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Ten Words for Free People

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Exodus 19:1-6; 20:1-17

[The Israelites Reach Mount Sinai]

On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. ² They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. ³ Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: ⁴ You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶ but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.”

[The Ten Commandments]

20 *Then God spoke all these words:*

² *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³ you shall have no other gods before me.*

⁴ *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.*

⁵ *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 the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

⁷ *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.*

⁸ *Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰ But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.*

¹² *Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.*

¹³ *You shall not murder.*

¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵ You shall not steal.

¹⁶ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷ You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

By way of introduction to this series on the Ten Commandments, I've a video clip to show, then I have three questions to consider. The video clip is from an old late-night show called *The Colbert Report* – an interview of a congressman who has been out of office more than ten years. I'm not sharing his name or state – so if you know, please don't. My point isn't to poke fun at him, but rather to see in him a near-perfect example of how Empire and scripture so often intersect. [Video Clip](#)

Question One: What are the other seven commandments? Our trusty congressman gave us three. (Extra points if you know where they go in order.) You'll notice I massaged the language a bit. Black preaching has a saying: *If you ain't heard something and you ain't seen something, you ain't got nothing.* This massaged language is based on thirty years of seeing and hearing the Ten Words used abusively in church.

1. **I AM** the Lord your God, who brought you out of slavery. Don't make other **beings** into gods.
2. Don't make **things** into gods.
3. Don't use my name for anything but me – I AM.
4. Keep the Sabbath.
5. Respect the elders.
6. Don't murder.
7. Don't do adultery.
8. Don't steal.
9. Don't lie.
10. Don't covet your neighbor's house or spouse.

The Ten Commandments are also called *Decalogue*. Do you know the word “Decalogue”? *Deca-* means “ten”; *logue* means “words.” Ten words. For too many people – people like our friend the congressman and many of our brothers and sisters INSIDE church – *Ten Commandments* is a billboard. Something posted and large enough to hide behind, but never read. Never carved into our hearts and minds.

But not for the people of God. They are God's gift for life as free people. Where they hang is irrelevant, if they do not hang on the walls of our life together; if they are not *written on our hearts*, as the Apostle Paul said. The Ten Words are the words of life for free people.

Question Two: If the Ten Words are not for decorating public buildings, what are they for? Spoiling your fun? In 1992 Mariah was 18 months old and about to poke her tiny fingers into an electric outlet. One of my campus ministry students – now a chemistry

professor at Mississippi State – said, *"Oh, it's fine. She'll get a little buzz and it will teach her not to do it again."*

"Or, she will die," I responded – and then bought lots of these outlet covers. Dr. Gwaltney has two sons, both of whom, thankfully, have lived to graduate high school. I suspect their mom bought these outlet covers for their house too. Because good parents don't bring babies home from the hospital, set them down, and turn them loose, do they? That isn't freedom. That's neglect.

The Lord our God did not bring the Hebrews out of Egypt, out of that houseful of horror and trauma and bondage of slavery, to leave them to fend for themselves in the wilderness of their own memories, terrors, cravings and imagination. What are the Ten Words for? For knowing how to live as free people. They are good news: from God, to the people of God and – even more so – to their neighbors.

I AM is starting over – AGAIN. The garden. The flood. Abraham. Now Moses. And these Hebrews. A new kingdom unlike any that the living or their ancestors have ever known. Unlike, that is, the *empires* of this world. Pharaoh embodies, in this section of scripture, the political and economic system built from an infrastructure of false scarcity.

The allegiance, the faith, demanded by empire and gladly kept by citizens and slaves is to the trinity of wisdom, wealth, and power. Empire wisdom, Empire wealth, Empire power – that elusive tease of some future trickle-down effect: trust the empire, enrich and empower the empire, and you too will prosper. The devil's lie from Eden, to the desert, to here and now.

I AM the Lord your God who brought you out of THAT house, the scripture says. You belong to me and to my kingdom: a kingdom with an infrastructure of abundance; a kingdom that keeps faith in the faithfulness of I AM, faith that the One who set you free means to keep you free as well.

What does Pharaoh (Empire) value? Wisdom, Wealth, Power. What does God who brought us out to set and keep us free value? Faith. Justice. The common good. Again, the Ten Words are not just good news for us only. They are good news for our neighbors: I'll never steal your wife or husband; I don't want your house or land or goats; I won't steal your food or tell lies about you and your family. Those are empire ways, and we've had enough of empire to last ten thousand lifetimes.

We choose freedom. Freedom inside a very, very big fence built not to spoil our fun but to keep us ALL safe – us and our neighbors – whom God also loves like a good parent loves her children; where God is trustworthy – trustworthy to provide all we need to live. Manna, remember? Bread from heaven. Only that's not what the word *manna* means, do you remember? *Manna* means *"what is it?"*

Martin Luther wrote (this is Martin Luther the German Lutheran from 500 years ago, not Martin Luther King Jr. the Georgia Baptist from 50 years ago) that whoever has the Decalogue has the whole Bible. Everything else is the story of God raising the people of

God to be free. They fail. Repeatedly. Empire is a tricky devil and so very, very, very seductive.

Which brings us to the **third and final question**: Why do we need the Ten Words at all? The answer is in your homework – all forty-seven chapters of it (Genesis 37 through Exodus 20) – which I know you have read, so I can blow through it quickly.

Once upon a time, long before the time of Moses, the Hebrews were free. But they were also few. There was Jacob, his four baby mamas and his thirteen kids, all living in Canaan. Of his twelve boys, Joseph was his favorite. So much so that Jacob dressed him in extra-expensive, fancy, tailor-made clothes, while the other boys worked out of a pile of Target t-shirts and shorts. As you would expect, Joseph was a terrible brat. He'd gather his brothers and tell them about his dreams in which he was a king and they were all his servants, bowing down to him and obeying his every command.

Naturally, being brothers – and this being the Bible – they decided to kill him. As they contemplated his means of death, a better offer came along. They sold him, naked, to slave traders. They pocketed the money, dipped his fancy pants in goat's blood and told their father his precious Joseph had been eaten by a beast. One tale says that Jacob went blind from weeping over Joseph all those years. After many adventures, Joseph ends up in Egypt – not as king, but almost. He's right-hand man to the Pharaoh, in charge of food security for the entire Egyptian Empire.

"Pharaoh" is the Bible's first archetype of Empire. All the wealth and power necessary to thrive, Pharaoh already has. Only he doesn't believe it. No matter how rich he gets, he dreams of starving to death; he dreams of scarcity. He needs more. Joseph helps him make a plan to get more. With Joseph's help, Pharaoh – Empire, remember – buys, stores, and hoards food over years and years until he possesses a food monopoly for the entire region, including Canaan. Food = power. Always. The Hebrews end up coming to Egypt to buy food.

Joseph is still a jerk to his brothers, like when you know you are going to start being good (go on a diet or stop drinking, etc.) on Monday – so what do you do all weekend? How do you act on the weekend? That's Joseph in Genesis chapters 42, 43, 44 and 45. He's horrible, because he knows that in chapter 50 he's going to forgive them for everything they did. But not yet. So in chapter 50, Joseph acts right to his brothers. The family is restored.

But politically, socially, economically, biblically, the deed is done, isn't it? The Hebrews are in Egypt now, under the thumb of the Pharaoh. And for the next 400 years, the Hebrews do what? They have babies. Thousands and thousands of babies. All the while, the Pharaoh's dreams of scarcity also increase. He strangles the people by starving them, so that all the people are forced to use all their money to buy food. When their money runs out, Pharaoh says, *Okay. You can pay with your livestock*. When the money and livestock are gone, they have only one asset left: their land. What choice do

they have? They pay for food with their land. They sell themselves into slavery in order to eat.

Joseph is long dead – see Exodus, chapter 1. Memories are always short (for everyone in the scriptures, except the prophets), and the Pharaoh is richer than ever, but no less anxious; and he is no longer driven by greed, but rather by fear. By fear of the very people he owns. Why? Because there are too many of them. The twenty members of Jacob's family have become a population of thousands. *The age of anxiety*, Dr. Brueggemann calls it. Where politics and economics no longer make sense because they aren't driven by policy or economics at all, but rather by anxiety and fear. Anxiety at the top of the Empire always means misery and suffering at the bottom.

The Hebrew workers are literally being tortured – treated as machines, disregarded as human beings, serving only to increase profits for the Pharaoh, to pacify the anxiety of the Empire. It's a circular, impossible strategy that inevitably explodes in violence. The workers cry out. The Empire cracks down harder. They cry to the heavens – and God hears. Finally. After so, so long. It's tempting to think God wasn't listening. But eighty years earlier, what happened? You remember. A little girl put her baby brother in a basket in a river. God planted a Hebrew asset in the Pharaoh's own house. He was long gone from the Pharaoh's house when God sent him back.

God's purposes ALWAYS require human agency. And Moses gets them out. God leads him and he leads them from Egypt to the wilderness up to Mt. Sinai. They are not as happy as you might think – it is the Bible after all; someone's always fussing. Their bodies may be free from making bricks, but freedom of the heart and mind is a much longer journey. They sold themselves into Egypt, remember. And all they know is slavery.

Being free isn't the same as knowing how to live free. Free from anxiety; free from greed; free from the never-ending craving for certitude. And you don't have to be the Pharaoh to crave certitude, to want to know for sure what tomorrow will bring. It's a long, long, long way from slavery to freedom. A long, long education, learning to live free.

Ten Words, the scriptures offer to the ones who believe we belong to God, beginning with *I AM the God who brought you out of Empire, the God who will keep bringing you out day after day after day, out of a world that will enslave you to anxiety and fear and promises it can never keep. You belong to me, and if you will let yourself belong to me, let my words guide you, my words can be all the words you ever need – and more than you can ever fully know.*

May this be a word of the Lord for today.