

SERMON: 2017/10/08 - BTR

[Invite children to sit on the floor at the front.]

Two months after their incredible escape from Egypt, the Hebrews arrived at the foot of great, tall mountain called "Horeb," (later renamed "Sinai"). And they set up camp. They put up their tents, put some water on the boil (for a cup of tea, obviously!), and began to enjoy a little rest in the big shadow that was being cast onto the desert floor: "Ahhh. This is nice. I think I'll just close my eyes for a minute or two."

[Blow loudly on a stadium horn.]

Suddenly, there was a terrific trumpet blast!

And a massive, dark cloud appeared around the summit, and from it they saw flashes of lightning and felt the ground beneath them shake: "Woah! Careful!"

Then, they heard a voice speaking, and it said: "I am the LORD, (the one who rescued you from slavery). Don't ever forget this: if you are going to be a godly people - a "holy" people, remembering that fact should be your first rule-of-life.

And the second is this: don't make new things to worship.

Three: don't use my name *unless* you're talking to Me or about Me.

Four: on the seventh day of the week, have a rest!

Five: Listen and obey your mums and dads.

Six: Don't commit murder.

Seven: "sexy stuff" is for married people only.

Eight: Don't steal.

Nine: Don't tell lies.

Ten: Don't be jealous about what others have; focus on the blessings you already enjoy.

And that was it.

God added lots of other rules later, but those were His top ten.

And what do you think?

Does it sound easy to obey God? (To keep all of those "commandments.")

[Let the children answer.]

Some sound quite extreme: I'm pretty sure I can avoid murdering anyone.

But what about not being jealous?

I've probably broken that a few times just this morning.

So, should I give up?

Or should I try even harder, and ask for the Holy Spirit's help?

Let's pray: Father in Heaven, we thank you for Your concern about us, for Your

desire to see order and peace in our lives. Help us to listen to Your guidance, in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to depart]

I'd like to begin with a quote from one of my very favourite philosophers, Thomas Hobbes - an Englishman, naturally; and it goes like this: '[If every man does what he wills, then] nothing can be unjust. ...notions of right and wrong... have...no place. ...[and there would be n]o arts; no letters; no society; and...worst of all, continual fear'.^[n.1]

The situation, then, where 'every man does what he wills' is anarchy - one of savagery.

So, what's the solution? Boundaries. A shared set of "dos" and "don'ts" that can order our affairs - our interactions with one another.

And *this* is what the Ten Commandments provide: structure.

God was reaching down into the mess of human history to establish an enclave of calm, a bubble of civilization - and this was an extraordinary act of mercy, because this era in which the events of *Exodus* were transpiring was a very primitive one:

Law-systems were only just emerging. They depend on literacy, you see, on being able to write (down) a sophisticated language, and that had only just emerged.

And so what He was doing was radical. Cutting-edge. He was personally driving progress forward.

Is that how you see these laws?

And yet look at them (again): they are commonsensical, aren't they? The sorts of rules that any *rational* man or woman would agree to, no?

I think that they are. Consider this scenario - and for it I'm indebted to the scholar, John Rawls, whose book *A Theory of Justice* I read when I was 19 [hold book up], and though my own views have changed a lot since then, this was a deeply challenging read that helped "lift my gaze" (somewhat) from pure navel-gazing, as a privileged student.

Anyway, picture this: the *first* generation of what we would regard as humans meeting each other for the *first* time in a clearing in a primeval jungle. Tool-makers all of them. Puzzle-solvers. Agile, athletic, Machiavellian survivalists. Or survivors from a shipwreck who were washed up on the opposite shores of some desert island and who thought they were all alone in the world, but now

bump into one another at the *only* fruit-bush to be found. What sort of restrictions would they agree to impose on themselves? What limitations would they accept on their conduct? [n.2]

They'd probably come up with a list like these [gesture to the Bible].

But what's going to keep us abiding by them? What's going to stop me "trying my luck" once in a while? - when the camera is off, when my browser is switched to 'private mode' and the browsing history is so easily deleted. Hm?

If you look into your heart, you know that there's some disturbing darkness there. See it - like a mischievous, little gremlin; squatting on your soul, a sly twinkle in his eye - waiting for you to drop your guard.

What then?

Who's going to keep him - me! You. - "in check"?

No, what's needed is more than *good* rules. What's needed is someone to *enforce* them: a power; an *authority*. And so God "puts on a show." Boom! Molten magma spewed from the mountain's summit. Hot clouds of ash and dust shot like from a cannon into the sky, turning the day into night. And out of the darkness above them they heard something speaking - like thunder: painfully loud.

Imagine you'd been there. Yeah, that would do it wouldn't it? [Pause.]

Do you remember the second Gulf War?

It was 2003. Believing, claiming - or whatever, that Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq was a threat to the West, George "Dubya" Bush and his British allies launched a massive air-assault on Baghdad, the capital:

In just two days, 800 cruise-missiles slammed into 'government compounds, ministries, and presidential palaces...reduc[ing them] to rubble.' [n.3] The "pummelling" was relentless, deafening; all of the city seemed to be ablaze [n.4]. And this, we were told, was "shock and awe." A new (military) tactic developed in the nineties, which aimed, explained its progenitor, to 'so overload the perception, knowledge and understanding of [the] adversary that there w[ould] be no choice [for them] except to..behave [and do what we] want them to' [n.5].

And *that* was the point of the terrifying "theatrics" at Sinai.

And it worked!

The people *stopped* what they were doing and, we hear, 'trembled', saying "We will listen" [see: Ex. 20:18-19].

But this is something that fewer and fewer people are willing to do now. To listen; to obey; to *submit*. More and more we *post-moderns* reject being told what to do by *external* voices. We desire to see every hierarchy flattened, and imagine ourselves - each one of us - as philosopher-kings, capable and able of unilaterally deciding what's best, what's right, what's true.

And maybe you're like that?

And yet the "thrust" of traditional religion is that '[t]o solve our problems of injustice, greed, and loneliness, we need to accept and even embrace the authority of realities that stand *outside* our human consciousness. ...[that]...the most viable solutions to our present problems may lie in the most unexpected places, perhaps even in those places deemed no longer fashionable by Western secular intellectuals.' [n.6] [Wave Bible.]

To have, in other words, humility.

Like the Hebrews in this episode! They were so impressed, so *intimidated*, by God's supernatural "muscle-flexing" - by the terrifying display of fire in front of them, that they stood 'at a distance' to hear the Ten Commandments [Ex. 20:18], which were being spoken aloud to them by the Lord. [Pause.]

Moses, however, despite the threat to his life of what was going on, stepped forward, which is interesting. Why?

Why isn't he more afraid of being fried to a crisp?

Because he's not just *willing* to consider holiness, to contemplate it from *afar* (as some abstract good): he's eager and excited to *possess* it!

And that's how we should feel too.

After all, hasn't Jesus won you by his sacrifice? Yes. And now He calls us to 'take up' a life of obedience [Mt. 16:24; Lk. 8:23]: a life of "producing fruit" as He put it in today's gospel reading (from *Matthew* 21). And that means a life of 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control' [Gal. 5:22-23], which are the very things that *He* exhibited!

To conform ourselves, then, to His rules, is to become like Him: to become less *creaturely* and to gain a something of our *Creator's* unique Heavenly dignity.

Let's take a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. *Leviathan* (1651), London, 78, available at <https://socserv2.socsci.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/hobbes/Leviathan.pdf> (accessed October 6, 2017).
2. Available at <http://www.univpgri-palembang.ac.id/perpus-fkip/Perpustakaan/American%20Phylosophy/John%20Rawls%20-%20A%20Theory%20of%20Justice~%20Revised%20Edition.pdf> (accessed October 6, 2017).
3. Carlisle, Rodney P. (2007), *Iraq War*, Updated Edition, New York, N. Y.: Facts On File, Inc., 3.
4. Kusnetz, Marc (2003), *Operation Iraqi Freedom: The Inside Story*, Kansas City, M. I.: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 47.
5. Young, Marilyn B. (2009), 'Bombing Civilians from the Twentieth to the Twenty-first Centuries', in Tanaka, Yuki & Young, Marilyn, B. (Eds.), *Bombing Civilians: A Twentieth-Century History*, New York, N. Y.: The New Press, pp. 154-174, 171.
6. Peters, James R. (2009), *The Logic of the Heart*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Baker Academic, 239.