

Narrative Lectionary: Covenant and Commandments

October 7, 2018

When somebody from another country becomes a naturalized citizen of the United States, he or she has to pass a test, and then needs to say the Oath of Allegiance. This is what new citizens need to declare:

"I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God."

That is a strong statement, isn't it? There is an unstated covenant here. The United States is saying to you: Welcome to this country. You receive the full rights and privileges of a citizen. Now, here are your obligations. Here are your duties. Here is your part of the bargain.

I thought of that Oath of Allegiance this week, as I was looking at the covenant God makes with the people of Israel. God had started this covenant with Abraham. God would give Abraham and Sarah and their descendants land and a people and they would be a blessing. The covenant went through Isaac to Jacob to Joseph. Joseph, you remember, ended up in Egypt where the Jewish people thrived and then were placed into slavery. Last week we heard about God delivering the people out of slavery in Egypt, bringing them through the Red Sea.

Not too long after their deliverance, the people started complaining. The first time they complained was because of lack of drinkable water. They were in the desert, remember, so this seemed rather justified. And God provided. Several weeks later they were complaining about lack of food. And God provided manna from heaven

and quail. Then they complained about water again. God provided. But there is a pattern being established that the people don't seem to trust that God will provide.

That's a pattern that perhaps we can see in our own lives, right? We get anxious about our problems, rather than trusting that God will be there for us. It's why Jesus says in Matthew 6: Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?... And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?... indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

34 'So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today. Jesus invites us to stay in the moment, to not borrow trouble, as we say, to trust that God will provide what we need.

So today's story is about three months after the Hebrew people have been delivered from Egypt. They have been set free from bondage. God is going to lead them into the land that God promised. And now God is going to intensify the relationship, even though the people have been grumbling, even though the people have not been very trusting, God says, I want to deepen the relationship.

So God says, This is what I have done for you. If you respond by keeping my covenant, then you shall be my treasured people. You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. But your response is to keep my word. Back to that citizenship example, our country says, Here is what we offer you; but now here is your response.

In a verse that we didn't include in the reading, the people answered as one: Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do!

That kind of call and response goes on in Exodus chapter 20 when God gives what we call The Ten Commandments. The translation of the first verse is really: And God spoke all these words in order to say/respond. In other words, God was all set up to speak, and the people were going to respond. The early commentators said that for every Yes commandment God said, the people responded with a "Yes," kind of like an Amen! ! In the black community, the pastor says, Can I get an

Amen? And the people respond: Amen! Just so here: When God issues a positive command, the people respond, Yes! For sure! You bet! And for every negative commandment they respond with a No! No way! We're not going to do that, God!

Sometimes we view the Ten Commandments as God giving a monologue of demands. OK. Listen up: I'm in charge, and here's the list- you have to do these things and you can't do any of these things. Instead, these commandments come out of a loving relationship. And it's consensual: the people agree all along the way.

Go back to that oath of allegiance: The country says, Welcome to this land. There are opportunities here. Maybe you came from a dictatorship. You get to vote here. Maybe you came from a country where you couldn't practice your faith. You can practice your faith here. But you also need to renounce your allegiance to the country you used to live in. You need to uphold our constitution. There are boundaries that come with these new freedoms.

Or consider the marriage vows. We could see the marriage vows as chains around us. We can't do this and we can't do that. But they are really boundaries that keep the marriage flourishing. When the marriage vow says, Forsaking all others, that is a restriction, isn't it, but that boundary allows the marriage to blossom.

So God says this at the start of the commandments: "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." Again, this is what I did for you. Here's how I want you to respond.

Other gods can come in many forms. What gets in the way of your trust in Christ? What keeps you from following? Our church leaders are reading a book called, *Weird Church*, about doing church in new ways in these new times. The authors look at the story in Luke 10, where Jesus sends out 70 disciples in groups of two. And Jesus says, I don't want you to take extra sandals or a backpack of food. I want you to rely on the people you come in contact with, the people who provide you with hospitality. I want you to trust that I will meet you in those people.

The point is, If you bring stuff with you, you are in control. But if you need to rely on others, it's not up to you. You have to trust. You have to trust that God will be

there to meet you. Even my need to control situations is a false god that I can trust in. What keeps you from trusting God?

And God says, Don't make any idols, because God says, I will be jealous. The Hebrew really means, so overcome with emotion as to be red in the face. God says, I love you so much I get emotional. When God says don't have any idols, God talks about punishing children for the iniquity of parents up to the third and fourth generation. I've always seen that as generational consequences for destructive choices. The consequences of abuse, for instance, can be passed down to the next generations.

But God also blesses to the thousandth generation those who obey God. The rabbis used to say that God is therefore 250 times as merciful as God is judging, four generations of judgment versus a thousand generations of blessing.

Or look at the 3rd commandment. God says, Rest one day a week. In fact, Sabbath rest is really the symbol of this covenant. It is counter-intuitive in our country to stop being productive. Guilty as charged: on my day off, I have a list. I am doing, rather than being. When I am successful at Sabbath time, I find myself in nature, or playing guitar, or reading just for fun.

My meditation time for 20 minutes is a mini-Sabbath, because it is non-productive. I do not have a prayer list; I am not looking at Scripture; I am not reading somebody's thoughts about God. In that meditation time, I am resting in God's care. Sometimes I have to fight the feeling that it doesn't feel productive. And that is exactly the point of Sabbath rest. It really is trust in God that my list will get done; that God will direct this congregation; that God is moving us into God's future, and it isn't about me making it happen. Our efforts to control people and events can be an idol.

The rest of the commandments, numbers 4-10, have to do with creating the beloved community that God desires. Honor your father and mother, and those in authority. Don't murder, in fact, find ways to care for your neighbor. How do these commandments help us with current issues?

Some of us went up to Concordia University to hear Dr. Leo Sanchez speak on immigration this past week. Dr. Sanchez pointed out that we enter the debate over

immigration at different points. Some of us enter from the standpoint of the law, and we might take our cue from the 4th commandment: Honor your father and your mother. Luther expands this to mean all in authority. We are to fear and love God, so that we neither despise nor anger our parents and others in authority, but instead honor, serve, obey, love, and respect them.

The commandment to honor parents also includes those in authority over us. So someone might say, We are a nation of laws, and those laws need to be respected when it comes to coming into this country illegally.

But in the 5th commandment, You shall not murder, Luther says, We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life's needs. Someone might say, We are to love our neighbors, and our neighbors are those who have come across our borders. Even while honoring the Ten Commandments, we can come out at different places in terms of how to live this out.

Earlier I said that we can look at the Ten Commandments as constraints confining our behavior, or as gracious boundaries that give life to our relationships. There is a professor at Luther Seminary who suggests that when we have been in bondage to something, we see boundaries as a gift. If we have been enslaved to drugs or alcohol or another addiction, we will see limits as freeing. And conversely if we haven't been enslaved to something, we might simply see the commandments as restrictions.

The professor brought this up in an Old Testament class one day, and a student raised his hand and said, That's one point for you, professor. He shared that he had a very difficult upbringing, and was a recovering alcoholic who had gotten in trouble with the law because of his drinking. The judge he appeared before said, I could put you in prison for a while, but I'm not going to do that. I'm going to require that you enter a rehabilitation program that will have strict boundaries.

Augsburg College, one of our Lutheran schools, had a program called Step Up, for students in recovery. He entered this strict program while in college, and those rules he had to follow were his road to freedom. Those rules he followed set him free. Those rules he lived by kept him out of bondage. God says, I offer you this

covenant because I created you, I love you, and I know what brings life and joy and justice and wholeness in relationships.

Let us pray. God of the promise, your desire is to bring us out of slavery, and to have us walk within the boundaries of your love. Help us to follow your ways in all our relationships, so that we discover the freedom of life in you. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.