

Faith in the In-Between
Exodus 20:1–17
Sunday, March 7, 2021

It has been one year since we have been *here*. March 8, 2020 was the last time we gathered in the sanctuary to worship God together. It was the Second Sunday in Lent. The scripture reading was from Genesis 12, where God calls Abram to leave his home and his family and follow God to this unknown place to begin a whole new life. The poem on the cover of the bulletin was about how we follow God into the unknown. And the last hymn that we sang together was, “This Is a Day of New Beginnings,” which we could not even begin to understand the implications of what we were singing.

In the 364 days since then, we have been *displaced*. Displaced from the church building, instead worshipping virtually or outdoors. Displaced from our church family, not being able to join together in meals or fellowship. Many of us have been displaced from our families and friends, not being able to gather in person (or in the same way) with the people we love. Displaced from our jobs and co-workers as many of us have had to work virtually or have lost jobs. And many of us have experienced a kind of societal and political displacement over this past year, as we have witnessed moments of tremendous turmoil and upheaval; protests and riots and polarizing debates that have led to disagreements and disappointment with people that we care about.

When I think about how much has changed over the past year, I think about the *people* that we have lost. People like Shirley Mandale and John Dale and Lois Glaser who won't be here with us when we do finally gather back together. Or people like Mary K Darin who *moved away* during this time.

We have lost some things that we will never get back. When we *do* come back together, we will not be the same people, the same *church* in the same *place* that we were a year ago. We've *left* that place. And while things aren't as bad as they *have been* over the past year, and we are starting to see a light at the end of the tunnel, we're not there *yet*. We have left the place we *were*, but we have not yet arrived at the place we are *going* to. We are in this strange kind of in-between. And that is an anxious, unsettled place for a lot of us. We don't quite know what to do *here, now*. We either want things to go back to how they were *before*, or we want to hurry up and get to how things are *going to be* going forward. But this *in-between* doesn't feel like a comfortable, productive place.

And so it's in the midst of *that* that we hear this story of God giving the Ten Commandments to Moses and the people of Israel. The people who had left 400 years of slavery in Egypt and followed Moses out into the wilderness. While they are happy to be free, they have left behind the only life they have ever known. Four hundred years, that is *generations* of Israelites who have been born and died in Egypt. They've been gone for three months, and they still have 40 years left before they arrive in Israel. They have left the place where they *were*, but they have not yet arrived at the place where they are *going*. They are *in between* Egypt and Israel, and already they are experiencing the anxiety of not knowing how they are going to survive in the wilderness; not knowing where their food or water is going to come from. Some of them are saying, "Back in Egypt, we may have been slaves, but at least we had enough food to eat." Some of them just want to go back to the place they *were*. Some of them just want to hurry up and get to the place where they are *going*. But they have to stop *here* first, at Sinai, the mountain of God, and it doesn't feel like a comfortable, productive place.

But it is in this in-between place, in the *wilderness*, in their *displacement* following a time of plague in Egypt that God makes the covenant with the people of Israel concrete. We talked last week about how God initiated the covenant with Abraham. And at that point, it was just kind of a handshake deal, a verbal agreement. God said to Abraham, “Live your life with me, and I will make of you a great nation and give you this land.” But it was just a one-on-one thing, no witnesses, nothing written down and signed. *Now* God says, “Here is what it *means* to live your life with me,” and literally writes it down in stone.

Now, we could easily preach a sermon or a whole *series* of sermons walking through each one of these ten commandments and what they mean. But we are going to look at the big picture of how these commandments fit into this larger idea of covenant that we are talking about throughout Lent. God has established a covenant with Abraham and eventually *we* are drawn into that covenant through Jesus Christ, but right now we’re in between those two things. So how do the Ten Commandments fit into this covenant that God has established?

Like I just said, they show us what it *means* to live life *with God*. Remember last week what God said to Abram, “Walk before me and be blameless,” and what that more literally means in Hebrew is, “Live your life with your eyes set on me, totally devoted to me.” And these first four commandments show us what God means by that. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make idols and worship them. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord. And you shall remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. All of these are about the people of Israel’s relationship with God; how they live out their love for God.

But the next six commandments shift the focus from *God* to *other people*. Honor your father and mother. Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness

against your neighbor, falsely accuse them of something they did not do. And do not covet what belongs to your neighbor. The first four commandments show us how to live in right relationship with *God*, while the other six commandments show us how to live in right relationship with *our neighbor*. How to live out our love for *God*, and how to live out live for *our neighbor*. This is why Jesus says, when he's asked which one of the commandments is the *greatest*, the most important, he says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." That is what all of the commandments point us to.

So what this shows us is that being in a covenant relationship with God, living with our eyes set on God and being totally devoted to God, is not *just* about our relationship with God. It is also about our relationships with *each other*. You cannot separate the two. We show our love for God in how we love our neighbor. Like it says in the New Testament letter of 1 John, "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have *seen* cannot love God whom they have *not* seen. The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." So to live in a covenant relationship with God has implications for how we treat our neighbors.

Now, what we *see* in all of this is that Israel's covenant with God – *our* covenant with God – is not just a one-on-one thing, a personal relationship. We so often hear Christians talk about having a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ," and I think it's really important that our connection to God be personal and intimate and real, if that's what we mean by a personal relationship. But one thing it is *not* is *private* or *individualized*. It might have *started out* that way. God's initial covenant with Abraham was one-on-one. And then it was with Isaac. And

then it was with *Jacob*. And then, even though Jacob had 12 sons, the covenant was primarily with Judah.

But what we see in this story today is that God's covenant is *communal*. It's not just with *Moses*. It is with *all the people of Israel*. It is with Israel *as a people*. Before this, when people talked about Israel, they were referring to an individual person, Jacob, whose name God changed to Israel. But *after* that, when people talked about Israel, they were referring to a *nation*. It was in this place, in the wilderness, in this in-between time that Israel became a *people*. These ten commandments (and the 600+ that followed) provided a structure of civil and religious practice that forged them together as a people. God's covenant was no longer just one-on-one, personal, individual. It was *communal*. It held a people together.

And so for *us* to be in covenant relationship with God is not just a one-on-one, individual, personal faith. It is *communal*. We show our love for God in how we love our neighbors, those with whom we are in community, communion. Covenant with God does not just bind *me* to *God*. It binds *me* to *you*. And it binds *us* to *God*.

So in this story, the covenant is shifting from an *individual* to a *nation*, and eventually it will extend to the *world* through Jesus Christ. And this shift *happens* in the wilderness, in between Egypt and Israel, having left the place they *were* and not yet arriving at the place where they are *going*. It is in the in-between, in their displacement that God makes the covenant with Israel *concrete* and *communal*, forging them into a people. It is in that place that they were called, in concrete ways, to love God and their neighbor. Not to wait until they get to the place where they are going, but to start doing it *now*.

And so God is calling *us*, as a covenant community, not to wait until we get out of this in-between time and get to the place where we're going, but to love God and to love our neighbor in concrete ways, *here, now*. In the midst of our displacement. We're not just biding time until this is all over and we can get back to the way things were. It was in their displacement that God transformed the covenant with Israel and forged them into a people, and God can use *this* time to transform our understanding of what it means to be the people of God and to forge us into a stronger community of faith.

We *all* want to be back here together. And we *are* getting there. But the challenge before us right now is how we can be the people of God, the church of Jesus Christ in the midst of displacement. How to live faithfully with God and with our neighbors in the in-between. And what we see here is that it starts with the awareness that it's not just about *me* or *you*. It's about *us*. Our connection to each other, and our connection, *together*, to God. Because we show our love for God in how we love our neighbor. That is the most simple, foundational message of our faith. And the most difficult to live out. So let us go now to the table of God for the strength that we need, that we might be nourished *as* the Body of Christ *by* the body of Christ. Amen.