

# “The Lord Alone”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – October 6 2019*

Rev. John Wahl

Deuteronomy 5:1-21, 6:1-9

What we heard this morning is the second iteration of the Ten Commandments. The first rendition (which is nearly exactly the same as this one) is found in Exodus, chapter 20, after the readings from last week and after Moses leads the people of Israel through the dried waters of the Red Sea and into the wilderness. In Exodus, Moses is called up to the top of Mt. Horeb and is given tablets with the Ten Commandments, while the people at the base of the mountain dance around the golden calf they have built for themselves.

Between that first giving of the Ten Commandments and this one, a span of 40 years has passed. The Israelites have wandered in the wilderness until an entire generation has died off. Their children, the second generation, come to the edge of the Promised Land at the end of the book of Numbers.

That is where we are this week in Deuteronomy, which means “second name” or “word;” we’re on the cusp of the Promised Land and Moses, their great leader, is reviewing for this new generation of Israelites what has come before, saying: *The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today.*

For the Jewish people, this second word is not confined to that second generation of Israelites standing on the edge of the Promised Land. It speaks also to the generations who would live in that land; and to the generations who, in exile and diaspora, were outside of that land again. Each generation is called upon renew the covenant God made with Israel at Horeb.

The Ten Commandments – and what follows – also speaks to us, who are the umpteenth generation removed from the wilderness and Promised Land. We – *all of us here alive today* – are called to enter into and recommit to the relationship with God that was first sealed after the Exodus: when God acted to save Israel and release them from bondage.

This is Moses’ message in this passage from Deuteronomy, and really of all Scripture, which seeks to invite us into the story of God and Israel, and the story of Christ and the church, and to find within the story our own story.

And the particular part of the story that we hear today concerns the giving of the Law as a gift to the people. The Law is not described here as a burden placed on us by a harsh taskmaster, but a gift given to promote a better life with God, and with one another. *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.* There is an established relationship here; one of intimacy (where Israel knows God's name) and of faithfulness (God has freed Israel from slavery).

It is out of that relationship, then, that the commandments are given. God gives them to the people of Israel so that they might know how to live into that relationship; how to be God's people and live as God intends.

All of us know these Ten Commandments, and how – in Jewish tradition – these ten laws were expanded to comprise over 600 laws; many of which seem irrelevant or even ridiculous to us: do not trim your beard, do not eat shellfish, do not wear clothes made of different fabrics at the same time. And we all have known people who expend so much time and effort trying to follow the letter of law that they miss its true spirit: how to better be God's people.

Most of us also know and appreciate how, in the Gospels, Jesus confronts the hypocrisy of those who follow the law at the expense of justice. His ire is directed at those who overlook their neighbors because they don't want to become unclean by breaking the law. Jesus declares, in both word and deed, that it is not unlawful – for example – to heal on the Sabbath, and to eat with those considered to be sinners.

And we remember, as well, that when Jesus was asked the “greatest commandment” question, he responded with words from this morning's second reading: *Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.* This is known as the Shema (after the first word in the verse, Shema, which means “hear”). It is so central to Jewish thinking and practice that observant Jews recite the Shema two times a day: once in the morning, again in the evening.<sup>1</sup> Jesus said that another law is like it, that we should love our neighbors as ourselves.

The Shema is a reminder to the people of Israel who come from and will soon return to a polytheistic world that they did not need a myriad of gods and goddesses to care for them. The one God of Israel was enough.

In today's world, we are also torn between the God of our religious faith and gods of our own making; we trust at one moment in the power of money to fix our problems, then confident that technology or modern medicine will take away our

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<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Schifferdecker from *WorkingPreacher.com*

ills. When these man-made gods fail, perhaps we fall to our knees. So, we – like the Israelites of old – need to be reminded that there truly is one God in whom we are commanded to place our confidence, trust, and faith.

In order to do this effectively, Moses suggests to the people that they love the Lord with all of their heart, soul, and strength; that they speak these words at home and away, at night-time and during the day; to tie them on their hands and bind them to their foreheads; to mount them on their doorposts and gates. Although some hear these instructions literally, Moses is more likely speaking metaphorically: the commandments are to guide what we think (on your heads) and what we do (on your hands). He is urging the people – this next generation who are preparing to enter into the Promised Land – to allow these words to guide every part of life.<sup>2</sup>

This morning, we join with Christians across denominations and throughout the world in celebrating World Communion Sunday. We do so in remembrance of Christ's instructions that when we break the bread and share the cup, we celebrate our unity with him and therefore with one another as sisters and brothers in Christ. Just as there is one God, there is also one Lord who unites us, and one church in which we worship and serve.

Of course, this unity – as one Christian church – is also largely metaphorical. We do not all worship and serve in one place, that is physically not possible. But, even when feasible, we often still choose to stay divided: segmented by tradition, by different practice or belief, and by economic or racial or sometimes even political difference.

This is not to say that we are not involved in cooperative ministry efforts. The Peace and Global Witness offering that we collect today is one example: through these gifts, the church will be able to address disease, poverty, famine, conflict and natural disasters throughout the world in ways that we as individuals, or as a congregation, or even a single denomination cannot. Our partnership with North Church – which, itself, is in partnership with local Lutheran ministries – is another way that we can offer our presence and service in a neighborhood and to a population that is different from ours. And next month, when we pack meals with *Rise Against Hunger*, we will be making a bold and tangible claim of God's love for God's people around the world.

And yet, on World Communion Sunday, it is also important that we remain humble about the state of our Christian unity. The various breads that are on the Lord's Table this morning are symbolic reminders of the many different

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<sup>2</sup> Jon Herrin, "Are We All In?"

expressions of this one faith. It would be great if we could simply load up our table with enough loaves of bread that each of you could take some with you and give it to those who are in need; but we know that's probably not a very effective approach. We don't have a far enough reach as individuals to affect true change.

In coming together at the table this morning, we are at the same time reaching out beyond that which we know or can touch directly; trusting that God alone is able to create what for us is necessary to foster the unity that we proclaim. By gathering in remembrance of Christ at one table, by loving and serving the one God, we are thus able to love one another in a way and to an extent that we never could apart from God. AMEN.