

**And God Spoke**  
**Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9,12-20 & Psalm 19**  
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Yesterday, in a fit of frustration with his baby sister, Owen threw a Star Wars action figure at her. In our house, throwing something (other than a soft, squishy ball) leads to an immediate time out.

After his grueling four minutes in the torturous time out chair, I knelt down in front of him and asked him if he knew why he had to sit there.

This is a routine that happens, by the way, daily, and several times a day on bad days. I did not expect him to engage me, and hoped only that repetition of these consequences would cause him to figure that it wasn't worth it, and give up on throwing things as a means to get his way. So far it hadn't happened that way, but forge ahead I did.

So I asked him if he knew why he was on time out, and he said, "Because I threw something at Maisy. Sorry." But something stopped me this time, and since I had his attention along with his contrition, I asked him, "Owen, do you know WHY we don't throw things in this house?" He looked at me, big eyes and pensive stare, "Why?"

"We have that rule because we want this house to be a safe place for everyone to play, a place where everyone is protected and free to have fun. You, Maisy, Mommy and Daddy, and even people who visit us.

If people were allowed to throw things here, nobody would be safe or protected, or be able to play without being afraid. That's why we can't have any throwing.

Do you think that is a good rule for us to have?"

And he paused, then he nodded. Then he said, with a very concerned face, "Mommy, that's a good rule. But I forget! I forget what to do when Maisy touches my things! So I just throw things at her!"

And I promised that next time she touched his things, I would help him remember to tell her NO, then ask me to help get her away. Because just as we don't throw things, we also don't take other people's things without asking. And he left satisfied.

Last week we saw our Israelites in the wilderness, caught between where they'd been and where they were going, thirsting for water again, and we saw God provide water from a rock.

This week we catch up with them when they've reached the base of Mt. Sinai, and set up camp there that would end up lasting two years. And their leader, Moses, keeps disappearing up this mountain to talk with God. He comes back and tells them all to be ready, because God is going to appear. Then it happens – the ground shakes, the mountain billows smoke and a trumpet blares, the whole camp trembles with fear, and God speaks.

We call this portion of scripture "The Ten Commandments" –and to a person, I'd be willing to bet we picture Charleton Heston clutching the stone tablets, his gray hair and beard shining as he gazes at the heavens.

Or we think of tombstone shaped faux stone, with Roman numerals down them – a Sunday school prop.

Or the fight to have them in a courthouse, or Dr. Laura on the radio, admonishing people to follow them.

We may pause and search our memory banks, straining to get them straight in our heads like state capitols or books of the Bible – the point is, we've at least encountered them before.

And chances are that if we are honest, other than seeing them as a distant ethical code, or simple Bible trivia – they haven't impacted us all that much.

In any case, I'll bet we never saw them as such a source of joy and life as our Psalmist does today. What is it about them that make the Psalmist gush?

In Hebrew they are referred to as, "The ten words", and they are the foundation to all the laws and teaching of the prophets that follow in the Torah. More than that, these ten words are to define the Israelites.

God said these are the things that will characterize you as a people, as my people. They are not worded as suggestions or guidelines, requests - these are descriptive – they describe the way this new life they will build together will work. No contingency plan, simply the way it is. Period.

They are grounded first in God – who God is and what God has done for them. The first word that shapes all others is: I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt – and gave you water and food and fed you and parted the red sea and destroyed the Egyptian army and guided you day and night across the desert – that is all implied here as well.

I am the God that saved you and claimed you as my own and guided and protected you. That's me – and now, here's you – you won't serve other gods, you won't covet or steal or murder or commit adultery.

These people, 400 years in slavery, are used to being told what to do. They are punished when they don't obey, their wills don't factor into it at all, they are slaves. There is no such thing as choice, they are not seen as human, they are valued only for what they provide and do, and are basically disposable. And now, suddenly and quite dramatically, they are given freedom.

They are given personhood, ontology, being – being in relation to each other, being in relation to God. They are valued for who they are and claimed as God's own. They have an identity, and they have freedom.

My kids and I spend quite a bit of time in the summers at Como Zoo. It is only about 2 miles from my house, and admission is free, so almost once a week, we park outside the gates and load up the stroller and spend a few hours visiting the monkeys and gorillas, lions and giraffes, zebras and sea lions.

Sparky the sea lion is not the Sparky from when I was a kid, in fact, I think we are about 4 Sparkys removed – as the offspring of the offspring of Sparky carry on the title and perform

as Sparky. For decades and generations these sea lions and the other zoo animals have been raised in captivity – their parents were born into captivity and their grandparents too. I wonder what would happen if these animals were one day, for whatever reason, released? The zebras' gates thrown open, and the buffalo prodded out to the grasses beyond the walls, the penguins waddling down Como Ave.

They wouldn't have a clue what to do, how to find food, where to sleep, even what it feels like to venture beyond the 20 x 20 walls they've only ever known. Many of them would not survive for long.

With the move from Egypt to the Wilderness these Israelites are dramatically and irreversibly thrust into a radically different way of life, perhaps imagined, but never experienced.

Slaves for generations, now suddenly, they find themselves with no rulers, no forced labor, no mandates dictating their daily activity. They are free.

When God gives them the Ten Words, this isn't about exchanging one set of rules for another. This is the contrast between slavery and freedom.

The rules in freedom are rules for life, for liberation, not for enslavement and oppression. These are rules for the promised land – filled with promise.

Here is what it looks like in the promised land, what it will be like in the home I give to you. Here is what life looks like when done in a way that honors and respects people, all people, in a safe place where everyone can grow, and play, and not be afraid.

This is not a burden on you – taking away your freedom. This is your freedom. Freedom to live for God and one another. Where everyone matters and who you are gets to breathe, and thrive.

This is a description of life in my house.

The 10 Commandments is more than a list of rules, something to be displayed in a courthouse, a standard to hopelessly aspire to, or measure yourself against.

Rather than the orders of a bossy God who is just trying to tell people what to do and dictate their lives, the ten commandments are a promise: this is what life can and should be like.

They are the house rules of a life of freedom.

Hear again the ten words God gives the people of Israel as they are descriptions of the home God makes for God's people:

*I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt.*

I am your deliverance and your freedom. You are not on your own, facing the elements and the enemies by yourself. I am in charge here, and I delivered you out of slavery and into freedom. You can trust me.

*You will not have other gods before me.*

You are not to be a slave to anything else – nothing else can dictate who you are, you've been freed from slavery. Not money or power, not self-promotion or personal security, not your work or your reputation. Nothing else defines you – I am your God, and I made you free.

*Make no idols for yourself – and no images of me.*

You cannot possess me or control me, and as soon as you try you make yourselves slaves again to an idea of your own making.

I am not a political party or a stance on an issue, I am not a way of worshipping or a particular denomination.

I am not what you make me to be with your songs and your prayers and your stained glass windows and your infighting. I am always more.

No box can hold me, I am free to be mystery, to be encountered instead of encapsulated.

*Don't take my name in vain.*

I am not something to be used to back your point or vent your frustration.

*Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy.*

Keep perspective and balance, everything does not depend on you, and your life is about more than work and what you do, or produce, or contribute. It is about who you are as my people. Remember that. Choosing to remember that is a discipline that needs practice, or it will be forgotten.

*Honor your parents and your life will be long in the land I am giving to you.* Cherish those who gave you life and nurtured you, respect them and esteem them. And those you raise and love will do the same for you as well - there is a generational cycle of love and respect and honor that characterizes life in this home – this place values past and anticipates future.

*You will not murder.*

You are human beings, persons made in my image, not a workforce, not possessions, not a number, or a credit score, or a diagnosis or a burden. Each one of you is sacred, your life is valuable - not to be tossed away or taken away, precious and irreplaceable.

*You will not commit adultery.*

Your relationships will never betray or trivialize someone. Within your relationships you will be safe and respected, you can trust the bonds you have, they are real.

*You will not steal.*

You can be assured that in this home what is yours will never be taken from you unfairly.

*You will not falsely testify against another.*

The truth about you or anyone else will never be sacrificed in order for someone to "win". Everyone's integrity and personhood will be upheld, so that matters can be decided honestly and fairly.

*You will not covet your neighbor's house, or spouse or kids or car or job or vacation home or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*

Jealousy, greed and envy have no place in this home. Everyone has what they need, and we all live in awareness of our blessings, in joy and gratitude. We have not become slaves to things, we're all different, and our relationships come before the things we have.

This is the home God makes for us, the life God gives to us and calls us into– the life of freedom, liberation from slavery.

Someone said to me this week that a small part of them secretly wishes everything in the financial markets would collapse and we would be plunged back into the Great Depression – where people didn't have things to lose, and all you had was each other. Where everybody was equal in their poverty and things were stripped back to the bare bones of what was important again.

We make ourselves slaves to so many things.

We allow things to define us and our lives – and this is a way of fear, not of freedom. We are slaves to schedules and deadlines, to consumer pressure to buy, own, accumulate. To people's expectations and self-imposed obligations, to habits and traditions, to the systems and markets and structures we've set up. These things should support our lives, but often they rule our lives.

But God delivers us from slavery into freedom – and describes the perimeters of that freedom, the way it is cultivated and maintained, shared and spread.

When you break it down it sounds like a list of rules. Follow the rules so you don't get punished. And fresh from slavery and newly, bewilderingly freed, maybe that is the way the Israelites needed to hear it at the time. Truthfully, it is the way we all need to hear it sometimes. You will not throw things at your sister. PERIOD.

But the bigger picture is that this list of rules is a description of life, and a promise of hope, the way we were meant to live, freed by God to live for God and for others.

Today we celebrate World Communion Sunday – all over the world in congregations of all denominations, all cultures and languages, people are coming before God, with their own fears and doubts, their hopes and their failings, their joys and their very lives.

And together as one we are celebrating the freedom God brings us in Christ. At home at God's table: We are breaking the bread of the body and lifting the cup of the blood and speaking out the promise of God's love and liberation for the world.

And as we remember the promise, we pray that it would live in us, that we would see it realized in and among us, and share its reality in the world that God claims and loves, until the day we are all at home in God.

Amen.