

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, rcl yr a, 2020
St. John's, Kitchener, online and in-person
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4B-14; Matt. 21:33-46

*I am the Lord your God,
who brought you out of the land of Egypt,
out of the house of slavery*

Well—there goes God again. A disembodied voice from somewhere high up on some mountain, talking down to us. Not just telling us what to do—but *commanding us*. Ten Commandments, given from afar. Ten more Thou shalt, and thou shalt nots. I mean—who does this God think his is anyway? Doesn't God grant us grace and freedom? If that's true, why does he think he can be the boss of us?

This lesson from Exodus really does feel, in so many ways, like it just comes out of the blue. Our most recent readings from Exodus, till today, have been *stories*. They began with the story of how Moses came to live, when other children were not so lucky; and then about God speaking to Moses in the burning bush. We've had stories about God's mighty deeds for the sake of Israel: delivering them from Egypt; making their way safe across the Red Sea; providing food for them when they were hungry, and water from the rock when they were thirsty.

But today things change. We don't have a *story* today, we have the giving of the Ten Commandments, thou shalt, and thou shalt nots: God the boss, bossing us all around ...

It can feel difficult to square the God of Grace in Christ, with God the giver of the law—and if that's true for us, how much harder it is for others. This is such a common, and sometimes well-founded criticism of Christianity—your God is a bossy God, and you follow a bossy God by being bossy towards all the rest of us. And so many at that point just opt out; who amongst us, really, needs another boss in our lives? And this kind of reading, of God, hidden on a high mountain, speaking down to us, can really feel like that: God the boss, making for himself a bossy people.

But even these commandments, this rule of life for God's community, aren't *disconnected* from the stories we just heard. In fact, we simply can't

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, rcl yr a, 2020

St. John's, Kitchener, online and in-person

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4B-14; Matt. 21:33-46

understand the Ten Commandments—any of the moral law, or any of the commandments we find in the New Testament for that matter—apart from what God has already accomplished for us.

And it's right there, we hear this right from the beginning of the lesson, because the Ten Commandments begin not with a commandment, as it turns out, but a reminder of who God *already is* to his people well before the commandments are recited. In fact the Ten Commandments *don't* come from some God far-away, some absent deity uninterested in human life apart from telling us what to do, the Ten Commandments *don't* come from a God who doesn't care about his people—the Ten Commandments come from a God who loves, A God who nurtures, a God who, in very real ways, has already saved his people.

The Ten Commandments come from a very particular God: “the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” This covenant, this giving of the law to his people, begins with what God has already accomplished for Israel: the God who brings his people out of slavery, the God who sustains his people in the wilderness, the God who has now led them to the foot of the mountain from whence he will give his commandments.

God does not begin as the biggest boss of them all. God begins with love in action: God sets Israel free from bondage; God saves Israel from death at the Red Sea; God feeds Israel when Israel is hungry, and gives drink when Israel is thirsty. This is the God who commands: the God who first *loves*.

And if we were to back up just a few steps—between God's acts of love for his people and the giving of the law—we would find some interesting things that would help us understand what exactly is happening on this mountain. This God who has chosen Israel, and who has done mighty things for Israel, still desires Israel's consent. In Exodus 19, Moses sets out God's plan to the Elders. God has asked Moses to bring a message to the people: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians,” says God to Moses, “and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, rcl yr a, 2020

St. John's, Kitchener, online and in-person

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4B-14; Matt. 21:33-46

you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.”

God is no coercer of souls, or even of nations; God sends Moses to *invite the consent of the people* to his choosing of them. And the people give it: “[t]he people all answered as one: ‘Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.’” If God is boss, it would seem Israel is a-ok with this arrangement, because they know God has already acted, and already loves.

And the giving of the law is part of a promise God makes: that God will make Israel “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” A nation set aside for the sake of the whole world, acting as a priest for the world: thus Israel stands before God, praying to God and worshipping God in truth for all of humanity; an Israel who stands before all of humanity bearing the presence of God to all humanity, and welcoming all humanity into God’s covenant. A nation that is priest to all the nations of the world—a nation that Christians join, grafted as we are onto Israel, finding ourselves among the people for whom God acts, among the people whom God loves, among the people who are given to God, a people given to the world, for the sake of the world and for the sake of God.

All these things come together to make a people, “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation,” that we would be part of because both God chooses us, and we choose God (what else would really be the reasonable thing to do?). A people not with a boss, after all; at least not the kind of distant, bossy boss that wants us to be boss over others. Rather, we are a people under the *sovereignty* of God.

And so in the giving of the law—the moral law that Christians cling to as well—God is made our sovereign, but we don’t become sovereign over others. Under God’s sovereignty, we find our *freedom* from the tyrannies of this world. Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it this way: “Israel will know no absolutes—not the state nor the individual nor the status quo—for there is only one absolute, namely God Himself. This single fact will save it, in the course of history, from tyranny on the one hand, and anarchy on the other.

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost, rcl yr a, 2020
St. John's, Kitchener, online and in-person
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4B-14; Matt. 21:33-46

[Israel] will always be the enemy of tyrants, because it will always refuse to worship anything less than God Himself.”

And it would be the same for us, grafted as we are onto Israel, with the same God sovereign over us, as he gives to us the moral law in the Ten Commandments: making Christians, too, the *enemy* of tyranny and the *enemy* of anarchy. Israel, and the church with it, will know no absolutes—not the state, nor the individual, nor the status quo—worshipping with Israel a God who is not as a boss who stands apart from us, but a God who—for the sake of a world so often under the rule of tyranny—a God who sets us *free*, a God who *loves*, the God who makes us *his very own* for his sake, and for the sake of a world he loves.

The Revd Dr Preston D.S. Parsons