

# LIVE FREE

Exodus 20:1-17

Third Sunday in Lent (Series B)

March 7, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The Old Testament lesson for the Third Sunday in Lent comes from the second book of Moses, commonly known as Exodus. It's chapter 20, verses 1 through 17. In this Scripture, God speaks directly to his people from a cloud of smoke. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Exodus 20, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>1</sup> And God spoke all these words, saying,

<sup>2</sup> "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

<sup>3</sup> "You shall have no other gods before me.

<sup>4</sup> "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, <sup>6</sup> but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

<sup>7</sup> "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

<sup>8</sup> "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

<sup>12</sup> "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

<sup>13</sup> "You shall not murder.

<sup>14</sup> "You shall not commit adultery.

<sup>15</sup> "You shall not steal.

<sup>16</sup> "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

<sup>17</sup> "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's."

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's start with a quiz. I'm sorry. I mean, "A celebration of academic achievement." That sounds like more fun. There's only one question in this celebration: How many commandments are there? If your answer is ten, you pass the quiz. Good job. But the best answer might be a little more complicated. If you answered "nine," or "fourteen," or even "fifteen," you also get full credit.

If you count up all the places in this passage where God gives a command, that is, where he says, "You shall," or "You shall not," or "Remember," or "Honor," we actually come up with fourteen commandments, fifteen if you read it in Hebrew, but we don't need to get that complicated.

But you might have also noticed that some of the "You shalls" and "You shall nots" are related to each other. So maybe we should consolidate some of them. And if we do that, we come up with nine.

For example, people sometimes wonder why the Ninth Commandment, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house," is separated from the Tenth Commandment, "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife ..." (20:17). It seems like these could just be combined into one. Some Christians do combine them into one, but then they have to divide the First Commandment into two commandments. So they separate, "You shall have no other gods before me" (20:3), from, "You shall not make for yourself a carved image ..." (20:4). That becomes the Second Commandment, and what we consider to be the Second through Eighth Commandments each slide down a spot.

We have this struggle because, if we consolidate the commandments that are related to each other, we only come up with nine. That's close to ten, but not right on, so what's the deal? We do need to come up with ten, because the Bible says there are ten. In three other places, once in Exodus (34:28) and twice in Deuteronomy (4:13; 10:4), Moses refers back to the Ten Commandments, specifically using the number ten. But if you look up those references, like Exodus 34:28, your Bible might have a little footnote saying that, literally, it's "the Ten Words" (דְּבָרִים).

And a "word" is broader than a commandment. If someone says, "Can I have a word with you?" they might give you a commandment, but they might also rebuke you, or they might compliment you, or they might make a promise. You never know until you hear their word.

So the Ten Commandments are really the Ten Words. So when we try to identify ten, they don't all have to be commandments.

So we look again at our Old Testament lesson, and it starts this way: "And God spoke all these *words*" (20:1). Then what follows is like a ten-point sermon, except God is more efficient with his points than most preachers are. And the first point, or the First Word is this: "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (20:2). Then we take the nine commandments after that, and it adds up to Ten Words, just like it's supposed to. So the First Commandment is really the Second Word, the Second Commandment is really the Third Word, and so on, all the way down to the Ninth and Tenth Commandments. And since those two commandments are quite similar, we can count them as one, and they become the Tenth Word.

And this, from what I understand, is actually how the Israelites counted them. But somewhere along the lines, Christians started to number them differently, and they started to call them the Ten Commandments instead of the Ten Words.

It seems that Martin Luther recognized this issue when he wrote his catechisms in 1529, and it might have been an opportunity to correct the numbering. But Luther didn't like to change things that didn't need to be changed, so he left the numbering alone. Instead, he included the First Word, "I am the LORD your God," as the Introduction to the Ten Commandments. That way he could get all the content in without having to mess with the way people had learned the commandments. So he stuck with the traditional Christian numbering. It was only after this that other reformers in other places developed the newer Christian numbering, where they combined the Ninth and Tenth and divided the First Commandment into two. And that's why some of our Protestant friends count the commandments differently than we do.

But enough history. There is a point to counting the Ten Words this way. This isn't just a trivial matter. So if I lost you with all the counting and history, this would be a good time to check back in.

Christians have always considered the First Commandment to be the most important commandment. And this is pretty easy to recognize. "You shall have no other gods before me" is pretty important. All of the other commandments flow from this one. And it's placed at the front of the list to emphasize its importance. Any time someone makes a list of rules, "Rule Number One" is usually the most important. And this is certainly true for the First Commandment. But when we recognize the commandments to really be the Ten Words, and when we recognize the First Commandment to really be the Second Word, and when we recognize the Introduction to be the First Word, then we see that there is something even more important than the First Commandment. It's the First Word: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

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The giving of the Ten Words comes immediately after Israel's escape from Egypt. They had been slaves there for 430 years (Ex. 12:40). But God had promised a land to their father Abraham. So God delivered them from Egypt.

God did this by first sending ten plagues upon Egypt. During these plagues, Moses requested that Pharaoh permit them to leave. And Pharaoh continually refused until the tenth plague, which was the death of all the firstborn. God spared the Israelites from this plague by commanding them to sacrifice the Passover lamb and paint the blood on the doorposts of their houses. So all the firstborn of the Egyptians died, while the LORD passed over the houses of the Israelites.

Finally, Pharaoh summoned Moses and gave Israel permission to leave (12:31). So they left in haste, just as God commanded them. But Pharaoh soon changed his mind and chased after them with his army (14:5-7). God led Israel to the Red Sea, and it was there that Pharaoh caught up with them. So now Israel was trapped between the sea and an army. It looked like a hopeless situation, but God had really brought this about so that he might get glory over Pharaoh (14:4). God sent a strong wind to part the waters of the Red Sea and dry up the ground (14:21). The people of Israel walked through on dry land. But when Pharaoh's army attempted to chase them through the sea, God let the wind stop. The waters returned to their natural place, and the Egyptian army was drowned in the sea.

In the morning, Israel found themselves alive and free on the other side of the sea. The result was that, not only had Israel escaped from Egypt, but there was no one left to chase them. They were free.

This is the event that we refer to as the Exodus, and it is the primary deliverance event in the Old Testament. It's what God refers to when he says, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

It was kind of like their Fourth of July. Except, instead of signing a piece of paper, then waiting for the King of England to receive that piece of paper, and then fighting a war for several years, it all happened in one night. And instead of the people fighting a war, God fought and won the war in one night. So this became the primary deliverance event of the Old Testament. And it continued to be God's greatest act of deliverance until the cross, where he delivered the world from even greater enemies through the death of his Son.

After their deliverance from Egypt, Israel began their journey to the land God had promised to Abraham. On the way, God spoke to them at Mount Sinai. The people all stood at the base of the mountain, the mountain was wrapped in smoke, God came down upon the mountain, and from there he spoke to them, from within the cloud of smoke. And this, as far as I can tell, is the only time God spoke directly to all the people. Usually he spoke to his servant Moses, and Moses then spoke to the people. But here, Moses is with the people, and God speaks to them directly (19:16-20:1). The people were naturally terrified (20:18), though they should not have been, because the words God spoke to them were gracious and kind.

From this cloud of smoke, God spoke the Ten Words. And he begins by declaring himself to be their God. That's the First Word. The LORD declares himself to be their God who delivered them from slavery to Egypt. This is the First Word, and it teaches us something about the other Nine Words. God makes himself to be their God, and he saves them before he commands anything of them.

Our natural minds have this belief that we use the commandments in order to earn God's favor. That is, if we want to be saved and go to the good place when we die, we need to do good things, like keep the Ten Commandments. This is the basic assumption of all natural religion. So our natural minds grab the Ten Commandments and think, *Alright, if I keep these commandments, then God will save me.* But that's not how it is. God saved Israel before he gave them the commandments. He declared himself to be their God, and them to be his people, before he required anything of them. And this is radically different from the way our natural minds work.

We switch things around. We think it is us who must do the work of reconciling ourselves to God, and we use God's Law to do it. And it is true that if we do actually keep all of God's commandments, we will have eternal life (Luke 10:28). God would let us in to the good place, and he would be happy to do so.

But sometimes we don't keep God's commandments. To say it more accurately, we only keep God's commandments some of the time. Or to say it even more accurately, we only sort of keep God's commandments some of the time. You and I have never, ever, in the entire history of our entire lives, done a good work with a truly sincere heart. We only deceive ourselves into thinking that God must be pleased with our goodness. In this way we flip God's will on its head. And we really try to take God's place in the work of salvation. We think that we are the ones who reconcile ourselves to God. We think that we can earn his favor by keeping his commandments. But this can never be. And the attempt to do so is really an attempt to steal God's glory for ourselves. God is the reconciler.

This is what we learn from the First Word. God did not give the commandments to Israel so that they could earn their place as his people. He made them his people when he delivered them from Egypt. He gave them the commandments because they were his people. Do you see the difference? The commandments were not given so that they might become God's people, but because they were his people.

## LIVE FREE (Exodus 20:1-17)

This is the way God's Law continues to function in our lives as Christians. Jesus Christ has fulfilled the Law on our behalf. He is God's Son. He took on human flesh willingly. And he did it to fulfill the Law on our behalf. Where we only sort of obey God's commandments some of the time, and never with a sincere heart, Jesus kept every commandment all of the time with a fully devoted heart. He did this so that he might suffer and die for our sake. This is God's new and greater deliverance event. The Exodus from Egypt was a foreshadowing of Jesus' death and resurrection. By Jesus' death and resurrection, he has delivered us from the greater enemies of sin, death, and the devil. This is God's new and greater deliverance.

So when we read the First Word as Christians, we can think of it in terms of Jesus' deliverance: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of slavery to sin, death, and the devil." By doing this, Jesus has made himself to be our God, and he has made us to be his people. It is into this new reality, as children in the house of God, that the commandments come. God still gives his commandments. But he does not give them to us so that we might become his people, but because we are his children in Jesus Christ.

It's like parents setting the rules of the house. The rules are not there as a path for the children to earn their place in the family. The rules are there to protect the children, because they are members of the family. This is the correct way to view the commandments. And when we view them this way, they become gifts instead of a burden. They might, sometimes, still feel like a burden, but this is only because our sinful flesh still wants to use them to steal God's place. That false use of the commandments only leads us back into slavery. If we submit ourselves to the commandments as a means of gaining freedom, we will fail, and we will be enslaved to this futile quest for freedom.

But we are not enslaved to the commandments. Through Jesus Christ, we are not enslaved to anything. We live in God's house as children. And as children, we are not slaves of anything, but we are heirs of his glory (Gal. 4:7).

So our relationship to the commandments is that we obey them in freedom, for we have been freed from sin, death, and the devil. The commandments become part of the lifestyle of those who have been freed from sin, death, and the devil.

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Dear saints who trust in Jesus,

You are not slaves of anything. Jesus has purchased you, "not with silver and gold, but with his holy and precious blood, and with his innocent sufferings and death." You are no longer slaves to sin, death, and the devil. You are not slaves to the commandments. You are not even slaves of God. Christ has purchased you. He has made you to be his own. But he did not do this to make you slaves of God, but children of God. This is where it gets really marvelous. Christ did not purchase you from slavery to make you his slaves. He purchased you from slavery to make you free. And it's not the kind of freedom where he just releases us back into the wild. He purchases us to adopt us as children of God. It is into this reality that God gives us the commandments. So we treasure them as redeemed and free children of God. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.