

God's Ten-Point Plan for Peace

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, October 4, 2020.

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

After the Israelites had followed Moses out of the land of Egypt, out of the bonds of slavery, they came to Mount Sinai, which is also known as Mount Horeb, and they camped at the base of the mountain. About three months had passed since they had escaped from Egypt. The time had finally come for the Israelites to meet their God. The dramatic scene is described in Exodus at the end of chapter 19:

“On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently.”

It was an awesome spectacle – the kind filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille would bring to the big screen in his epic motion picture, “The Ten Commandments.” The movie won the Academy Award for Best Visual Effects in 1956. Imagine what the special effects wizards at Industrial Light and Magic could do with that scene today!

There they were, Moses and the Israelites, standing at the base of Mount Sinai, witnessing what sounds an awful lot like a volcanic eruption, when out of the thunder and lightning, out of the fire and smoke, comes the voice of God: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” This is the God who liberated them from bondage. This is the God who gave them their freedom. And this is the God who would give them laws to live by, beginning with the Ten Commandments.

The first four commandments have to do with the Israelites’ relationship, and our relationship, to God. “You shall have no other gods before me.” We owe God our ultimate allegiance; we are not to follow other gods or worship them. “You shall not make for yourself an idol . . . [or] bow down to them or worship them.” We dare not try to domesticate or trivialize God, as if God could somehow be contained in a figure of wood or stone. “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.” We owe God our complete respect. “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.” We must follow God’s example of keeping sabbath, taking a day off each week for rest and rejuvenation.

The remaining six commandments have to do with our relations with one another, how we treat one another. One positive command – honor your father and mother – is followed by five prohibitions against murder, adultery, stealing, bearing false witness, and coveting a neighbor’s property. These six commandments affirm that human life is precious and must not be violated. Human beings are worthy of honor and respect and must not be abused or exploited.

It occurred to me this week that one could think of the Ten Commandments as “God’s Ten-Point Plan for Peace.” They offer us the basis for finding peace with God and finding peace with one another. They make human community possible.

Last year the Presbyterian Women’s Bible study, *Love Carved in Stone*, offered a fresh look at the Ten Commandments, or what author Eugenia Anne Gamble called the “Ten Words.” Gamble wrote: “the powerful creative force of God’s speech to the people in the wilderness brings a new kind of community into being. This new community is an alternative to the dominant culture of violence, privilege, and isolation that they have known.”

“That was true in the wilderness and it is true for us now,” she continued. “God both addresses us personally in these words and creates with them a new community of us. The Ten Words are an invitation into a passionate life with God and with each other that is fundamentally different from the lives we have led heretofore. Each of the Ten Words offers a salve, a healing balm, for a core wound in the human experience. They provide boundaries within which we can live in freedom and peace.”

When the Ten Commandments are violated, particularly when one or more of the last six are violated, human community is disrupted, peace is broken. This is true of human communities at all levels: in families, congregations, neighborhoods, nations, and the world.

The Ten Commandments are central to both the Jewish and Christian traditions. They are fundamental to Judeo-Christian ethics. Even people who haven’t grown up Jewish or Christian have heard of the Ten Commandments and can name a few of them.

Of course, naming the Ten Commandments is one thing. Following them is quite another. I imagine that we all do pretty well observing most of them. As far as I know, there aren’t any murderers, adulterers, or thieves among us. Most of us would never dream of perjuring ourselves in a court of law. We do our best to honor our parents. We worship one God and try to steer clear of false idols.

We may have a little more trouble observing the commandment not to covet our neighbor’s house or other property, given the rampant materialism of our culture. And some of us have a lot of difficulty obeying the commandment to not misuse God’s name, particularly when we’re feeling angry and frustrated. Still, we know we shouldn’t.

The one commandment most of us seem to have forgotten is the fourth commandment about keeping the Sabbath -- a day set apart from the rest of the week for rest and renewal. In our fast-paced, achievement-oriented culture, there seems to be no room for sabbath, no rest for the weary. We are busy people, always on the go. (Even in retirement, some people remark that they are busier than they were when they had a full-time job.) We have things to do, places to go, people to see. We go from one activity to the next . . . to the next . . . with hardly a moment in between to catch our breath. We are overscheduled, overworked, and overwhelmed.

The Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, makes the following observation: "To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too

many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence."

We cannot do it all! We do violence to ourselves when we work all the time and don't set aside sabbath time in our lives for rest and renewal. Even God rested on the seventh day after creating the heavens and the earth. Do we think we can somehow outdo God by working seven days a week?

Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor notes that "sabbath is a gift, but we are so reluctant to accept it, that God had to make it a command." That's right! Sabbath keeping is not merely a suggestion from God. It is a commandment from God, right up there with "thou shall not murder" and "thou shall not steal." If only we took it as seriously! "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy."

Sabbath is a gift. Thank God for it! "On the Sabbath," John Calvin says, "we cease our work so God can do God's work in us." "Sabbath keeping is a way of living out our belief that we are not our own; that we belong to God."

To live the gift of the Sabbath is to engage in simple, time hallowing acts:

- seeking rest from daily occupation;
- sharing with others in worship;
- taking time with God's word;
- engaging in acts of compassion;
- enjoying activities that refresh and renew the spirit.

Sabbath is a day set aside from the rest of the week when we can finally catch our breath, take time out from our busy, hectic lives, and give thanks and praise to God for the gift of life, for the love of family and friends, and for the beauty of God's Creation all around us.

Some of us have great difficulty carving out time in our lives for sabbath rest and renewal – myself included. And yet, deep down in the depths of our souls it is something we yearn for. It is something we know we need to replenish our spirits, to restore our souls.

Sabbath keeping is a form of personal peacemaking. It is one way we have of seeking peace within our hearts, of centering ourselves. It is a practice that can help give us peace of mind. When we are stressed out and exhausted from our busy, hectic lives, it is especially difficult to be a force for peace in the world. But when we are able to slow down and come to a place of peace within ourselves, then we have the inner resources to be more effective peacemakers out in the world. Remembering the sabbath and keeping it holy can help us find that inner peace. May we do so. Amen.