

“God Alone”

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis

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Deuteronomy 5: 1-21; 6:4-9

“Not with our ancestors did the LORD our God make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today.” This is the part of this lengthy reading that has grabbed ahold of me. Hebrew is a language that uses repetition to emphasize. The literal translation is: **Not with our ancestors did the Lord our God make this covenant, *but with us, we, these here today, the living.*”**

This is not just a story from the past. It is our story.

So, what is the story? Basically, it is the story of God’s relationship with us—expressed in an agreement—a covenant. We tend to give it the shorthand name of the Ten Commandments.

But there’s a backstory to this story. This is actually the second time Moses is sharing this covenant with the people. The first time was 40 years before this one. The first time, Moses goes up the mountain and comes back with two tablets of stone that have the 10 Commandments engraved on them.

The first commandment is “you shall have no other gods before me.” In what has to be one of the biggest ministry disappointments of all time, Moses comes down the mountain—probably glowing from his encounter with God—to find the people worshipping a golden calf.

These are the people who God delivered out of Egypt—the people who walked across the Red Sea on dry land. And even after all that, they still couldn’t trust God to get them through the wilderness to the promised land. So, while Moses was up on the mountain, they got all their gold together and molded it into a golden calf—a god that was really worth something.

Another word came from God. This generation will not get to the promised land—even Moses. They will wander in the wilderness for 40 years. The children of that first generation are the adults now, and they are getting ready to leave the wilderness—to go to the land God has promised. Moses is taking this new generation back to Mt. Sinai—he’s not doing it literally but figuratively through a series of sermons which is basically the book of Deuteronomy.

His point is not to make sure they know their history. He wants to make sure that they know this is *their* story. God is in relationship with *them*—and this is what it looks like.

This is more than a list of rules. In Confirmation last week, Mei Reumann said the 10 Commandments are like a road that you walk on through life. I think that is a super helpful picture—this is what it looks like to walk in relationship with God.

When we learn the Commandments, we say the first one is: “You shall have no other gods before me.”

But Jews have a different way of numbering. For Jews, the first word, the first commandment from God is: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

God is a god of freedom—and these are not just pretty words. God has shown that God is a god of freedom by liberating the people from bondage in Egypt.

God says to the people: You never have to serve a human lord. *A human lord can never again determine all that you are.*

This is a confusing word—because if this is indeed our story, too—what does it mean for the millions of people who have been enslaved since then? What does it mean for all of the people who were enslaved in this country? What does it mean for immigrant children, separated from their parents, in detention centers? What does it mean for the masses of people—mostly African-American—in prison for non-violent crimes? What does it mean for all those around the world who are caught in the web of human trafficking?

Those are hard questions for me.

I don't have a complete answer but I look to others. It's no coincidence that Harriet Tubman was called "Moses" by the enslaved people she led to freedom. This story of liberation—this story of God as a god of freedom—has been a central story—a defining story for oppressed people around the world. If you cannot convince people in their hearts and spirits that they are slaves—that they deserve to be enslaved—there is still a measure of freedom. There are seeds that can grow—seeds that mean the enslavement will not last forever.

I believe it makes a difference when you know that God wants you and all people to be free.

I want to bring this closer now—because I believe this is true for each one of us. None of us—to my knowledge—are literally enslaved. But I know there are ways in which we *are not free*.

I want to pause for a moment of silent reflection. What are the pressure points for you? Where do you feel trapped? What are the burdens that are weighing you down?

(Pause.)

These are real. I have my own set of them that—last week—literally kept me awake at night for days. These are our own personal wanderings in the wilderness—when the God of freedom is not the first thing on our minds. When we gather as a community, we live into this story of the people of Israel who have a hard time remembering who God is. We come together—weekly or as often as we can—and often we come as people who feel burdened and trapped by so many things—and we remind each other of who God is and the freedom that God is leading us toward.

Today, is the Sunday that we remember the life and extraordinary witness of Saint Francis of Assisi. Francis and his co-worker, Clare, are the picture of what it looks like to live as free human beings. Both of them came from immense privilege and wealth. But for Francis and Clare, this life of privilege and material wealth crushed their spirits.

God spoke to Francis in ways that were different than the way God spoke to Moses in the burning bush—God spoke through an experience of extended illness and through a meeting with a leper. Francis

heard God tell him to rebuild his church, so he used his father's money to literally rebuild a falling down chapel and give to the poor. His father was furious at Francis and he had him arrested.

His father brought Francis to the cathedral in the center of Assisi. In front of the bishop and all of the townspeople gathered there, Francis joyfully returned all the money. His father was a cloth merchant, so Francis had the best clothes that money could buy. There, on the steps of the cathedral, Francis took off those designer clothes and handed them to his father. This was not an angry tearing off of his clothes, but a gentle relinquishing of all of the privilege and status he had enjoyed. The bishop recognized the Spirit of God that was at work in Francis and he wrapped Francis in his own cloak.

What keeps us from being free is different for each of us. For Francis it was his privilege. Even though what we need to let go of may be different for each of us, Francis is the embodiment of what healthy relinquishment looks like. It is a path to freedom.

Richard Rohr puts it this way: “[Francis and Clare] lost and let go of all fear of suffering; all need for power, prestige and possessions; and all need for the small self to be important, and they came out the other side knowing something essential—who they really were in God and thus who they really were.”

They knew that first word: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

And I believe they knew the second word, too. “You shall have no other gods before me.” When you know the God of freedom—the God who has freed you—who is still freeing you—you can relinquish those other gods. Gods like fear and control and security. You can let them take second place.

As you think about what this all means for you, I want to share some of what it means for me. For decades, Francis—but even more the Franciscan way—has been an important part of my spiritual journey. But I have never been like Francis in terms of giving everything away. I was a tither—giving away 10 % of my income—for a lot of my life. When we first came to Christ, I continued to tithe for a while. But it was not sustainable—as a family living in this city. And I felt terrible that I couldn't do it because it felt like something I should be doing.

In June, the members of the Council were asked to consider increasing our gifts to the Church. We prayed and thought about it, and Paul and I decided to increase our giving by 20%—and honestly, it feels really good.

We are launching our Stewardship Appeal today—and I've been thinking about how appeal is such a good word for it because it is really appealing to me. Spiritual growth—growing in our generosity—is at the center of it and that's what makes it so appealing to me.

I can say from the last few months of giving 20% more, that it has been good for my spirit. It is not an inconsequential gift for us—there are things we will not do or buy because of it—but they are not things we need. What I've received in the process is something I desperately needed—I have experienced the freedom of giving up control over that money. And I have a greater sense that God is ultimately in control. In a time when it seems like our country and our world is spinning out of control—that is a gift of incalculable worth.

At the end of today's reading, we hear that beautiful statement of faith called the Shema. "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might." Then we are told to tell our children and keep reminders of who God is around us. I never thought I would say this, but writing our offering check every month is a reminder for me of who God is.

The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

(Prayer cards.)