“Through Heaven’s Eyes: Members of God’s Community”

The Rev. Jennie Sankey

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

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On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone to Egypt, they came into the wilderness at Sinai, where they camped in front of the mountain (Exodus 19:1). Three months of picking up and moving on, of manna, quail and water, of sore feet and sunburned faces - three months of freedom, of independence, of forward movement away from a life of slavery, of life in the full presence of God, who leads with cloud by day and fire by night. Three months have passed, and there’s something different in the air, as the Israelites set up camp. God calls to Moses from the mountain and instructs him to tell the Israelites: **“**You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, **6**but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” (Ex 19:4-6)

Three months of worshiping together, walking together, eating together, living together in all new ways has brought them to this particular encounter with God. God of their ancestor Abraham, heard their cries, delivered them from Egypt and is leading them towards the promised land. Their relationship with God is nothing new-these 10 commandments come to a people who know God to be actively involved in their everyday lives. Which is how these words also come to us today, as a people in a new kind of wilderness. We look back and see how God has been with us. We camp where we, receiving God’s Word and law for us on this day, in this time, with these people.

And what we receive is a gift. God’s law is given for the “sake of the life, health, and well being of individuals in the community. God’s law takes into account what the people need for the best possible life.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

We’ve become quite familiar with introductions of new guidelines for living in this wilderness time in. Weekly, sometimes daily since March recommendations about hand washing, mask wearing, traveling, gathering, and sanitizing have been recommended and changed and added to as we’ve learned to camp where we are. This week I was reading up on the CDC’s guidelines for Halloween, as we plan what we’re calling a Halloween drive-thru “CARnival” at the church, and had to giggle at this particular guideline for life in 2020:

Under the list of activities considered a “moderate risk” on Halloween: “Having an outdoor Halloween movie night with local family friends with people spaced at least 6 feet apart”

* If screaming will likely occur, greater distancing is advised. The greater the distance, the lower the risk of spreading a respiratory virus.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

File this one as an amendment to commandment number 6: Thou Shalt not Kill. While these CDC guidelines are certainly not commandments coming straight from God, they are the guidelines we need for life in a pandemic wilderness, as we reinterpret and apply the guidelines that frame our life as a community. And if I can do my part by not playing a scream-inducing horror movie for an outdoor Halloween movie night, you better believe I can sacrifice that and play something more along the lines of “It’s the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown!” Because the way I see it, these guidelines serve the health of my community.

The Israelite community was being asked to function in unprecedented ways as they left slavery behind and journeyed toward the Promised Land. They needed to hear loudly and clearly, that the God of their ancestors, the God that brought them out of Egypt, the God that has met them on this mountain is their one and only God. The first four commandments are all about Israel’s relationship with God, and how they are to exist within that relationship-by making their lives center around their awe, respect, and worship of their liberating God.

The Israelites also needed to hear a word (or 6) about how to be in relationship with their neighbors. Their lives are not just their own - each individual is responsible for the well being of the community in the ways they relate to family, respond to injustice, and treat fellow human beings.

And while the 10 commandments we read today are central to Israel’s law, the law doesn’t stop there. Think of the 10 commandments as the Bill of Rights, and the collection of laws and explanations that follow as the amendments-lots of them. Over time, new situations arise, culture changes, and the law must be reexamined, re-interpreted, and applied differently based on the needs of the community. God’s Word is not static. Even stone tablets can be broken and made again, as Moses shows us a few chapters later.

Especially when we’re in the wilderness. I don’t think God made a mistake by delivering the 10 commandments *before* the Israelites reached the land God had promised to them. *Before* they had a chance to settle down and enjoy the small comforts of life without crisis. *Before* they found a new normal, and slowly forgot what life was like “before.”

You remember “before.” But here we are. It’s fall. The end of September. Remember back in March, when we were pretty sure this would all be over by June? Six months of staying more isolated than many of us have ever been. Six months of uncut hair, and zoom calls and pajamas on the bottom. Six months of facetiming and zooming to try and scratch the itch of needing to be together. Six months of postponing another start date and another game and another concert. Six months of wearing masks and combing through confusing data on public health websites and sitting in the driveway 6 feet from your sister instead of on the couch in your living room. We want answers now, vaccines now, to return to the sanctuary now, to feel safe when traveling now, to return to normal NOW because we are DONE with this pandemic wilderness.

But we are here. Wilderness time is a time to return our attention to God-to reexamine where we’ve come from and where we are going. God meets us here. We look back and see how God has been with us. We camp where we, receiving God’s Word and law for us on this day, in this time, with these people.

The 10 Commandments continue to function at the core of our life together as Christians today. Jesus told us what the greatest commandments are-to Love God with all our heart, mind and soul (Thou Shalt have no other God’s before me) and to love your neighbor as yourself (see commandments 5-10). Jesus’ words don’t negate what God tells us in theses 10 commandments, but illuminates their original intention-God’s hopes for our health and well being, providing for us the best possible life.

So what is it that we need from God’s law today?

Perhaps in our reading today, there was a commandment that stood out to you-maybe the command to honor the sabbath because you desperately need rest or the command to not covet your neighbors possessions, which reminded you of the Amazon packages headed to your door this week. We could easily spend months of good study looking at each commandment’s interpretation in 2020. I can’t do it all justice in one sermon. But I can tell you about the one that stood out to me in this reading, in this week of 2020.

“Thou Shalt Not Bear False Witness.”

Now I’m not going around lying to all of you. In fact it is my job as a preacher and pastor to try and speak the truth of the Gospel in all that I do. But it’s difficult, to craft words that can convey truth to people who are older and younger than me, who both agree strongly and disagree deeply with my politics, who come to worship with experiences much like and completely different from mine, who seek both affirmation, inspiration, and challenge. There was a time in the American church when parishioners trusted their pastors implicitly-and while I am certainly not looking for a return to that, because that had problems of it’s own, I hope that I earn your trust as a pastor, while also challenging you to ask good questions and dig deeper on your spiritual journey through my commitment to truth. But this year, it feels that truth has become even more difficult to preach. Or discern.

I took a quiz online this week that tested whether or not you could identify internet trolls[[3]](#footnote-3)-fake social media accounts who exist simply to create chaos, spread falsehoods, and increase division. The quiz showed you 8 different Twitter profiles, and asked you to decide if it was a real human or a troll. And I’m embarrassed to say, I only got 4 out of 8 correct. That’s a failing grade on a quiz. This quiz made me both question what falsehoods I was believing and consider how to better discern what is real. It made me wonder if I had spread lies unknowingly. So how does this commandment, “Thou Shalt Not Bear False Witness” apply in 2020 to me as social media user, as a political person, as a pastor, as a human living in a pandemic, in a time of social unrest, and a presidential election season?

Positively stated, I think this commandment means something like, “commit to the truth in all you do.” This goes beyond a personal quest to identify internet trolls-I have been challenged and convicted by this commandment to speak constructively, carefully forming my own opinions before I share information rather than just reposting something I saw and agreed with. I hope to do better in speaking of others in ways that only furthers their well-being. And I pray deeply that anytime I am in a position to preach, teach, or grow in God’s Word alongside you, that the words we share will be full of God’s truth.

Camping where we are in this wilderness, reinterpreting God’s law for the sake of life, health and well being of individuals in the community in 2020 looks different than it has before-but it is a task we are continually called to undertake.

We started this worship series on stories from Exodus with 5 brave women making way for baby Moses, and are stopping in the middle of things. “Do not be afraid,” Moses tells the Israelites at the end of today’s reading, as they tremble and keep their distance from God’s thundering, trumpeting, smoking glory. I find it hard to believe that this put them much at ease-but this admonition to not be afraid isn’t just for this moment. It is also for the years to come, because while this part of the Exodus story is certainly a climax, it is not the end. The people will be in the wilderness for many more years. They will have opportunity to put the commands God has given them into practice as both their weariness of the present and anticipation of the future grows. What’s next is the long haul. Even if we preached the rest of the book of Exodus, we still wouldn’t complete the journey to the promised land. Instead it ends like this:

“So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels.”

Some normalcy has been established during this wilderness time: new patterns of schooling are becoming routine, working from home isn’t going away, masks are here to stay for awhile, and we’ve got church on the couch figured out. The rules of being community are the same they have always been and are very different from how they used to look. When we gather in-person at youth group tonight, we will eat together, play together, and pray together, like we always do-but we will stay 6 feet apart, wear masks, play games that don’t involve tagging or getting too close, and when we pray, turning our thumbs to the right so that we can support the person next to us as well as be supported by another, we won’t physically touch. But all that we do will be done in love, because at our center is God, and to our right and left are our friends, whose life and health and well-being we care about deeply.

We won’t be in this wilderness forever. But while we’re camped here, there is time to carefully reexamine some of the basics. Don’t be afraid to put a crack in those old stone tablets and etch in a few amendments as long as those amendments are about how to love God and love your neighbor in 2020, because God is with us, providing us with what we need to have the best possible life.

1. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=260> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/holidays.html#halloween> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://spotthetroll.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)