

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis
 “Living in Freedom”
 March 4, 2018
 Lent 3B 2018
 Exodus 20: 1- 17

As you might know, Vicar Tamika is taking classes half-time and here half-time. One of her classes is “Biblical Story-telling”, and this week, I had the very interesting experience of going to her class. There were six students and each of them had learned the story of Esther by heart.

And it was so interesting, because each one of them used virtually the same words, but the story each told was different. They emphasized different things. They interpreted certain aspects of the story differently. They told different stories because, as they delved deeply into the scripture to learn it by heart, they *heard* different stories.

So, for today’s sermon, I’m working with the scripture from Exodus—the very familiar 10 Commandments. Some of us had to learn these by heart for confirmation, along with Luther’s explanations. I don’t know how this was for you but for me, it was a super-stressful experience—and not something that was particularly spiritually enriching. I still have trouble with the order of them.

But what the biblical story-telling class got me thinking about is what is the *story* of the 10 Commandments—because it’s so much more than a list—and no one would ever make an epic movie about a list.

Is this a story of people who are out of line, and who need some rules to get them back in. Is this a story of God trying to whip people into shape?

I think this is the 10 Commandments Story for a lot of us. The 10 Commandments are a story about how we’ve gone out of bounds and God is the ref who calls us on it.

Roy Moore is someone who has been in the news a lot. During his Senate race, several women came forward to accuse him of sexual misconduct, most disturbingly with very young women. But before this, Moore was in the news for another reason. He was the chief judge of the Alabama Supreme Court, and during that time he had a monument to the Ten Commandments made out of granite.

This was a massive monument. It weighed 5,280 lbs. Moore had it installed in the courthouse. But when various courts—and eventually the Supreme Court—ruled that it violated the Establishment Clause of the Constitution—that part that says the government will not establish a state religion—when that happened, Roy Moore was forced to remove it. But he did not go quietly. He went from one public appearance to another, lugging this 2 ½ ton monument around with him.

Preacher Thomas Long says this is the story of the Ten Commandments for most of us. They are a heavy set of ethical demands that have become burdens—weighing on us like a massive granite monument.

Martin Luther put the Ten Commandments first in his Catechism. The story of the Ten Commandments for Luther is that they are impossible to keep. For him, their purpose is to show us how bad we are—how we can’t save ourselves. They are the stepping stone into the central story: how we depend on God to save us and through Jesus, God does. For Luther, the Ten Commandments is a story of how we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.

This is one of those times when it’s been helpful for me to go back to our ancestors in the faith—to look at what the story of the Ten Commandments is for Jews. They hear a refreshingly different story—so different because rather than being constrained or weighed down by the Ten Commandments, Jews see them as a path of Life.

The story is about a God who frees people from slavery—in this case, a very specific slavery in Egypt. It's a story of a God who is with the people in the wilderness—leading them and giving them what they need in some new forms like manna.

And now this God who has freed them from slavery is giving them some *words*. That's what it actually says: "God spoke all these words." God is giving them words—not commandments. Somehow that sounds better. Commandments is one of those words that makes you sit up straight and check out at the same time. But words—especially the idea of God giving God's word—that sounds more like a promise—a word that can be trusted—counted on.

I think about what a difference it makes that these are words from the *one who brought you out of slavery*. In a more recent story, I picture Harriet Tubman talking to the newly freed slaves that she has led to freedom in the North. She gives them some words. She tells them how to avoid being captured and returned to slavery. She directs them to some safe places. She gives them some words about how to live in freedom—and *stay free*.

That's how I see the story of the Ten Commandments. It's the story of a God who wants us to *live* in freedom—of a God who *has* freed us and who gives us words that show us what it means to live in that freedom—words that reorient us when we get trapped in whatever it is that enslaves us.

Because face it—we all get trapped. Luther was right. But I believe the Commandments are more than a mirror of how far we fall short—they are also a gift from God because they point us to a way of life with God and with community that is full and free.

Relationship rather than rules is the story of the Ten Commandments. The first 4 words are about our relationship with God and the remaining ones are about our relationships with our neighbors—how to live in ways that keep us free.

Luther wrote some amazing things about the Ten Commandments. If you haven't read them since Confirmation—or if you've never read them—I really recommend his short explanations in the Small Catechism—which you can find in the hymnal or easily on line. What I like best about them is that he points us toward what *to do*—not just what not to do.

But honestly, some of the most beautiful words from Luther come in the Large Catechism—in his words about the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me." This is really the heart of the story--the part that everything else depends on—our main struggle.

The story of the Commandments assumes that *there are other gods*.

Luther asks the all-important question of what it means to have a god. His answer is that a god is "that from which we expect all good and to which we take refuge in distress." "To have a God is nothing else than to trust and believe God from the whole heart."

Surely, we each have other gods—things and people in which we trust beyond their trustworthiness. But that is not the main story here. The big story here is that God is *not* a cosmic ref, waiting to catch us out of bounds or making a foul. God is the one from whom we can *expect all good*. The one we can take refuge in when things are falling apart. The one we can depend on when the lights go out.

The God who has brought us out of everything that enslaves us, has given us God's word—not just one word but ten—about a way of life that keeps us free. And as Christians, we also trust in the Word of God we know as Jesus—the one who shows us what it looks like to live freely—the one who came to make sure we know just *how free* we really are.

For these words of God—and for *the Word* of God we say, Thanks be to God. Amen.