



## The Promise of Instruction

Exodus 20:1-17

Rev. Jenny McDevitt

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When it comes to the Ten Commandments, I can't help but think about Judge Roy Moore. Do you remember him? On two occasions he was the chief justice of the Supreme Court of Alabama. He was removed on both occasions. He most recently ran for a senate seat in 2020. The reason most people remember him is because of the controversy around a large monument he commissioned and had installed in the state judicial building. The enormous statue included a giant copy of the 10 commandments.

To make a long story shorter, the monument was not permitted to remain in place, and so Judge Moore hauled it from one public appearance to another before finally laying it rest, so to speak, at his own Foundation for Moral Law in downtown Montgomery just about a year ago. Don't worry if you missed this — a few other things were happening just about a year ago. But the monument's re-installation brought to light some key details, including the fact that the Judge Moore's ten commandments weighed a total of 5,280 pounds, or, if you do the math, just over 500 pounds per commandment. When the granite statue was put in place, a five-ton crane buckled under the weight of it.<sup>1</sup>

I wonder if sometimes that's how these commandments feel to us. Impossibly heavy, causing even the most righteous and upright among us to buckle underneath their weight. I wonder this especially since we find ourselves focusing on them just two weeks after we explored God's covenant with Noah. That covenant was unconditional, remember? I will never destroy the earth again, God says, and in making that promise, God asks nothing — not one thing — of Noah or anyone else.

Not so when it comes to Moses and the ten commandments. The condition comes a few verses beforehand. God says to Moses, "Remember, now, how I set you free. Therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession. You shall be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation."<sup>2</sup> If you obey my voice and keep my covenant.

That "if" is enough to make your shoulders sag and your spirits drop, isn't it? Two little letters, but they contain the weight of the world — a world that says, so often, you will be loved to exact extent that you earn it. You will be valued in direct proportion to what you produce or achieve. You will be considered faithful so long as you live flawlessly. You will be offered the promise, but only if you can show

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<sup>1</sup> This story was originally shared by Tom Long in his essay "Dancing the Decalogue," in *The Christian Century*, March 7, 2006. For the purposes of this sermon, I added updated information.

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 19:4-6

you are worthy of it. That's what that "if" and all the instructions that follow, seem to carry.

And lest we get carried away and say to ourselves, that is just the way of the Old Testament, I'll point your attention to the Gospel of John, chapter 15, in which Jesus says, "You are my friends **if** you do what I command you."

Whenever I find myself flummoxed by scripture or even disappointed by it, I generally take that to mean I simply haven't plumbed its depths adequately. And so in my study this week, I read every word of the book of Exodus multiple times. Here is what I finally noticed: the ten commandments are situated very carefully.

The story of Exodus before the commandments is the story of the Israelite's enslavement in Egypt and the way that God delivered them from bondage into freedom. And the story of Exodus after the commandments are handed off is the recitation of astonishingly detailed instructions about where they should reside — astonishing detailed instructions all geared toward creating something breathtakingly beautiful, with acacia wood and fine linen, with blues and purples and crimson, with golden threads and careful metalwork.

What I'm saying is this: on one side of the commandments is freedom and on the other side of the commandments is beauty. So perhaps what sits right in the middle is not, in fact, heavy and hard but rather part of that same transcendent trajectory. Because surely God would not liberate God's people from slavery only to shackle them to another impossible and inhumane way of life. Surely God is not so cruel or conniving as that would require. I have come to believe wholeheartedly that God gives us the commandments so that

we might have the best chance possible at a life replete with freedom and beauty, not weighed down with burden, but light enough that we can, in scripture's own words, soar on the wings of eagles.

I know, I know, that's a far cry and a long leap from, "**If** you obey my voice and keep my commands." But don't miss this: Moses carried the tablets that said, "You shall not murder," but he himself once took a human life. And as for the rest of God's people, well, Moses comes down the mountain with the first set of tablets only to find them dancing around as they put the finishing touches on a golden calf. Moses is so upset by this he drops the tablets, but as theologian Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, "Moses let [the tablets] break, but only because the people had already broken them."<sup>3</sup>

If remaining in right relationship with God (there's that IF again) required full and perfect obedience to the law, friends, it would have been over and done with right then and there. If a mistake or a misstep was enough for God to wipe his hands clean and brush the dust off her sandals and call it a day. If disappointment was reason enough to desert us. If wrong answers or a third strike or spilled milk or a golden calf were enough for God to give up on us. That would have been that, and the Bible would have been a heck of a lot shorter. But it wasn't. And it isn't.

Exodus shows us clearly that left to our own devices, we humans are a bit of a hot mess and a mixed bag. That is not new information for God. We have been that way from the beginning. But even still, God chooses to love us.

The commandments God issues as part of the covenant with Moses, they are not conditions on the promise. They are part of the promise itself.<sup>4</sup> God is not making love

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, in *Gospel Medicine*.

<sup>4</sup> Again, Barbara Brown Taylor.

conditional. God is actually extending what love looks like and how far love can reach. It was love that compelled God to set the Israelites free, to give them their lives back. And it is love that compels God to issue some commandments so those lives would be worth living.

How about this, God says. Honor the Lord your God, because I am the one who has brought you this far already. I am your source and your strength, and I am your road home.

Don't waste your time worshipping anything other than me, because at some point, in some way, it will let you down, and it will break your heart. Spare yourself that pain, won't you?

Don't use my name casually. You know my name because I have drawn close to you, and I will never be casual in my treatment of you, I promise.

Remember the Sabbath, because it will be a chance to take a break from what you do so you can remember who you are.

Honor your parents, whoever they are, because good or bad, they are the reason you can breathe. They gave you your place in the story. Now, honoring is not the same as idolizing or even obeying —relationships are complex. What I'm saying is, remember that none of us got where we are all on our own.

Do not murder. Do not take a life, and do not sit quietly or complacently by as another life is taken. Do not withhold from anyone that which is life-giving, be it rights or respect, space or security, food or freedom.

Do not compromise the trust someone places in you. Do not ever forget how fragile the human heart is — a heart that beats, but that can also break. When you are presented with an opportunity to knowingly rupture a relationship, resist it at all costs. The resulting burden will be so heavy, it will weigh upon everyone, including you.

Do not take what isn't yours, and while we're at it, don't take more than you could ever

need, either. There's more than enough, once you figure out life is not zero-sum game.

Do not bear false witness. Do not spread stories of fake news. Your word is your bond and only the truth will set you free. If, along the way, you forget what the truth is, or what it looks like or sounds like, just remember this: I am the way, and the truth, and the life.

Do not wish you had what others have. It is a slippery slope that ensures happiness will always be elusive. Rejoice with those who rejoice, give thanks for what you have, and eventually, you, too, will discover that the only treasures worth storing up are heavenly ones because where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. So set your heart free, that's what I'm trying to tell you.

These are the commands I am giving you, God says, because I set you free once already from everything that held you down and held you back, and this instruction, this guidance, it is your best chance of taking the life I've given you and living it to its fullest and best capacity, no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

I know, I know. God says, "**If** you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession. You shall be my people." We **are** God's people. We **are** God's treasured possession. There's no way around it. But **if** we obey God's voice and keep God's covenant, we'll never forget it. We'll never forget that we are God's treasure, that we are God's beloved, and before you know it, we'll find ourselves living like we believe it's true, too.

Robert Wuthnow, an American sociologist, says that stories and memories can become so planted in our minds, they act back upon us.

He tells the story of Jack Casey, a volunteer fireman who, as a child, had some teeth pulled under general anesthesia. Jack was terrified, but one of the nurses said, "Don't worry. I'll be right here beside you no matter what happens. I'll be right here, the whole

time." When he woke up, he saw that she had kept her word. She was still standing beside him.

Twenty years later, Mr. Casey was called to the scene of an accident. The driver was pinned upside down in his truck, and Jack crawled inside to try and release him from the wreckage. Gas was dripping on them both, and power tools were required to get the driver out. The whole time, the man kept repeating that he was afraid to die, that he didn't want to die, and every time, Jack replied, "Don't worry. I'll be right here beside you no matter what happens. I'll be right here the whole time."

Later, after he was safe, the driver told Jack, "You were an idiot. Why did you do that? If something had gone wrong, you would have died, too." In reply, Jack simply said, "Somewhere deep inside me, I knew I couldn't leave you."<sup>5</sup>

I think that is the way the commandments work. We are found. We are rescued. We are set free. And what follows is a life beautifully shaped around, and in response to, that liberating act of love.

"I'll be right here beside you, no matter what happens."

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the house of slavery."

Freedom on one side. Beauty on the other. The gift of our lives is tucked right in between.

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<sup>5</sup> This story is also shared by Tom Long in "Dancing the Decalogue."