

Sermon: It's Not About You

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-22**

We've said it before about the Gospels and we'll say it again right now: they are intricately crafted documents. Either John knows his audience well and he knows they're able to follow along, or he's just being clever, but he does things in his Gospel that no one else does, and he does things in today's passage that you wouldn't notice if you weren't paying attention, and part of that is the lectionary's fault.

In the first reading from Exodus, we hear everything we need to know about having a relationship with God. This is another form of covenant without actually saying so, unlike the one God made with Noah, or in the second covenant with Abraham.

Where the covenant with Noah was a one-way covenant, and the one with Abraham was a two-way covenant, this latest one is more three-dimensional. It covenants God with people, and the people with God, but is also covenants the people with each other.

Moving from one covenant to the next, things are getting ever-more complicated.

Here we have a group of people only recently freed from slavery. In their captivity, they had lost all cohesion as a community. They had no social structure, no organization. They were really just a bunch of individuals doing whatever they had to in order to survive. Now, here they are in the desert wondering – and complaining about – what exactly it is that Moses is leading them into. Some thought it would be better simply to return to Egypt. They had no concept of community or nationhood.

But God had an idea about that, and 'then God spoke all these words.'

All these words include three major concepts: No other gods; remember the Sabbath; and don't mess over your neighbors.

Our first commitment is to have no other gods. Every surrounding culture had some form of house gods, and the question then was, 'Are we all worshipping the same god?' When Moses first met God, he asked, 'Which god should I say has sent me?'

House gods brought religion down to the family level: the god of Abraham became the god of his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob. They could all say ‘the god of my fathers’ has proven to be reliable and protective. But the family down the street might have had similar results with their own house god. This is why the punishment for worshipping a false god extends to the third and fourth generation, to the family living in the same house: you, your children, your parents, and maybe your grandparents. That’s one house god down – and the punishment *went no further*. But God promises steadfast love essentially forever to those who love God and who keep God’s commandments.

This commandment provides a socially unstable group with a new definition of God. This is a god for the people, not for persons. This is YHWH, the one who makes things happen, the one who helps the oppressed and helpless, and who promises a better future. Those other gods still exist, but with YHWH, it’s a matter of trust and commitment, and of entering into a wholehearted relationship. This God is a unifying force. As the prophet Micah said, ‘For all the nations walk, each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God for ever and ever’ (Micah 4:5).

As for keeping the Sabbath, this is a revolutionary concept that’s rooted in Creation: God rested and so should we. More than that, keeping the Sabbath holy keeps us in solidarity with others, even with those we might not consider an equal. When we look at the world in that way, and when we begin to consider the needs of others, then we might start thinking about justice, which might lead us into asking pointed questions about how some groups sometimes try to take advantage of some other groups.

Which brings us to our neighbors, whoever they might be. Every commandment after remembering the Sabbath has something to do with maintaining good relations with our neighbors, and our neighbors include our parents. According to Jesus, the greatest and first commandment is to love God with all our heart and soul. The second greatest commandment is *like* that first one: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

The next three verses in Exodus read, ‘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”’ (Exodus 20:18-20a). Living life according to God’s will is nothing to fear.

Now, earlier I said that John either knows his audience well, or he's just being clever. And I threw the lectionary under the bus.

John has Jesus overturning tables very early in his Gospel, where Matthew, Mark, and Luke put this story toward the end of their respective Gospels. In Matthew, it happens right after Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Here, it's the next scene after the wedding in Cana where Jesus revealed the first of his signs, which occurred right after Jesus called his first disciples, which happened right after John the Baptist gave his testimony. If you string all of that together, then a very knowledgeable reader might recall the words of the prophet Malachi, who wrote:

'I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me,
and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple' (Malachi 3:1).

You can only begin to see these things when you have some context and know what came before. It's a kind of treasure hunt.

The first part of the passage gives us a moment when Jesus most resembles an old-time prophet, demonstrative and action-oriented. Then the story turns, and Jesus gives us a glimpse of the resurrection, and we're only in chapter 2.

Where our translation says, "In the Temple," Jesus found people selling stuff,' it's more correct to say, 'in the Temple precincts,' meaning the area around the Temple. Only the priests were allowed in the Temple itself. And that opens up a can of worms about the Temple economy.

All observant Jews came to Jerusalem for the Passover, and if you were traveling a far distance, you probably would not be bringing your Temple sacrifice with you. You would want to buy it only after you reached Jerusalem. If you were wealthy, you could opt for a cow or a sheep or goat. Less wealthy people would go for the doves or even simply make a grain offering. In Luke, when Mary and Joseph present Jesus in the Temple and make their sacrifice, they offered two turtledoves (Luke 2:22-24).

That part and the money-changing was all okay; that was the system and it worked. The problem is: it was a system. It became its own thing. Over time, the system overshadowed the whole point of going to the Temple to celebrate the Passover.

There's a theory out there, and it's probably not provable, that it was Caiaphas who allowed rival merchants to set up the animal stalls, somewhere around 30 A.D.

Jesus' action in driving everyone out may have been directed more at Caiaphas than anything else. It's also probable that there were some abuses going on there, some exploitation of the poor via high prices and inequitable exchange rates – it *was* the only game in town, so to speak, and Caiaphas took advantage of it. John makes a point of saying later that 'Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people' (John 18:14). And that one person was Jesus.

It's also curious to me that, in this high-tension moment, the disciples remembered a verse from Psalm 69. What caused them to recall this specific verse? 'Zeal for *your* house will consume *me*.' I don't think it is Jesus' zeal for the Temple that leads to his arrest; I think it is Caiaphas' zeal for the Temple system that does him in. When Jesus is interviewed by Annas – Caiaphas' father-in-law – he only asks about Jesus' teaching and about his disciples. The action in the Temple never comes up in conversation, but I think we can bet that Caiaphas remembered.

So: no other gods? Jesus once said, 'You cannot serve God and wealth' (Matthew 6:24). If we take this theory about Caiaphas as fact, it would explain a few things about the Jesus story, and it would serve as a reminder that those other gods are always there. There are always other deities – ideas, people, things – that take the place of God in our hearts. A cell phone can be a mighty god if it becomes your source of all knowledge, entertainment, and cat videos. Money in and of itself is not a bad thing. It is the *love* of money that is the root of all evil.

Given all these modern-day idols in our midst, how do we live into that first commandment? How do we keep them from overcoming our commitment to God?

Back at the burning bush, God also said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you":

This is my name for ever, and this my title for all generations' (Exodus 3:15).

The god the Israelites came to know as YHWH is that same god of their ancestor Abraham, the god of the ever-lasting covenant. YHWH – the LORD – meets people in history and comes to them in their time of need, yet this god is wild and unpredictable. Like our ancestors, we only have to do one thing well: love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might (Deuteronomy. 6:5). Amen.