

“In the Room Where it Happened”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Deuteronomy 5:1-21; 6:4-9
October 6, 2019 - World Communion Sunday

We are on the express train through the timeline of the Hebrew Bible. We made a short stop in the book of Exodus last week and now we find ourselves in the book of Deuteronomy. The title “Deuteronomy” is from Greek, and it literally means “second law.” Most of the book is made up of Moses’ speeches to the Israelites just before they enter the Promised Land. They have escaped Pharaoh and crossed the Red Sea and made it to Mount Sinai...and then continued wandering and waiting for the past forty years.

Nearly the entire generation that was there when Moses received the Ten Commandments has died. Moses is speaking to their children, telling them everything they need to know before he dies. So it’s the second telling of the law — the Torah.

We are tapping into two pieces here: the Ten Commandments and the *Shema Yisrael*. This version of the Commandments will sound slightly different from the list Moses read nearly forty years ago. And then the Shema — which we’ll talk more about — will sound very familiar to us as where Jesus goes when asked what the greatest commandment is.

Knowing that this is Moses addressing the next generation of Israelites, listen carefully to what he tells them about God’s covenant. Hear now these words from chapters 5 and 6 of the book of Deuteronomy:

Moses convened all Israel, and said to them: Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently. The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. The LORD spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire. (At that time I was standing between the LORD and you to declare to you the words of the LORD; for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain.) And he said:

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

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

You shall not murder. Neither shall you commit adultery.
Neither shall you steal. Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbor.
Neither shall you covet your neighbor's wife.
Neither shall you desire your neighbor's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

On the sepia screen, Dorothy Gale sits up in bed as Auntie Em tells her it was just a bad dream. It's true that "there's no place like home" but, Dorothy, you never left. Her farm friends and the fortune teller arrive to check on her. She assures them she remembers them and then defiantly declares:

"But it wasn't a dream...it was a place. And you and you and you and *you* were there."
But you couldn't have been, could you?"

*The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb.
Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant,
but with us, who are all of us here alive today.
The LORD spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire.*

There is a tradition that survives to this day that every person with a Jewish soul was present at Sinai.¹ That tradition starts right here with Moses telling this next generation of Israelites that God made the holy covenant with them, that they were there, speaking to God, face to face.
You and you and you and *you* were there.

But they couldn't have been, could they?

Moses lays it out for them, telling them what their parents and grandparents learned about how they were to live. It all starts with "I am."

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

This is the God of liberation. God's identity as the God of generations and laughter and struggle centers on this act of having brought the people out of bondage and into freedom. God has rescued them for a new life in covenant with their God. Everything that follows in these commandments is about that new life.

They must stick with this God and not go in search of another deity or anything else to worship.

¹ I'm indebted to "NL:DR - The Narrative Lectionary Podcast for People on the Go" for this insight, and several others throughout this sermon.

They are not to make idols, tempting as it may be. This is the God we met last week giving the name “I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE” — don’t you dare put limits on this God, turning the Mighty and Holy Verb into a graspable noun, an object to venerate in the place of a being with which to grapple. This God that you — you were there! — are attached to is a jealous God, a vulnerable God, a God who cares about your little life. This God is eager to pour out steadfast love. So use God’s name with care.

Preachers like to point out that the first few commandments are about God, and the rest about community life. If we’re paying attention, we notice that here the transition happens within the commandment about the Sabbath! It starts by talking about holiness but quickly turns to life together. Everyone must rest, not just the powerful, not just the free, not just the citizens, not just the humans. Everyone must rest, because there was no rest for any of you in the economy of Egypt. You have entered into covenant with God — you were there! — and that relationship is so wildly different from the domination you experienced when you were a commodity, an object, a servant of Pharaoh.

God saved you from exploitation. Pharaoh’s not in charge anymore. And neither are you. Be careful how you set up your labor and your wealth. Remember who gave you your freedom and your strength and your bootstraps.

The commandments continue with a vision for a community that upholds respect and dignity for all. Murder is clearly a violation of your neighbor. So is theft. But coveting someone else’s stuff? That messes with your relationship with them. That messes with your own dignity and integrity too. Adultery, lying, manipulating the truth — imagine if these things got loose in our world and entered the halls of power! These commandments point to disruptions to relationships that would leave a community in disarray. Do you know about a community in disarray?

After the Ten Commandments we get the *Shema Yisrael* — named for its first two words in Hebrew, translated as “Hear, O Israel...” These verses are central to Jewish liturgy. They’re said morning and night, as instructed. They’re part of prayer services and on the little scroll placed in a mezuzah on the doorpost of a Jewish home, again, as instructed.

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD is one.
You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your might.*

It’s understood that to love your God isn’t an emotion, it’s not thoughts and prayers, it’s an active love shown in worship and struggle and living with all your heart and soul and... “Might” as a translation is a bit lacking here. It’s muchness, all-you’ve-got-ness, oomph!

Actively love your God with all your oomph, and keep these words in your very being, in your heart, inside you. Take them with you. Know them. Repeat them. Teach them to the next generation.

And Moses has come full circle. He will die before he can tell the generation after this one himself. So he tells the group before him — you were there! He tells them and then he tells them about how God wants them to keep on passing it down. He tells them and it sounds a bit different from when he told their parents and grandparents because years have gone by and much has happened and the Word of God is not a noun, but a verb, and it must be reinterpreted as it is spoken in each time and place.

Moses tells them and tries to get them to understand the experience of their ancestors by insisting that they were there. They need to know that they were there to meet this God of liberation for the first time. They need to feel in their bones that this God will continue to create a new thing. They need to know that they and their children and their children's children *are* the new thing.

If they weren't there, they will forget. They will see this as maw-maw and paw-paw's covenant. These commandments, this liberation, this new economy, this heart and soul and strength will all fade like a dream. They will walk away from a God who has rescued them, who is calling to them, who needs their attention to make a better world.

God has offered them everything, if only they remember that they were there.

“...the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’”

Paul wrote that description of the institution of the Lord's Supper as he was trying to get the church in the city of Corinth to get their act together in celebrating communion. He doesn't simply scold them — though he does scold them! — but he puts them in the room where it happened.

We are a people freed from oppression in Egypt and the oppression of sin and death. And yet we need to be reminded constantly, as sin and death and the economies that revel in them engulf us. When people are exploited, when we turn to idols, when observable truths are up for debate, when our leaders bear false witness, when God's name is dragged through the mud, we need to be reminded that we were there.

We are freed from Pharaoh. We are bound together.

We are about to confirm God's call on leaders for this congregation, making promises together to lead and be led and you'll be able to say you were there when Grace Burgess was ordained as a Deacon and Emma Richardson as an Elder.

And then, with so many congregations around the globe on this World Communion Sunday, we will break the bread of heaven and share the cup of the new covenant. Here we do this weekly, knowing that we need to meet at this table to remember that we were there. Today we are reminded that this table — each Lord's Day we are reminded that this is not our table, but Christ's! — extends far beyond these walls. It is but a piece of a table that circles the earth in a festival web.

This table extends beyond our time as well, through the ages, with millions of tables sharing millions of loaves and millions of cups through two millennia, all the way back to an upper room during the Passover in the bustling city of Jerusalem, on the night in which he was betrayed. This table extends beyond our time to our children and our children's children, if we will keep these words in our hearts.

Come to this table where Christ is the host and come with all that you have — your joy, your fear, your faith, your doubts, your hope, your despair, your numb indifference. Bring it all to the feast of new life and receive a blessing and know that you are invited to taste and to see. This meal of the nations is for you...and you and you and *you*. Amen.