

“Life-Giving Words”

Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park

At First United Methodist Church of Oak Park on September 25, 2011

Text: Exodus 20:1-4, 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. 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."

We have been reading the Book of Exodus quite a few weeks now. How many Exodus stories do you remember? Do you remember the story of two brave Hebrew midwives who saved the lives of many Hebrew boys? Do you remember the Israelites' Passover meal before the departure? Do you remember the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea? Do you remember the bread from heaven and the water from the rock? All dramatic and thrilling stories, are they not?

Well, did you know that we are now halfway through the Book of Exodus? There are 40 chapters in the book, and today's reading is from the 20th chapter. We are in the middle of the book, at the center of the story, literally and symbolically. Yes, in today's lesson, Israel's story reaches one of its high points.

“Then God spoke all these words.” So begins our lesson. Then, addressing the people directly, in the first person, God continues: *“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; you shall not make wrongful use of the name of your God; remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy; honor your father and your mother; 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 anything that belongs to your neighbor.”*

I am sure that most of you recognize this, even though you may have difficulty remembering all ten of these commandments. No thrills, no spills. Our lesson is about the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. You may remember the controversy about its display in public places. You may also remember some theological debate about faith and work. We are

saved by grace and through faith. Then, what is the place of the law in the Christian faith? You may wonder. The Ten Commandment lesson happens to be found in the middle of the book of Exodus. The giving of the Law may have taken place in the middle of Israel's wilderness journey. But, what is the big deal about it? Why does it matter, especially for us, the Christians? How do we reconcile the God who makes and gives the law, and also eventually enforces it, with the God who is gracious and merciful, loving and forgiving?

Many of us are suspicious of a punitive, stern, and judgmental god, while at the same time, embracing, implicitly or explicitly, a life shaped by such a god. We think that we need to measure up to whatever God requires to avoid God's punishment. Others do not want to have anything to do with the laws and commandments. They think that they are obsolete, that they are no longer useful or necessary.

Well, in Matthew 5:17, Jesus himself said, "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophet; I have come, not to abolish but to fulfill.*" I think that it is at our own impoverishment that we neglect or ignore the law and the prophet. I personally think it unfortunate that our conversation or controversy about the Decalogue is limited to the display of its engraved form and not about the purpose or meaning or the spirit that runs through it.

I hope that you remember some of the Exodus stories – crossing of the Reed Sea, bread from heaven, and water from the rock. I hope that you remember God's mighty works of grace, delivering, guiding, leading, protecting, and providing for the people of Israel. I know that I have been preaching on Exodus for a few Sundays now. You may have gotten tired of them. But, it was important for us to hear these stories before we get to the Mount Sinai and hear God giving God's people the Ten Commandments.

You see? The law was given in the context of God's grace, not as a condition or requirement for it. The law was given to a people who had already been delivered. The law was given to a people who had already been chosen as God's people. No, it was not obedience that moved God to save. Grace and salvation lead to a response of obedience, not the other way around. After delivering the Israelites, after saving them from the bondage of slavery, God gave them the law, as a gift, so that they may reveal God's character and passion in their life together as a covenant people. God gave God's people the law, as a gift, to give their life integrity, coherence, zest, courage, and meaning.

When asked, Jesus summed up all the law into two great commandments: "*Love your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself.*" "*On these two commandments,*" he said, "*hang all the law and the prophets.*" (Matthew 22: 36-40) These, my friends, are not just a few words for a good life. These are life-giving words with the power to transform us into a covenant people, a gift from God whose goal is healthy relations and well-being for all creation. God's passion is that we be liberated from the bondage of slavery and live together in a world of justice and peace, sharing and caring for one another.

We are a people graced by God. We are a people saved by God. We are a people called by God, to reveal God's character and passion in this broken world. This is the common destiny that we share with our sisters and brothers around the world. Thanks be to God who takes us as we are and saves us! Thanks be to God who sets forth what we shall be and commands us to listen and obey! Thanks be to God for the saving grace and life-giving words! Thanks be to God! Amen!