

“Free to Trust God” based on Exodus 20:1-17 and John 2:13-22

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on March 3, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

About two decades ago, the New England Patriots and Carolina Panthers played in the Super Bowl. A group of friends and I were in Puerto Rico for the game. And so, we called a cab to go to a sports bar to watch and the driver asked where we were from. Just to make things easy, they all said Philadelphia, and I said New York.

They were from West Chester which is outside of Philly, and I was from Upstate New York. But it was easier to just say Philadelphia and New York, but the cab driver’s demeanor suddenly changed. He became oddly respectful and deferential even. Somehow in our talking, my last name came up and he asked, “Are you Italian?” Again, for ease, I said, “Yeah, my family is from there.”

Then it all clicked for him. He knew our origins and my last name. He expressed right then that his policy was that he did not mean to disrespect anyone with connections. Perhaps he’d seen too many movies or maybe he actually had a bad experience at some point. He thought then that we had mafia connections. I assure you that this is certainly not the case. He even tried to refuse payment, which was very strange.

I tell this story because throughout much of our human history so much of our identities have been tied to our place and our name – where we are from or live, and our family. This was very much the case in the ancient world where gods and tribes defined who a person was and the culture by which they were governed. A temple and the carved deity inside belonged to a city representing it, and the people of that city belonged to that deity, representing the god.

Often in warfare, a temple would be raided, and we have records of this in cuneiform tablets. They would steal the god’s stature but they would not destroy it. In part because it might be given back with a ransom paid, thus restoring the city and its people but only after extracting something from the city. Or if the victor wished to be a conqueror and take over the city as its own, the god would likely be restored to the temple in an elaborate ceremony, proclaiming that their victory was ordained with the city’s god’s help. And so, then the identity of the conquered people, would be fused or merged to that of their conquerors.

In our text today, the Israelites have been freed from Egypt by their God. They have no homeland. Their people have no true homeland identity. Yes, we know the land promised to Abraham when he left the Mesopotamian city of Ur, one of the earliest civilizations in human history in what is now Iraq, and he journeyed to the land God gave him, known as Canaan. But Abraham’s descendants didn’t stay there very long. Jacob was his great grandson and his family was the one that went to Egypt. They didn’t have a foundation. He went to escape famine and ended up enslaved by the empire.

God heard their cries and used Moses to lead them out of Egypt, and now there they were at this point, a people in the wilderness with no real identity of their own. They had no home. No idol to restore. They were free from Egypt, yes. But for what?

And so, we find in this text God restoring their identity. They need no idol, for the God who brought them out of Egypt, recognizes no other gods, literally, “before my face.” They need no city, because this God is the Creator, not of one people, but of all that exists. All humanity bears this God’s image.

And now, these people will be set apart from the world, or Holy, they are different, because of the way in which they carry the name of their God in how they live – what they say and what they do. As a people devoted to the one true God of all the earth and over of all humanity, these commandments show they are a people set apart to love God and love their neighbors. These 10 commandments are like wedding vows, but faithfulness as the story goes on was far out of reach. Loving the true God and loving neighbors, was rarely seen.

In light of this, let's look at the 10 commandments again and hear them with ancient Israelite ears. These come from the Lord, known as Yahweh, who freed them from Egypt, and so, the false gods have been proven powerless – this is the one true God. But just as you had no idol for this God in Egypt you will not have one now. You will not need one. You will not make one – not of a heavenly being, not of an earthly being, and not a being of the seas of chaos. You do not have to bow to anything from these realms because you are made in God's image. You will be protected from the false idols and you will not be made to serve these created things.

The Lord claims then to be “jealous,” or “passionate” might be a better translation even about this command, saying the “twistedness,” or “sin” of the parents will be registered upon the children, to the third and fourth generations. This always sounded harsh to me until a pastor friend pointed out that this span of traditional human generational memory. Herodotus in writing his history would only accept as fact, written or oral testimonies within three to four generations. This is how we tend to keep memories alive – “Remember uncle so-and-so and what he did?” Unless it's written or enshrined, this is about how long things last. God's promise then is that God will only remember this as long as you remember this. But for those who are faithful with covenant love, that will be remembered to the thousandth generation, meaning forever.

But God warns them not to “carry the name of the Lord falsely.” I know, y'all went “what?” when you heard the reading. This is supposed to be “take the name of the Lord in vain.” In English, we know that to take is to carry something away. That's what the Hebrew word here means. We have been conditioned to make a metaphor here that “take” means “speak.” It does, but it also means don't carry God's name and do things God doesn't want you to do.

To take the Lord's name in vain is more than how we use it verbally, but how we carry our association with that name. It's the things we do in the name of “Christian” that are in truth either vain for our own benefit or simply worthless and of no benefit to anyone. What if we carry it as God has asked us to with love and faithfulness, by following these commands?

And so, to these people who have been forced to toil day after day without rest, the Lord also then commands them to “chill out,” and “remember you are loved.” God doesn't need them to always be working to make their world, because God actually created everything, and still rested. So then, everyone – you, your family, your helpers, your animals – must all take a whole day of rest each week and be restored in a world where work never stopped. This feels like our world today.

Then the Lord restores the promise of a land to Abraham but with a condition. The Lord tells them to honor their father and mother. They are where you come from, not the land. The land is given by God and parents are the instrument by which God gives life. In a world where resources could be scarce, preserving elderly wisdom of the faith has a value beyond resources. It becomes then a command from God to honor them.

Then come the commands that are just two words in Hebrew – you will not kill, commit adultery, nor steal. To kill here is a word whose root means the pulverizing of pottery shards. There is no need to think that you or I can be the ultimate judge, using death as a means to take action against others, destroying them or who they are. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus takes us so far as to say that if we insult someone, we violate this command.

You will not commit adultery is a reminder to be faithful to one another as the Lord is faithful. We do not have to give in to lust, our animal instincts of promiscuity to preserve the species. We can be instead committed to one another, without fear. Abraham and Sarah could have used this lesson because out of fear that God would not fulfill the promise made to them, Abram and Sarai devised for him to have a child with Hagar, who was Ishmael.

Similarly, you will not steal reminds the people they do not have to worry about their needs, resorting to taking from others. Instead, we remember the Lord is our provider. Likewise, this is a reminder to be thankful for what you have, and even generous, because if the people are grateful to God and confident in God’s love, then our impulse should not be to take, but to give. Our goal is not to preserve what we have, but to preserve life around us by giving it away to others.

Then the last two are vital to keeping the community intact by prohibiting deceit and desire. You see, when we are asked to give testimony, what’s at stake before the Lord is not honor but truth. In many cultures, it is considered the right and correct thing to do to lie if someone’s honor is at stake. Therefore, for family or friend you would be honorable to give false testimony, but this is a miscarriage of justice. The Lord is stating here clearly, that with the Lord in charge, the truth will be heard, and so, the Israelites are to be a people of truth, because guilt is met with justice and forgiveness too, without regard to honor or shame.

Lastly, we are told not to desire the spouse of a neighbor, nor their house, nor their servant, nor their maid, nor their ox, nor their donkey, nor anything which the neighbor has. It happens to add up to seven things, so it signifies this means everything. We are not to desire anything that belongs to another. That seems hard because how can we control desires? We can’t but we can choose to not feed these desires. This list tells us that we feed our desire for the Lord, not for created things.

In this light, we see that God’s decrees here give the people an identity, but not in the idol that can be stolen, or in the city where they may or may not be. It is instead tied to the God who freed them from bondage. They are free to trust in their God, who also is not bound by anything because the God of the Israelites is the creator of all things and amazingly, as they are on this journey from Egypt to the promised land, this God traveled with them in a tent.

Beloved, these commands are as relevant to us today, as they were for the Israelites then. This is because our God is not bound to one nation, nor is our God bound to any particular space like this building. No, our God shared in our humanity to be one of us. He was not housed in a temple of brick, but he was the true temple in our humanity. He is the meeting place of heaven and earth – the Word became flesh, and literally, “pitched a tent” or “dwelled” among us.

And so, when Jesus says the temple will be destroyed, he speaks of himself as the real temple. Yes, the existing temple will also be destroyed, but he is the true temple, but he will be destroyed by sin and death only to rise again. Jesus is not against the temple, but rather he is showing us what the real temple is. So, then the temple is destroyed, yes, but he rises again.

In this, Jesus reveals that the love of God is not only for the descendants of Israel, but for every nation, just as God promised to Abraham. Beloved, in Christ, the fullness of God dwelled in our life – your life and mine. Christ died for us, rose for us, and ascended to advocate for us. We are redeemed through him.

What's more we are freed and by faith we become a new temple, with the Holy Spirit in and among us. We are a new replica until the time the Lord returns and all things are made new and our God dwells fully among us again when Heaven and earth are one.

In the meantime, being temples of that Spirit, we are empowered to take part in the ministry of reconciliation. We are called to accept God's love and share it with our neighbors and be different than the world. We are to be a force for change to make this world better reflect God's love and generosity in God's eternal life. That is our calling.

Let us go forth from here knowing that in these commands there is no burden. This is merely doing what is right in response to God's love for us, by being the best we can be in reaching out to the world to share this love. Amen.

Exodus 20:1-17

And God spoke all these words saying, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you from out of the land of Egypt, from out of the house of slavery. No other god will exist before me. You shall not make a carved idol for yourself or any form which is in heaven above, which is on the land beneath, or which is in the water beneath the earth. You shall not bow down to them nor be caused to serve them, because I the LORD your God, am a jealous God, registering the twistedness of the fathers upon the children, upon the third, and upon the fourth generations of those hating me, while demonstrating covenantal love to the thousandth generation of those loving me and observing my instruction.

"You shall not carry the name of the Lord your God falsely, because the LORD will not hold as innocent the one who carries his name falsely. Remember the Sabbath day, to set it apart. Six days you shall serve and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. You shall not do any work, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your servant, nor your maid, nor your beast, nor your immigrant which is within your gates. This is because in six days the Lord made the heavens and the land and the sea, and all which is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart.

"Honor your father and your mother in order that your days may be made long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving to you. You will not kill. You will not commit adultery. You will not steal. You will not give false testimony against your neighbor. You will not desire the house of your neighbor. You will not desire the spouse of your neighbor, nor their servant, nor their maid, nor their ox, nor their donkey, nor anything which your neighbor has."