

First Baptist Church of Augusta
Exodus 20:1-17
Journey Through the Wilderness: Is There a Map?
March 15, 2009
Lent 2009

NRS Exodus 20:1 *Then God spoke all these words: 2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3 you shall have no other gods before me. 4 You shall not make for yourself an idol... 7 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God... 8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy... 12 Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. 13 You shall not murder. 14 You shall not commit adultery. 15 You shall not steal. 16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. 17 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.*

In the wilderness it is easy to get lost. Just ask the Israelites, who wandered for 40 years, when it should have only taken them four months. Someone should have asked for directions. In the wilderness, it is understandable to fear the worst, and believe that there is not enough to go around. Just ask the Israelites, who complained of starvation, and so, God gave them manna, bread of heaven, every day for 40 years. In the wilderness, people begin to question who is in charge here, and start threatening insurrection, a change of leadership, or worse, just turn around. Just ask the Israelites, who tormented their leader Moses with the grumbling and complaining, to the point that Moses wanted to be done with this fickle bunch.

Wilderness – it is not just a stretch of historic desert crossing modern day Israel. It is where people find themselves when they have lost their way and their bearings. Wilderness is the place, when the world is upside down, and the only way across seems to be through a minefield. Have you ever been to the wilderness? Wilderness is where the college graduate is when searching, first for the perfect job, and now, just any job. Wilderness is a mutual fund that was ready for your retirement, but now is cut in half. Wilderness is the bottom of a bottle, wilderness is the divorce attorney, wilderness is when you don't know where you are or where you are going.

Wilderness is, however, God's opportunity. There in the wilderness, God gave to Moses, what Jews today call the Ten Words, the Decalogue. We know them as the Ten Commandments although nowhere are these referred to as commandments.

For many, *the Ten Commandments* denote harshness and repression. I suspect for many "*Thou shalt not...*" sounds like an angry parent capriciously inflicting some burden to be endured. Could there be more to these ten words, these Ten Commandments, than simply a list of what you cannot do? This morning, I am going to share with you two observations about these ten "words" of God.

First, the Ten Commandments are **God's Claim**.

We have this claim made clear in the very beginning of this passage, verse two: "*I am the Lord your God...*" God shares with them the personal name for God – *Yahweh*, Lord. It is a divine claim, not a burden, but a blessing. God is saying, "You are my people, I love you and I want to see you through this journey, that at times is a parched wild place." Could it be that God wants the same thing for us today? John Killenger wrote a book about the Ten Commandments, with the wonderful sub-title: To My People With Love. It is a map in the wilderness, where a claim is staked, and it has our name on it.

Verse 2: ***“I am Yahweh...”*** It is God’s claim on God’s children. When we say, “I believe in the Ten Commandments,” we had better not be kidding, because God is not. God is saying, I am yours and you are mine. Pharaoh and the mighty machine of chariots and force cannot stand against this claim of God. All of Egypt and any other principality or power cannot stand against this claim of God. The wilderness, with its threat of annihilation and privation and insecurity cannot stand against this claim of God.

Name your threat; name your enemy; name the force that, disrupts, disorients or disturbs, and remember God’s claim: I am the LORD– I am Yahweh– I am yours and you are mine. There is nothing or no one that can stand against this claim.

Secondly, the Ten Commandments are **Our Opportunity**.

While verse two initiates God’s claim, the first commandment opens up to our opportunity: ***[2] I am the LORD your God... [3] you shall have no other gods before me.***

Essentially, all the other commandments are interpretive or fall beneath this first one. If you miss the first commandment, there is not much need in worrying about the others, because they only become a list of empty rules. This is one of the reasons I have difficulty with the idea that the Ten Commandments should be posted in a public place. Let’s just suspend what we know about the first amendment, and ideas of separation of church and state for a moment. A state politic cannot make a faith claim. God’s words of claim, both in verse two and three speak of covenant, the mutual entering into a relationship. It is an abomination to assume that a courthouse or any other government entity can make this claim. Pharaoh and the bricks of Egypt, if they could, would have posted the Ten Commandments, because then, there would be no need for Yahweh or God.

If we are hiding behind Pharaoh to post these words, then shame on us. God is asking you and me into this opportunity of God’s claim and the first commandment sums up all the rest: *“you shall have no other gods before me.”* No government, no market, no personality, and no principality.

Of course, a modern reading of this first commandment may be: “Thou shalt have *at least* one God,” because I do wonder in what or who, do people believe. In an age of skepticism, “meism,” and cynicism, what are the other gods vying for our allegiance? The Israelites had the problem of believing in any foreign god that came their way, as they roamed through the desert wilderness. The pagan fertility gods and goddesses of the Canaanites promised rain for the land, and productivity in their crops, and good health for their families.

But today, our world has become antiseptic against gods. These words of God are an invitation not just to believe ***in*** God, but actually ***believe God***.

The trouble is, we have raised generations who believe only in themselves. We celebrate the so-called self-made man or woman, as if such a person really existed, and therefore, scorn the poor, the un-credentialed and the un-accomplished as failures. We have made heroes out of industrial and commercial and financial giants. We buy their books on how to get rich, how to be successful, how to lead, how we can be all that we can be (whatever that means,) and so on. I am not here to disparage self-improvement, but I do challenge the practical atheism, that chokes our wilderness sojourn.

I am the LORD your God... you shall have no other gods before me.

There is a Map. “This commandment requires the people of God to mobilize all of its life, in every sphere, around one single loyalty.” (Brueggemann) God must be God in all spheres in life. In our Christian tradition we are familiar with the phrase: Jesus is my Savior and Lord. When a person is deciding whether or

not to make that claim, I warn them, this is an all or nothing relationship. God is to be God over all relationships: work, school, marriage, family, friends, finances, leisure.

When we trust the map, when we accept God's claim and realize our opportunity, it does not destroy all of our other relationships; it just places it in good order. "Thou shalt not..." is literally interpreted in the original Hebrew as, "there will not be to you." It is a shift, not only in perspective but emphasis. "There will not be to you..." speaks of emancipation and liberation. When we get the order right, we are set free from all those other gods; we are set free from life-denying practical atheism, which inevitably leads to despair.

It is a command that is not so much to be obeyed, as it is to receive and trust the good news of God's emancipation.

The "Big 10" is our opportunity to lead others through their wilderness too, and invite them into God's claim and our opportunity. I cannot think of a better opportunity than the times we are living in to say beyond these walls, "Hey, God gave us a map."

This past Friday and Saturday, I was in Columbus for the Georgia Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Assembly. One of the speakers gave a presentation entitled: *the Church has Left the Building*. I love that choice of words, for God's claim is not a private possession, but an opportunity for sharing. We do not invite people to come and see all the great things that go on here. Rather, the opportunity God has entrusted to us, is about going and doing.

In that same assembly, another presenter compared the church to an airport. I perked up when he mentioned airports, because I admit that every time I am at an airport I get a bit excited. Yes, traveling can be stressful and even a little bit frightening. An airport is a place full of action – everybody is going someplace. The business person is going to meet a client, hoping to broker a deal. The family is going to some distant place, to enjoy a vacation. The soldier is going to meet up with the rest of the company, hoping to get home safe.

Airports, I was reminded, are interesting and exciting, because everybody is going. The airport is not, however, the destination. And, so it is for the church, this church. We are not a destination, we are a place for going, for sending, for sharing. "We show the way God loves by the way we love others." (Lenten devotion, Goshen College)

The Ten Commandments are God's claim: I am yours and you are mine. The ten commandments are also our opportunity: no other gods. If we believe the claim, and accept the opportunity, how can we remain here when Jesus said: *You are the light of the world; a city on a hill cannot be hidden.*