

Sunday, November 24, 2019

**We Promise!** A sermon preached by Nancy S. Taylor, Senior Minister of Old South Church in Boston in our 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Year, on the occasion of our annual return to the Old South Meeting House on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, based on Exodus 20. 1-17 *The Ten Commandments*

The rabbis tell us that the proper context in which to understand the Ten Commandments, is that of a wedding. The rabbis tell us that the giving of the Ten Commandments was personal, intimate, and relational: an exchange of vows, a tying of the knot between God and Israel.

I invite you in your imagination to travel back in time 3000 years, to the Sinai Peninsula. The children of Israel have been delivered – rescued and delivered by God – from wretched enslavement in Egypt. Free at last, having entered the desert, they set up camp at the foot of Mt. Sinai. God, who led them as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, is settled atop Sinai, shrouded in the mountain mists that often occur in the Sinai Peninsula. That’s when God decides to propose.

God, on bended knee, says: “Remember how I brought you out of Egypt, how I bore you on eagle’s wings. I brought you to myself, to make you my people.” God uses the language of a lover proposing to the beloved: “I brought you to myself. I love you. And if you marry me, if you take my covenant and accept it, then you will be a holy nation, my treasured possession.”

The people, as it happens, are in turn in love with God. They have fallen madly in love with this God who has freed them from slavery and escorted them safely to the desert. They don’t act coy. They don’t play hard to get. Flattered and in love, they accept God’s proposal.

Moses, who is God’s best friend, becomes God’s best man. He organizes the children of Israel to make all the preparations you make for a wedding. Three days later, when all is ready, Moses regathers the children of Israel. They are squeaky-clean and all turned out in their finest. Moses arranges them neatly together at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

The rabbis tell us that the mists upon Mt. Sinai were the *chuppah*, the sacred wedding canopy. It is beneath this canopy that, to this day, Jewish couples speak the ancient vows that unite them as partners.

Moses stands between the partners: between the trembling children of Israel and Yahweh. All is silence. Moses clears his throat. Then he reads the tablets, the Ten Words or Ten Commandments. The rabbis tell us that this is the *brit*, the wedding contract, the vows.

The vows begin with God’s own description of their relationship. “I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” God does not say, ‘I am the Creator of heaven and earth.’ But rather, “I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. You shall have no other Gods before me.”

In other words, let’s be honest. There are a lot of other suitors out there – other gods out to woo us, vying for our attentions, our affections, our time. There are other gods. Oodles of

them. Having no other gods before Yahweh means that money, sex and power – the three biggies – can't insinuate themselves among us, within us, between us; can't bring us down, can't enable our exploitation others. Ours is a world of options and choices. It does no good to pretend there are no other suitors vying for our attention.

But, none of the other suitors has ever wrought an Exodus; none but our Yahweh has ever loved and liberated slaves.

It seems to me that 350 years ago, our faith ancestors were wooed by Yahweh: Yahweh, this astounding, wondrous God who loves and liberates slaves. God got down on bended knee and proposed to our ancestors (to Mary Norton, widow of the Rev. John Norton; to John Hull, mint master and his wife, Judith; to John Alden, sea captain and his wife & Elizabeth; to Theophilus Frary, town selectman, and his wife, Hannah; to bookseller Hezekiah Usher and his wife Elizabeth; to James Pemberton, brewer, and his wife Sarah; to William Salter, shoemaker, and his wife, Mary) ... and a bunch more. Three-hundred-and-fifty-years ago God got down on bended knee, proposed to these, our ancestors, and they said yes.

To read the story of it, to read about their lives, and their labors, is to understand that the founding of this church was personal, intimate, and relational. As is true of any such union, it was a fateful, destiny-making tying of the knot with Yahweh. As is true of any family, that story of genesis, passing from generation to generation, is deep in our communal DNA.

The thing about the vows Israel and God took together 3000 years ago; the vows our ancestors took 350 years ago – the same vows by which you and I are also bound to each other and to God – is this: to be faithful to God, we must be faithful to each other. That's the thing about the Ten Commandments. If they were all between you and God, that would be easy...or, at least, easier. But less than half of them are – just the first four – the ones about taking no other gods, not worshipping graven images, not taking God's name in vain, and honoring the Sabbath.

The last six, more than half, are about loving and honoring each other. The vows are about how to live together on this small, beautiful and fragile earth. The command to honor father and mother (directed not so much at children, as at adults) reminds us that we are not self-made. We stand on the shoulders of others. And, please note that this ancient theological affirmation, elevates women, making them fully equal to men.

The Ten Commandments are a fusion of theology and ethics...a sharp reminder that the way we attend to God, informs and shapes the way we attend to neighbor. To put it differently, faithfulness to God leads to faithfulness to one another.

Ethically speaking, the commandments restrain sin. Sin matters, for sin is never merely personal. Sin is never a solo occupation. Sin has consequences, a cascading effect which ripples out, inevitably, inexorably into other lives.

The Ten Commandments, like vows between two people on the day of their marriage, are the guard rails within which we agree to operate. Or, think of them as the boundary lines on a

football field. The Commandments keep us from running out of bounds; or, make clear when we have run out of bounds; when there is cause to blow the whistle, cry foul, exact penalties.

The Ten Commandments are encouragement to live well, honestly, respectfully with each other. By adhering to these ancient imperatives we both protect human community and enable it to flourish.

Conversely, if we run out of bounds, if we cross the lines, if we fail to rest from our labors, if we tell a lie (even a little one), if we covet that which belongs to a neighbor ... the fabric of our relationship with God and with others begins to fray.

Biblical scholars argue that, after that first, fateful tying of the knot 3000 years ago in the Sinai Peninsula, that at important occasions subsequent, ancient Israel gathered to reaffirm and to renew their vows to God. This was done ceremoniously, in public, in worship.

I propose we do the same. I propose we do the same today. In this ancient house. At this site of revolution. In the presence of the spirits of our ancestors, our mothers and fathers on whose shoulders we stand.

I submit, that across three and a half centuries of being a church, undergirding the act of making a new nation, of birthing democracy; enabling our ancestors to endure wars, economic crisis, epidemic and natural disaster; empowering and inspiring efforts for civil and human rights ... beneath it all, undergirding it all, for 350 years lies the firm bedrock of the Ten Commandments, a way of ordering the church's life ... the life of its members and ministers – giving them, giving us, structure, purpose, defining guardrails in our interpersonal relationships.

Moreover, I submit that adherence to this ancient ethic, is utterly countercultural to what the world would have us do. In light of the behaviors, the sneering cynicism we read about in the daily news, these Ten Commandments seem antiquated, naïve, the preoccupation of schmucks, buffoons, dupes, and saps. The world would have us lie, cheat, exploit the weak... grab what we can, crush the feeble and grind them into the dirt as the strong walk on their backs. The world would have us eat too much, drink too much, buy too much ... amass power and wealth, give no head to the prisoner languishing behind bars, and the refugee deprived of security, and the motherless child.

But that is not God's way. We hew to a God who loves and liberates slaves and who requires of us moral rectitude, decency, righteousness, justice, mercy, compassion, kindness, generosity ... not merely as the stuff of individual morality, but as the stuff of society.

Old South Church (dearly beloved) we are here, still being church, 350 years on, not because we have always gotten it right; we have not. We are here, 350 years on, not because we have always done right by our God or by our neighbors; we have not. We are here, today, 350 years on, because the ordering of human life, as prescribed by God in the Ten Commandments, is our north star, our goal, the plumb-line to which we return and by which we are measured. If that renders us schmucks, buffoons, dupes, and saps, so be it.

So, Old South, the time has arrived. The time has come to reaffirm our vows – those vows made to God 3000 years ago at Mt Sinai by our great, great faith ancestors, and made again 350 years ago, May 12, 1669 in Charlestown, by our immediate faith ancestors.

Are you ready? Are you ready to reaffirm your vows? If so, say: We are!

Warning. These are not easy promises to keep. Many of us have failed at one or more of them. Yet, here, now – in the presence of God and each other; in the hearing of our ancestors – let us reaffirm our commitment to this ancient, holy ethic, not because it is easy, but because it is good, right, and righteous...because God requires it of us. Because without this ethical bedrock, we cannot be community, and we have no business claiming to be church.

I invite you to rise: young and old, new member and old timer, visitor and pilgrim. Rise as you are able, in body or in spirit.

Old South Church in Boston, will you have Yahweh, a God who loves and liberates slaves, to be your God, to live together, forsaking all others, and be faithful to God alone? If so, say, I do!

Do you promise, to refrain from taking the name of this God in vain? If so, say, I do!

Do you promise, to remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy and rest from your labors? If so, say, I do!

Do you promise to honor your fathers and your mothers, remembering that we stand on the shoulders of others? If so, say, I do!

Do you promise not to commit murder ... and, thereby, assert that every human is made in the image of God, and that we have no right to deprive another of life. If so, say, I do!

Do you promise not to commit adultery? If so, say, I do!

Do you promise never to steal? And, please know this: this commandment, in ancient times, included the stealing of a person. Do you promise never to steal? If so, say, I do!

Do you promise not to bear false witness against a neighbor, to honor the truth, to refrain from all lying, all deception and falsehood? If so, say, I do!

Do you promise not to covet anything of your neighbor's? And do you promise to refrain from jealousy, envy and greed? If so, say, I do!

Furthermore, on this auspicious anniversary and occasion, will you endeavor to love and serve the future into which God is ever calling us, with more devotion than you love and cherish the noble past that is our inheritance? If so, say, We do!

Do you promise to honor the God who loves and liberates the enslaved, by affirming human liberation wherever and whenever it is compromised? If so, say, we promise!

Do you promise to trust the God of rainbow and fiery pillar to guide Old South Church into the next 350 years? If so, please say, we promise!

Then may God bless us. May God strengthen us, inspire, and guide us, and ever help us to keep these vows and promises we have made ... vows and promises which we have, on this day, in this house, in the presence of the spirit of our ancestors, heartily and boisterously renewed.

Amen and Amen!