

St. Paul's Congregational Church
March 4, 2018, Exodus 20:1-17; Lent 3
Calling Forth Our Best
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Here's the setting: the Hebrew people with their leader, Moses, are encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai, the sacred mountain oasis where as a young man Moses had so vividly experienced God's presence in the burning bush. They have symbolically gone from the wilderness desert, from fruitlessness, dryness, and barrenness, to the mountain, to refreshment, exaltation. We know it's at the mountain where something incredible is about to happen.

Here at Mount Sinai, they pause to reflect on what has happened to them. They have come to see clearly and to acknowledge explicitly the passionate, steadfast love which God has demonstrated toward them again and again. It's here that this motley crew of refugees realizes its exalted calling to be the Lord's own community, specially chosen to reveal God's love to all people. And here they begin to see how their grateful acceptance of God's love and their response to that love calls them to certain attitudes and actions.

Moses goes up the mountain alone and he's overwhelmed by the awareness of all that God has done for his people: God's steadfast love in their past and present, God's promise for the future. And here, at the top of the mountain Moses meets God who says, "I have carried you on eagles' wings and brought you here to me. If only now you will listen to me and keep my covenant, then out of all peoples you shall become my special possession, for the whole earth is mine. You shall be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation. These are the words you shall speak to the Israelites."

So Moses goes back down the mountain and shares all this with the people and tells them to prepare themselves formally to recognize God's loving presence among them. Their response: "Whatever the Lord has said, we will do." Talk about a faithful response! At least now, anyway.

The extraordinary realization of the Israelites at Sinai was that this utterly transcendent, this totally "other" God, loved them and had chosen them to be his own. I ask again, have you ever had that experience of God –

a time in your life when you knew this amazing fact deep in your soul? In the pit of your stomach?

The relationship between God and these people is a covenant – throughout the entire Bible we hear about covenant – a special kind of relationship between God and humanity – a mutual agreement, a promise made between parties. We know about covenant in this church – a mutual agreement by which we will live as community. Covenants are so often broken again and again – we know that too. But God never gives up.

A little history here – the ancient Hittite king initiated a covenant with his vassals by declaring his position, his rights. Then he stipulated the conditions by which he would offer those vassals protection. They must agree to live peacefully with his other vassals and to serve no other king.

We have the same model here: God gives the Ten Commandments – the obligations of the vassal Israelites – but they are preceded by a similar declaration of God's position and rights: I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

God's offering to Israel then, to us even today – is not law but God's presence, God's protection, God's love. God's very self! God tells them, tells us: I am the Lord **your** God. They didn't deserve it – neither do we - but God poured out love for them, and continues to pour out love for us.

And then come the commandments – not the Ten Suggestions – but the Ten Commandments – they tell the rules for the lifestyle that must result if the people of Israel accept God's transforming love. We note the words are simple – direct – straightforward indeed. Our lives today as were those of the Israelites can be so chaotic, confused – that's a testimonial I think of our need for some direct, simple, straightforward talk about the way things are in the world. The Israelites testified that God loved them enough to teach them, to show us, the way in simple, straightforward, direct ways that people can understand.

The Ten Commandments – God's straightforward statement of the facts of life. This is the way that leads to life. All other wanderings lead to death. What a gift these commandments are to us. But doesn't that seem a bit odd to you?

But they are a gift - they are tangible, continuing proof of God's grace. They aren't limitations of the good life – they are steps that lead to the good life. Think about the rules parents lay down for their children – certainly as children we saw some of the rules as limitations, as dos and don'ts that limit our freedom and didn't we resist them. Certainly as teenagers we did – rebellion is a human nature, isn't it. We're not all that

different from the Israelites are we. Through the ages human nature doesn't change. We all need boundaries – adults as well as children and youth.

But here's the good news - we're not left by God to wander – to figure out the way of life on our own. God shows us the way as our parents did. And God's way is timeless. God makes promises. God's way works to bring life in all its abundance and joy. The question becomes, how do we live in those promises?

We look at the commandments themselves and see they are indeed boundaries of how to live in community. Most importantly, we learn that we're called to love God first. No other gods before me it says. What acts as a god in your life? Money? Security? Possessions? Job? Our children? For Israel, for us – nothing must be more important than God. But we must not use the name of the Lord in vain – and that's much more than what we consider swearing. Think about this: so many times I hear people exclaim, "O my God!" in any number of situations. The question is – are we speaking prayerfully when we do that? Because what's being talked about here is a thoughtless use of religion and the language of religion – to go through the motions of worship, to say God's name, and then to live as if we have little or no commitment: that's the vain use of God's name.

Remember the Sabbath – that's another tough one especially for us I think. It was at Sinai that the Israelites came to realize the danger of losing perspective. They realized the very human tendency to become immersed in and obsessed with the "things" of this world. That's true for us, for sure – and I wonder if our "things" have to do with calendars, scheduling, all those activities that fill our days as well as possessions: so many things, activities, manage to get in the way of our devotional life. Think about walking into this place on Sunday mornings full of thoughts and shoulds and to-dos – that it's hard for us to center and slow down enough to worship. But we are commanded to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. True enough – some of us work on what we ordinarily think of as the Sabbath – but friends, the Bible doesn't say remember Sunday and keep it holy. For those of us who do work on Sunday – it's important to take Sabbath time in order to regain our perspective, to rest, to re-create so that we can return to the ordinary affairs of life with a new energy, a fresh viewpoint. We need time from the routine and take that time for nurturing our relationship with God and with each other. How do you take Sabbath time?

Years ago when I was in Connecticut it was one of those wonderfully warm early spring days on my day off – I drove to Hammonasset State Park and walked the beach. The sound of the water lapping against the shore, the sight of the birds, the smell of the salt water, the touch of the shells and sea

glass I picked up as I walked along – all of that did more to center me than anything I'd done in a long time. Surely God was in that place – where is that place for you? Where is that place where you can allow God to find you? Where is that place where you can be open yet closed off from the routine we're all ensnared in? Find that place – wherever it is – and go there and let God find you. Let God move in and through your very core. That's taking the time to reflect with joy about receiving God's love that never ends – That's living in to God's promises.

And here's another commandment that has to do with living in community: honor your father and mother. This isn't just about children respecting and obeying their parents - it's about the people of Israel, us, being called to realize that all human life is sacred, including the lives of the aged or anyone else who could be considered "other". The society that cannot honor – and I use the word honor intentionally – we don't necessarily have to like or enjoy –but the society that cannot honor those who are different – in age, in viewpoint, different in any number of ways – that society will be a short lived society indeed. If we live into God's promises, that means we honor each other, warts and all. We don't have to agree with each other to honor each other either – not easy for sure, but that's what we're called to do, that's what we're commanded to do.

Then there are the commandments that have deal with the don'ts – those don'ts that are so terribly destructive of human relationships. You shall not commit murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false evidence against your neighbor. You shall not covet. Now, that's a tough one isn't it in a materialistic, secular culture.

The person who covets – the person who is restless and dissatisfied with what he has and wants what someone else has – maybe that person still believes there's security in possessions. But living into God's promises given through these commandments means we trust God alone – no thing, no possession can bring us the security that God can bring us.

Why is it that we so often have to hit bottom, hit a crisis time to realize this? We who are so blessed so often miss this point I think. At Bread for the Journey we went along in our group session talking about the usual problems of recovery, the challenges of getting and staying "clean" – it was a good session but it was a little surface - something was missing. Then when one of the women talked about feeling so terribly alone in this journey, I spoke up and said, ah, but you're not alone. Ever. Well, then the floodgates opened and the whole conversation changed. They talked about all they'd lost – their possessions, their jobs, their freedom in some cases as they'd spent time incarcerated. But then they talked about what they'd

gained – a stronger relationship with their higher power - they all called that God. They recognize now through all their struggles that life itself is a gift from God and I tell you, I've not seen such gratitude, such a healthy perspective on the "things" of life ever.

Being in relationship with others is what keeps us going. Being in relationship with God gives us strength, courage, even joy, but most of all, hope.

The overriding message of the Bible is just that – God wants to be in relationship with us. God has given us the tools, including the Ten Commandments, to make that happen. And we know that God will go to extraordinary lengths to make that happen – even sending his Only Son that we might have life and life abundantly - but we have to be willing to turn and accept that relationship. We have to slow down. Sometimes it takes a serious illness. Sometimes it takes a hurricane. Sometimes it takes jailtime. Sometimes it takes a brick.

Once upon a time, a young and successful executive was traveling down a neighborhood street, going a little too fast in his brand new jaguar. He was watching for kids darting out from between parked cars and slowed down when he thought he saw something.

As his car passed, no children appeared – instead a brick smashed into the Jag's side door. He slammed on the brakes and spun the car back to where the brick came from. He jumped out of the car, grabbed some kid, and shouted, "What was that all about! Who are you? Just what were you doing? Just what were you thinking!"

He ranted on and on, "That's a new car! And the damage from that brick you threw is going to cost a lot of money to fix. Why did you do it?"

"Please, mister, please – I'm sorry. I threw the brick because no one else would stop." Tears rolled down the child's face as he pointed toward a parked car – "it's my brother – he rolled off the curb and fell out of his wheelchair. I can't lift him up."

Sobbing now, the boy asked the executive, "Would you please help me get him back into his chair? He's hurt and he's too heavy for me."

Moved beyond words, the driver tried to swallow the lump in his throat as he lifted the boy back into the wheelchair, took out his handkerchief and wiped the scrapes and cuts, making sure he was all right.

"Thank you and may God bless you," the grateful child said to him. The man watched the little boy push his brother down the sidewalk toward their home.

It was a long walk back to the Jaguar – he never did repair the side door. He kept the dent to remind him not to go through life so fast that someone has to throw a brick at you to get your attention.

God wants, demands our attention. God whispers in our souls and speaks to our hearts. God wants us to have the blessings of freedom to live. Sometimes when we don't have time, don't make the time, to listen, God has to throw a brick at us. It's our choice – listen to the whisper or wait for the brick.

What choice will you make? May God grant us the action of the Holy Spirit in our lives to bring us closer to the eternal promise: I will be your God and you shall be my people.

Amen.