

Take Two Tablets and Call Me

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World Wide Communion

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – October 2, 2011

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

Then God spoke all these words:

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

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.

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.

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work.

Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

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

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or

we will die.’ Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.’

As a child I saw the movie the Ten Commandments, starring the very handsome Charlton Heston, as Moses. With Heston’s striking face, sculpted body, his beautiful beard and a voice that could charm snakes, I subconsciously thought that this is what God looks and sounds like. The truth of the matter is that Moses probably looked more like Tevye, the milkman, in “Fiddler on the Roof”.

Forty years of tramping around in the wilderness with the Israelites was enough to take it out of anybody. When they weren’t raising hell about the food, it was about not running the water. They were always hankering for the flesh pots of Egypt, and making bitter remarks about how they should have stayed at home, and let well enough alone. And as soon as Moses’ back was turned, they started whooping it up around the Golden Calf, and when somebody stood up and said Moses should be thrown out, the motion was seconded by thousands. Any spare time Moses had after taking care of things like that, he spent time trying to persuade God not to wipe them out altogether, as they deserved.

Picture Moses, hunkered down in the cleft of the rock on Mt. Sinai, with God’s hand over him for added protection, he had been allowed to see the Glory itself, passing by, although God let him see only the back part, it was something to hold on to for the rest of his life.

With Moses lingering so long on Mt. Sinai, that some thought he’d settled down and gone into real estate, the people turned to Aaron for leadership. Despite an expensive theological education and all those years at denominational headquarters, he had them dancing around the Golden Calf like a bunch of “So you think you can dance” types. No one knows whether this was Aaron’s way of getting even with his kid brother, Moses, after all those years of eating humble pie, or whether he actually believed with the rest of humankind that a God in the hand is worth two in the bush. It took Moses a while to get things back on track. Eventually the Israelites caught on to what the two tablets were about. Yes there were Ten Words (The Decalogue), but what were they really about? Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, suggests taken in their total, they called for a community rooted in the character of God – who

was calling them to the purity of holiness and justice in the neighbourhood. The God who enunciated this purpose did so with clarity and solemnity, (not Ten Suggestions, or Ten Steps to a Successful Business), and with severe sanctions for those who refused this purpose. God became the source of a well-ordered creation, neither chaotic nor nonsensical. For them, the will of God guaranteed security, dignity, purpose, fruitfulness – all the blessings of the good life.

In our secular culture, many think it is not rational, even plain infantile to believe in any kind of God. Witness the publishing of books by people like Stephen Hawking extolling atheism, claiming that is the way of reason. In addition, these books are the popular, a powerful statement of where our culture is at these days. Walter Brueggemann makes an interesting observation. The tables have been turned upside down. As late as the 18th century it was an over-whelming challenge for writer/philosopher to even think there was no God, and in the 19th century, Charles Darwin kept his theory of evolution a secret, because he was afraid of the backlash from the powerful established church. Now in the twenty-first century, some of the hopefuls in the Republican race for a leader have become the laughing stocks of not only atheists, but also middle of the road Christians. I suspect that they still retain credibility in the deep south of the US. However, elsewhere, and for many others, thoughtful and aware believers see clearly what is happening.

Our old churches are being converted to restaurants, condominiums, art galleries, even in one case, a brewery. Those churches that are still open have about one-tenth the worshipers compared to the “good old days.”

As we give up willingly, or not so willingly, the levers of power and influence we once had, have become in a very real sense exiles in our culture; not in the sense of the Babylonian Captivity of the People of Israel, but in the sense of powerlessness, despair, profound absence (of God) and moral ambiguity. I believe there is still hope. If the church can be honest about our “Good Fridays,” it can speak of and live out the goodness of “homecoming,” just as the Israelites waited and hoped for their homecoming – the Promised Land. We are a people who are waiting and hoping for “homecoming” – the Kingdom of God! The “kingdom” is a time and place in the context of which God’s “impossibilities” for life, joy and wholeness are all made possible and available. In the meantime, the exiles (us) are fixed upon these impossibilities.

In doing so, we exiles refuse the world's verdict on the impossibilities, and, as a result, we pay less heed and allegiance to the world's wearisome and very predictable possibilities – the gods of this culture like security, money, education, and family. Paul Tillich, an influential theologian of the last century, defined God as a person's "ULTIMATE CONCERN. If you want to know what your ultimate concern is – or to put it another way – if you want to know what your idols are, ask yourself these questions: Where is my ultimate loyalty? What do I consistently make time for? In what have I put my trust? Where can I be most deeply threatened?

Most of us do not say to ourselves, "I'm going to worship an idol starting tomorrow morning!" Instead, it happens when we invest our full energy and ultimate alliance in those things – perhaps even good things – that are NOT ultimate. In addition, if we worship idols, instead of God, we will be ultimately disappointed.

Jesus trimmed the commandments down to two: Love God, Love the neighbour. It is as simple and complex as that!

In a few minutes, we will be celebrating World Wide Communion. This is an observance that was started by the Presbyterian Church USA in 1936. It was/is a call for all Christians – of whatever background – and of whatever theological tradition – to recollect that we believe we are one in Christ. Imagine men, women, and children from every language, colour and nationality gathering in fields, straw huts, brick schools, as well as stone cathedrals, large churches, small churches, chapels in hospitals, prisons... In a million different settings, Christians today are praising God and entering into both a physical and spiritual communion with one another as the planet turns under the gaze of the same sun as the one that shone on Moses and all the Israelites since time immemorial, and the gaze of the same stars that God has placed over us all.

Resources:

Bueckner, F. "Aaron" "Moses" *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who*, New York: Harper and Row, 1979

Brueggemann, W. *The Word Militant: Preaching A Dedentering Word*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007

Copenhaver, M.B. "Finding God in all the Wrong Places" *Stillspeaking Devotional*" The United Church of Christ, USA