

Exodus: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Then God spoke all these words: 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 make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. 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. When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."

Prayer

In praise of our gracious God, and from the core of our non-anxious self, in faith we thankfully pray: You who command, You who are our commander, You who are our commander-in-chief, we intend obedience, without reserve. As we ponder your commands, they often come at us like more nagging from our mother, like more rules from our teachers, like more expectations from our peers, like more pressure from the church, like more defeat from our guilty conscience. Our obedience thins down to resentment, tired of the nagging and pressure and rules and expectations. Then we hear your wonderful words of life, and know that in your command is our perfect freedom. For your command, for Jesus' glad obedience, for Jesus' new command of neighbor, we give you great thanks. We vow full, glad obedience. Amen.

"Guarding Our Lives with Holy Obedience"

You swept through the desert, you stung with the sand,
You goaded your people with a law and a land,
And when they were blinded by idols and lies;
You spoke through the prophets to open their eyes.

(Spirit of Gentleness, vs. 2)

Today pediatricians tell parents to think of the first couple of months of a newborn's life as the fourth semester of pregnancy. In this neo-natal period, newborn babies innately learn to deal with existential anxieties associated with the trauma of birth. It's the time for a tiny soul to learn the boundaries of embodiment and to develop a thriving sense of self. Important to note here is that without safe cradling arms and limiting boundaries of the blanket, the formation of a non-anxious self is impaired.

Free at last! Free at last! Free at last! Not long after the Israelites entered their neo-natal fourth semester of identity formation as a people of God they got into trouble. Survival in the desert was uncertain. Where do we get food, water, and shelter? Fear gripped hearts, and rising anxiety caused self-preserving, death dealing modes of relating to kick in. When it was obvious to Yahweh that they didn't know how to order themselves in a life-giving way, their Maker stepped in to help them out. Cradling them in God's Everlasting Arms, The Holy One stilled their fears by telling them, "I am God, and you are not," and bound their anxiety with the gift of Law. Barbara Brown Taylor imagines God saying to them: "Sink these ten posts in the center of your camp, hang a tent on them, and together you may survive the wilderness . . . Guard your life together. Guard your life with me" (Gospel Medicine).

Torah was, is, and always will be the Holy One's swaddling blanket for the development of a non-anxious self. The Ten Commands bind our free will anxiety by setting the boundaries for obedient living into the Divine Image. Walter Brueggemann says that it's "likely that Torah is peculiarly aimed at the young,

in order to invite them into this distinct identity of wonder, gratitude, and obedience to 'Another' not like anyone else, no human, no god, nothing and no one else' (Covenanted Self).

In his Daily Devotional, 'The Great In Spirit of', pastor Anthony Robinson wrote: I was a stranger in an unfamiliar city, attending a conference. I was far from home and, in the words of Jesus regarding Martha, I was "anxious about many things." But it was Sunday and I went to worship in a nearby church. I was in an unfamiliar church among people I did not know. And yet, as we rose to join in the opening hymn, something happened. I was caught up in praise. Lost, I was found. Found in the big story of God's grace and purpose. My voice was set loose in praise and a sense of wonder and gratitude was renewed in my heart. The praise of God invites us to cease our frequent and restless preoccupation with ourselves. Praise of God challenges our natural self-centeredness and sense of accumulated grievance. Praise invites us to turn our attention to what makes life good and to the generosity we have experienced. That Sunday, in a strange city and church, far from home, my voice was set loose in praise of God. Losing myself in praise of God I was found. At least sometimes, praise of God is a great 'in spite of.' In spite of the evidence to the contrary, our praise dares to assert God's presence, God's power, and God's covenant faithfulness. (365 Daily Devotions).

Evidence to the contrary happened again last week. Fifty-eight people died, and hundreds were wounded in our Las Vegas mass shooting. Gun violence continues to rip apart the fabric of America's soul. We are lost. We are sinking in sin, breaking at least three of God's Ten Commands.

You shall have no other gods before me. The first commandment was given at a time when the Israelites were perfectly aware of the other gods of the cultures around them. We assume that we've progressed past such "primitive" ways, ignoring the many idols that draw us toward them and away from being the people God has called us to be. Brueggemann writes powerfully of these temptations; "In pursuit of joy, we may

choose Bacchus; in pursuit of security, we may choose Mars; in pursuit of genuine love, we may choose Eros. It is clear that these choices are not Yahweh, that these are not gods who have ever wrought an Exodus or offered a covenant (UCC Sermon . Seeds, Oct. 8, 2017). So, I wonder, in our society's sin of doing violence with guns, are we choosing power as our god?

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. One idol that we are currently fashioning for ourselves is the automatic assault weapon and derivatives there-of. We trust in its ability to secure victory, we pay dearly to own one, and we devote hours of practice with it. Our worship of it is reflected in our movies. In the old TV show Hawaii Five-0, McGarrett and his law enforcement team used to take down bad guys by talking and/or punching each other out. In today's show, they use automatic assault rifles, thereby upping the acceptance level of killing and violence in our culture. In the real world, bigger guns are contributing to the militarization of police forces. Another idol that we have fashioned for ourselves is the Second Amendment of our Constitution. This idol is being used to block forms of gun control legislation.

You shall not kill (commit murder). Killing keeps the cycle of violence going, without end. So when Jesus was tested by the religious leaders as to which of the laws was the most important, he answered by summing them up in two relationship love commands. "Love God with one's whole being, and to love one's neighbor as oneself." In short, guarding our Holy life with God is about fidelity, faithful obedience to the heart of the Law. In his book 'The Covenanted Self,' Brueggemann says that "the second true desire of our life, derivative from the first, is to have 'good neighbors,' that is, to live in a neighborhood." And if both of our great relationships were healthy and strong as they should, "our energy might be redirected toward neighborly matters like housing, education, health care . . ." and, I would add . . . getting guns that are designed for mass killing of people off the streets and making them illegal to own.