

October 8, 2017

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Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

## Top Ten

In just a couple of months movie critics will start to put together top ten lists, “Ten Best Movies of 2017.” I love reading those lists, I’ll even copy them down, refer to them later, films I want to see, the best in entertainment. Top ten lists aren’t limited to movies, of course. Many here may have watched a certain long-running late night show led by a wry comedian known for his top ten lists, a recurring segment of the Late Show with David Letterman. Dave had some great top tens. While looking into them, while researching for this sermon, on the internet I even found a top ten list of his top ten lists.

We have a top ten list in the Bible, too. We hear it today in the Old Testament reading, God’s top ten: the Ten Commandments. This when God give’s his top ten, this is the context for where God speaks that list, and the people hear it, are told to copy it down and refer to it later: God gave the Ten Commandments, God gave the law, in the wilderness, after the Exodus.

We’ve been working our way through the book of Exodus this fall. You’ll recall that the book begins in Egypt, where God’s people, Israel, was in misery. The children of Israel were slaves in Egypt, dying, being killed, and then God appeared to Moses in a burning bush. God told Moses, “I have heard their cries, I have heard their misery.” God told Moses to lead the people out of that, “Lead them out of Egypt, I’ll be there with you,” God said. And Moses went, and the people exited. The children of Israel left a place of death, walked away from slavery, through water, sang and danced into a new land of freedom.

But then, in that new land, the people got hungry, and thirsty. They didn’t really know where they were going. They didn’t know what to do. They didn’t know how to live in freedom. God heard that too, and God provided food, and water, and the law.

That’s where we are in the story today, in Exodus, after the Exodus, in the wilderness at the foot of Mt. Sinai, when and where God gives the law. That’s the context for God’s top ten, and that’s where the comparison ends, because this Bible reading is really not that entertaining. There’s some pyrotechnics at the end, but this list of do’s and don’ts is not nearly as fun as the readings before it: the stories of seas parting, and manna falling, and water gushing from a rocky font. In contrast, a list of laws is boring. Law is like that, despite its depiction in movies. Talking about laws can be a real downer.

Martin Luther, who had been planning on becoming a lawyer before he entered a monastery, understood this about the law in a deeply personal way—maybe not the boring part, but the way the law bores into ones’ soul. For Luther, the law was one of two great themes of the Bible, the two themes being law and gospel. Contrary to what some people think, Luther did not mean that these two themes are synonymous with or sequestered to the two testaments of the Bible, Old and New. That is, even though the Old Testament is replete with laws and the New Testament begins with gospels, both testaments have both. That’s because when Luther talks about the Bible containing law, he doesn’t mean a list of do’s and don’ts. (Though you can find those in the gospels, too.) What Luther means about the Bible, the whole Bible, containing law, is that it shows humanity’s gaping need, it reveals how we do not live whole and healthy lives, and that we prevent others from being whole and healthy, too, others with whom we share this earth, and the earth itself, too. It is, we are, we know brokenness, broken bodies, broken hearts, a broken world. It’s the law that shows us that. Or to put it in another way, to put it as Luther puts it: the law shows sin.

That is not what God wants for us and the good world God made. God wants us, God wants all, to flourish. God has fashioned us for it, and, even further, made us free to do so. “For freedom Christ has set us free.” (Gal. 5:1) This is good news, this is gospel. “If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:36) Truly free, free in what you do, free in deed.

This is in the law, too. This is what the Ten Commandments are all about: freedom. The “you shall nots” can make the list sound negative, like so many restrictions, but it’s a limited understanding that defines freedom as merely the absence of restriction. There is so much more to freedom. We are not just free from, we are free for. The Ten commandments get this, they describe factors for productivity, give protections for peace, establish a framework for flourishing. Luther gets this in the Catechism, as he explains the commandments by spelling out their positive implications. God’s law is a guideline on how to live as free people. God’s Top Ten, God’s ten best, help us live at our best. We do this by not killing, or stealing, or lying, or cheating, or coveting. We do this by taking care of our elders. We do this by taking time for rest. We do this by honoring God’s day and God’s name. Above all we do this by knowing who is God, the one who brought you out of the land of Egypt.

It’s been said that at the Red Sea, God took Israel out of Egypt; and at Sinai, God took Egypt out of Israel. When the people passed through the Red Sea’s watery walls, God said, “You are in a new place now. Your enslavement is a thing of the past.” And then at the holy mountain of Sinai, God said, “Here’s how you keep that bondage in the past. Here’s how to live, truly free.”

As we’ve been working our through the book of Exodus this fall, for the Children’s sermon we’ve been acting out its wonderful stories. I didn’t know how I would do that this week, with a list of laws. So I was glad that Dee asked to lead the children’s message, together with the prelude, Prayer for Peace, so timely after the violent, tragic, heart-breaking events of this past week, our new worst mass shooting. It’s awful, on top of everything else, on top of hurricane after hurricane, on top of violence received and violence perpetuated, on top of vineyards abused and sons killed, dark parables, true tales of malevolence and murder and misery.

The law is not entertaining, but the law can be life. I heard this this week from comedians, late night hosts. Maybe you heard them too, if you didn’t, look them up online and listen to them, listen to how they started their shows with a call do something. We can do something about gun violence. The laws we have now show us our sin. No human made law will be perfect, but we can do better, we can press on toward the goal, we can do something about this list: Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook, San Bernadino, Orlando, Las Vegas.

We can do more, God has made us free to do so.