

3- 3-2024 - God's World and the Ten Words" – Mike Eggleston, St Benedict's Episcopal Church

We've read today in Exodus 20 one of the most world-shaking, world-changing texts ever written. Exodus 19 and 20 tell us that the skies were thundering and lightening and Mt Sinai was shaking and smoking and the people were trembling in the distance when the LORD God spoke today's words. This is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where the text says that God spoke directly to the people of Israel without any intermediary, not through prophets, priests nor scriptures. So it was a world-shaking day. And the contents of what was spoken were world-changing. I think that every culture impacted by Judaism or Christianity has had its values shaped by what is called the Ten Commandments. God's inscribing these words on two stone tablets is said to have actually happened a few days later at Mt Sinai. But I couldn't resist quoting a little of how the Zohar, a mystical Jewish text from at least 800 years ago, describes God's inscribing of the 10 words. "A spark flashed out to engrave. A flowing measure extended ten cubits on this side, and out shot comets inside comets, seventy one. . . .The spark expanded, whirling round and round. Sparks burst into flashes and rose high above. The heavens blazed with all their powers, everything flashed, sparkled as one. Then the spark turned from the side of the south and outlined a curve from there to the east and from east to north. Then the spark swirled, disappearing, comets and flashes dimmed. Now they came forth, these curved, flaming letters flashing like gold when it dazzles. Like a craftsman smelting silver and gold when he takes them out of the blazing fire, all is bright and pure, so the letters came forth, pure and bright, from the flowing measure of the spark. . . .when these letters came forth, they were all refined, carved precisely, sparkling, flashing. All of Israel saw the letters flying through space in every direction, engraving themselves on the tablets of stone."

I quote that because I'm very interested in how the ten words are presented. How do we clothe, how do we spin the living words of God? When it comes to the ten commandments, we've spun and clothed them often in a dark and static fashion. We argue and dispute in the courts whether they should be displayed in public places on stone monuments. Cecil B DeMille and the Fraternal Order of Eagles started a campaign back in the 1950s to help publicize that iconic movie the Ten Commandments by donating thousands of monuments for public places. I don't argue with that. Let the courts and governments sort that out, may they have lively and passionate debate over where those monuments belong, or not. But what I do wish was presented differently is the phrasing, the words and order and dynamism of the 10. Darn. The monuments and the tablets you can still buy in book stores have eight thou shalt nots. And our Christian way of presenting the ten words usually leads off with a shall no, "You shall have no other gods before me." That's commonly thought of as commandment one by Christians. But in Judaism, the first commandment is not you shall have no gods before me. The first commandment is "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." Do you hear the difference? I don't know quite why or how it happened. But Jews whose scriptures and historical memory these are led off the Ten with a word of liberation and freedom. The commandments start with I AM the God who frees us. Most Christians start instead a little further down the list with the

restrictions. Now I'm sure we need both. What child, what human being, doesn't need both freedom and guardrails, open road and traffic laws? Yet I'm just saying there that we have dressed up God's ten words more somberly than they actually are.

You may also have noticed I'm trying not to call them the Ten Commandments. It's hard not to do that. All my life, custom and culture has taught me to say Ten Commandments. But it turns out, that's not what the Hebrew scriptures themselves calls them. Exodus 20.1, "God spoke all the words." In Hebrew, these ten are called the ten words. Aseret ha-Dibrot. If the Hebrew text had wanted to call them commandments, it would have had a perfectly good word for that, aseret ha mitzvot. Mitzvot is commandments, a fine word used hundreds of times for other commands in the Bible. But the ten are called debar, which is best translated as words, declarations, statements. Again, I don't know exactly why or when this happened. But at three crucial points in Exodus 34.28, Deuteronomy 4.13, and Deuteronomy 10.4, our Revised Standard and New International Versions and King James and what have you have translated the Hebrew as ten commandments, where the actual Hebrew words there are aseret, ten, ha-Dibrot, words, declarations, statements. Truth be told, I'm no Bible scholar. I don't read or speak Hebrew. I can only read books, and very occasionally, talk to rabbis. But the very few Hebrew speakers I've heard from about this have shrugged and said, yeah call them what you will, but in Hebrew they are the ten words. Foundational words. Instructive words. Commanding words, often times. But these are the 10 headings. The many commandments come later.

And now I want to present regarding the Ten Commandments or ten words is that they are also environmental words. They are not only teachings about religion and human relations. These are also words about how to live in right relationships with all nature. Thirty-some years ago in 10 small evening worships I preached a sermon series on the Ten Commandments as environmental teachings. I've long ago lost any trace of those 200 minutes of sermons and discussions the commandments and the environment. And don't worry, we only have time for about seven minutes on that now. But I will go right to the top three environmental teachings among the Ten Commandments, the ten words.

The most obviously environmental one is what we count as number 4. "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it only. Six days labor but on the seventh you shall do no work – not you, your son, your daughter, your servants, your livestock, nor the aliens in your land. You may notice it doesn't mention wives, but let's assume that's because women as well as men are those being told to keep Shabat. You may notice also that this says nothing about going to worship on the Sabbath. It just says rest, rest from labor, all of you. Now why this is deeply environmental is first because it also includes the animals. And three chapters later in Exodus we'll see that it is part of a series of sabbath rest instructions. In Exodus 23 the seventh day of rest follows directly upon a command to let the land rest every seventh year. Let the fields and orchards lay fallow one out of seven years. There it even spells out let the donkey and the ox rest every seventh day. For a people fresh out of slavery probably working 24/7/365, Sabbath was a gift of rest for them and the creatures. Another reason this is the most environmental

word is that it is the only one of the ten words that relates to the rhythmic cycles of life. Natural life comes in cycles; day, night, winter, summer, high tide, low tide, inbreath, exhalation,. Our heartbeats and even the life of our cells evidently have their rhythm of action and rest. We notice also that the Sabbath word refers back to God and to nature at the very beginning. In Genesis 1, God labors six days; on the seventh, God rests. Now I think all this tells us that Sabbath does not have to be taken literally but it sure should be taken seriously. We hadn't better everyone rest on the same day; if God literally took off every seventh day then birds and airplanes might crash to earth and every subatomic particle come unglued. But the sabbath is serious about rest and refreshment. Writes Wayne Muller in his book, Sabbath, "If we forget to rest we will work too hard and forget those we love, forget our children and our natural wonder. God says, 'Please don't. . . Remember to rest.'" Says Isaiah 55.13-14, "If you call the Sabbath a delight. . . then you will take delight in the Lord and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth." Remember the sabbath is a most environmental word from God.

But so also is the tenth of the ten words thoroughly good for the environment. "Do not covet. Some Christians and Jews say this is two commandments. Do not covet your neighbor's wife, and do not covet your neighbor's house or servant or strength or wealth or success or know-how or anything else that is your neighbors. But Protestant Christians mostly consider this just one word: do not covet. And Buddhists agree. This is Buddhism's third noble truth. Nirodha, break the cycle of craving and desire. Environmentally minded people mostly agree too. Simply. Reduce your carbon footprint. Simplify. One of my earliest and favorite ecological books was entitled Enough is Enough, by an Anglican Bishop of Winchester, John V. Taylor. His was a short little book of 114 pages. My copy has fallen apart into 40 different sections as the binding wore out and the tape I affixed melted away. But there are some things Bishop Taylor said that don't melt away and Taylor said we might repeat to ourselves often. When tempted to covet and to possess more stuff, try saying, "The price tag is too high." And to all the come on ads that invade from all directions, say, "Who are you kidding?" And of more shiny new possessions, say, "You can't it with you." And of all plates in front of you, say, "I will not take more than my fair share." Of course Jesus had some pretty good antidotes to coveting too. "Freely have you received. Freely give." Paul gave us one quote from Jesus that we otherwise wouldn't know Jesus said. "It is better to give than to receive." Overcome coveting.

And my time is almost out. Yet I will point out one more of the most environmental of the ten words. Namely the first. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." Why is that environmental? Because it sets our hearts on the one source of all creation. The earth is the Lord, and the fullness thereof, the world and all that dwell therein.", says Psalm 24.1. "Every beast of the field is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the hills, and all that moves in the fields is mine," Psalm 50. From the very beginning in Genesis 1, God says at the conclusion of each day of creation, "Behold, it is good." So if all creation belongs to God and is good, and if are to have no other gods before that creator God, then we had better honor and not steal nor kill nor adulterate nor lie about, but take care of God's good things. So help us God, Amen.