and place to rest in the things of God.

I struggle to honor the fourth because there is always something or someone pulling at me. I don't regularly rest in and with God.

Oh sure, God and I have our moments.

We have them when I sit on the sunporch and absorb the view.

We have them when I prepare food and I realize my abundance.

We have them when I share time with my husband and family.

God and I have all kinds of moments!

But the thing is, God's not looking for moments. Not looking for some awareness or satisfaction stolen here and there. God is looking for us to regularly and routinely rest from all that we do, in order that we may rest in and rest with God.

As my Jewish friend Mitch recently said to me, "Susie, the observance of the 4th Commandment actually makes God happy."

So Beloveds, my prayer for you as you make your way through the rest of this day and into the new week, is that you join God's invitation to covenant with the Holy and regularly rest from your work. Go ahead, make God happy — Let yourself be held in the Divine, in God, and from there may the fruits of your life and our collective lives be less messy and more aware of God's presence.

Amen