

Psalm 119.17-32

- ¹⁷ Deal bountifully with your servant,
so that I may live and observe your word.
- ¹⁸ Open my eyes, so that I may behold
wondrous things out of your law.
- ¹⁹ I live as an alien in the land;
do not hide your commandments from me.
- ²⁰ My soul is consumed with longing
for your ordinances at all times.
- ²¹ You rebuke the insolent, accursed ones,
who wander from your commandments;
- ²² take away from me their scorn and contempt,
for I have kept your decrees.
- ²³ Even though princes sit plotting against me,
your servant will meditate on your statutes.
- ²⁴ Your decrees are my delight,
they are my counsellors.
- ²⁵ My soul clings to the dust;
revive me according to your word.
- ²⁶ When I told of my ways, you answered me;
teach me your statutes.
- ²⁷ Make me understand the way of your precepts,
and I will meditate on your wondrous works.
- ²⁸ My soul melts away for sorrow;
strengthen me according to your word.
- ²⁹ Put false ways far from me;
and graciously teach me your law.
- ³⁰ I have chosen the way of faithfulness;
I set your ordinances before me.
- ³¹ I cling to your decrees, O Lord;
let me not be put to shame.
- ³² I run the way of your commandments,
for you enlarge my understanding.

Exodus 20.1-3

Then God spoke all these words:

² I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me.

Matthew 6.24-34

24 'No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

25 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

34 'So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

Sermon

After hearing about the Kings and Queens all summer long, I think it's fair to say that we're pretty familiar with the centrality of idolatry, or putting another thing before God. And we'll get more familiar with it over the next few weeks as we talk about the first two commandments: do not have any other gods before me, do not worship false idols. In fact, these two are so similar in so many ways that almost all traditions except our own and the Eastern Orthodox tradition squish the first two into one commandment: you shall have no other gods before me, so don't worship any idols. The Catholic and Lutheran catechisms and the Jewish Talmud all make this one commandment. The Ten Commandments hymn Christopher found for us to sing does this same thing. It combines 1 and 2 into a single commandment, because it's actually a Lutheran hymn. And honestly, I think their logic makes sense. The two are inextricably bound together. I wrote three different sermons this week and didn't like any of them, largely because I kept feeling like I was repeating myself and getting super boring. Either rehashing what we heard this summer with the dire warning of King Solomon's life, and exactly what you lose when you worship false Gods, or stealing my own thunder from next week's sermon on idolatry.

All that to say: thanks, John Calvin, for making my job super tough with these first two commandments that really should be one.

As a side note, if you're curious how the other traditions stay with 10 while combining these first two, I'd be happy to tell you all about it later. Check in with me during coffee hour.

All of this is to say, by my third sermon I had figured out that perhaps what matters this week isn't as much the commandment, but the prologue. This first commandment, properly understood, has two parts. The prologue: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;" and then the commandment: "you shall have no other gods before me."

When we translate this into English, what's interesting to me is the punctuation. Now, I'm not going to be asking you to diagram a sentence or anything, but stick with me for one minute here, because this is a case where the punctuation used can change our theological understanding. Hebrew, like a lot of ancient languages of the near east, was written in block letters, smashed together, with no spacing and very few, if any, vowels. You can imagine that reading ancient Hebrew is like looking at a whole string of vanity license plates. You know what I mean, when you sit there in traffic and try to understand what "HTGRL" means on the truck in front of you? Is it "Hot Girl" or maybe "Hat Girl"? Or perhaps "Hot Grill" or maybe "Hat Grill?" When we take out spaces and vowels it can be a bit of a puzzle to figure out what something says.

This said, Hebrew can be read, for the most part, because with a little practice and some context, you can usually figure out whether the word in question means "girl" or "grill." And scholars who have devoted their lives to understanding this ancient language are really, really, really good at it. But this first commandment, when it's squished together the issue isn't the words, it's the punctuation. Should it be two sentences? "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." period. Then, the next sentence: "you shall have no other gods before me." Period. If that's the case, then these are two independent thoughts, even if they logically flow one to the next.

Or maybe it's one very long sentence, with just some commas thrown in for fun? The NRSV, which we read from this morning, splits the difference and uses my second favorite bit of punctuation, the semi-colon. The semi-colon is great, it separates the clauses into two independent ideas, but it keeps them connected as a single sweeping thought or phrase, implying that one is dependent upon the other.

And this is important. I promise. Because what this punctuation implies is that we cannot have the first commandment, "you shall have no other gods before me," independent of the prologue "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." The prologue begets the commandment. And by inference, the prologue then begets the entire list. It's the soil the seed grows from, or the yeast which causes the bread to rise. It is the foundation of the house, or the recital language before the formal contract.

I know I talked about this last week, but this is imperative to understand, so I'm going to restate it again. Where the people came from is crucial to understanding the commandments. Without context, these will simply be for us a dry list of dos and don'ts.

The people were enslaved. Their lives were curtailed and controlled, and what was given to them was only that which the Egyptians wanted them to know or do. Baking bricks, building temples, backbreaking labor and the dehumanizing snap of the overseer's whip. Even their children were not their own, with the first born sons being murdered by the paranoid Pharaoh. And while they must have known and told those ancient stories of the God who once came to Abraham and Sarah, who promised them descendants as numerous as the stars and a promised land where they would be safe, I also wonder if these stories, whispered in homes, late at night, felt like hope, or more like fables and fairy tales. Generations into slavery, I imagine hope might have been elusive at times.

I know I mentioned this last week, but it's impossible not to take the story of the Hebrew people and weave it into what we know about slavery in our own nation. And I think it's good to do this, because these commandments and this story of the Exodus are some of the most important pieces of scripture within the history of American slavery. This story of slavery and escape, of God's enduring preference for the enslaved Hebrew people, of the dramatic overthrow of Pharaoh, of God's love and provision and power...it was incredibly threatening to those who owned, controlled, or benefited from the labor of enslaved people. So, while so-called "Christian" white folks were deeply concerned for the everlasting souls of the people they kidnapped and bought and sold as nothing more than chattel, they were careful to offer them a version of Christianity scrubbed clean of the exodus narrative, with all traces of God's preference and intervention on behalf of the powerless and oppressed sometimes literally cut out of the Bibles they used.

But, of course, a story this provocative couldn't stay hidden forever. Some enslaved people read, and abolitionists used this Exodus narrative as a powerful theological counternarrative to all the "God is ok with slavery" drivel going around. And this story got told. There were these secret hollows, literally secret groves and meeting places called "hush harbors" or sometimes "brush harbors" where enslaved folks would gather together to practice a faith that felt true to them, not just the canned pro-slavery Christianity being handed to them by their oppressors.

In the hush harbors the songs sung were a combination of field songs and slave spirituals, with drumbeats and phrases remembered from their tribes back in Africa. The story of the Exodus from Egypt and the giving of the ten commandments was told, alongside the stories carried over on the slave ships. A new Christianity was born, or perhaps it was remembered, a combination of their own faiths from generations past and these new stories of Exodus and hope. Harriet Tubman was sometimes called the Moses of her people, leading them out of slavery and into a new land.

And all of this, the ancient memory of Egypt and even the less-than-ancient whispers of the hush harbors in our own country, all of this is bound up in those important words of the

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

In the Jewish tradition, this prologue isn't even a prologue, it's the first commandment, and it stands on its own. And I find that fascinating and perhaps more theologically accurate. Because what it says is this: the commandments do not start with us. They're not actually, at their core, about our actions, our words, our deeds, our dos and do nots. The commandments begin, most importantly, with God and with God's action.

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

And to give John Calvin a little credit, I think he saw this, too. Because aside from the Jewish tradition, which makes this its own commandment, set apart from the rest, we're the only other faith tradition that includes this prologue as a formal part of the first commandment. And I'm grateful to Calvin for that. I'd like to think he saw how important it was to begin the list not with what we should and should not do, but first, what God has already done.

Because we're sometimes forgetful and sometimes openly malicious people. We sin both by omission and error, and also by willful action and unkindness toward others. We won't actually live up to, or even remember, this entire list of commandments. But God will. And God does. And God did. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

So, next week, I promise, we'll actually turn a little and think about our actions and our work and how these commandments are incumbent upon us. But for today, let's stop right here, at the prologue, and simply remember what God has done, and trust nothing more and nothing less than God's continuing faithfulness to this promise: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. This is the beginning of the commandments, and the place where we can hang our hope.