

# “God’s Words”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – October 9, 2022*

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Exodus 19:3-7; 20:1-17

## *Introduction*

After God parted the sea and brought the people out of Egypt and into freedom, God led them, as a pillar of cloud and fire, through the wilderness. When they complained about having no food, God provided them manna from heaven every morning. When they complained about having no water, God showed Moses a rock to hit with his staff and the water flowed. When they were tired, God led them to an oasis where they could camp. We pick up the story in the book of Exodus, chapter 19, where – only a couple of months into their long journey – the Hebrew people have reached the foot of the Mount Sinai.

## *Read Exodus 20:1-17*

Last Sunday, four of us left immediately after worship to travel to Montreat Conference Center in Black Mountain, North Carolina, for our initial Thriving Congregations training. We gathered with members of thirteen other congregations from around the country – city and rural, large and tiny – all seeking to love and serve God and their neighbors. The intended purpose for this two-year program is to thicken relationships within congregations and thin the lines between churches and their surrounding communities.

What we heard is that these are challenging times for Christian churches: amid political divisiveness, demographic changes, and after two and a half years of living through a pandemic, congregational leaders are asking difficult questions about their future. But what we heard just as loudly spoken were inspiring stories; amazing examples of creative and impactful ways churches are acting to bringing healing, joy, and hope to their communities. We came away from our time together with two very specific goals and action items. We will get to those in a few minutes.

Last Sunday, we heard the story of the Red Sea crossing, as God – through the hand of Moses – parted the waters to allow the Hebrew people to safely pass

from bondage in Egypt to freedom in a new land. As we said, this was their moment of salvation, their resurrection to new life as God's people.

Today's narrative lectionary story tells about the giving of the Ten Commandments, also known as God's Law. At the foot of God's holy mountain, the relationship with the chosen people is strengthened with a covenantal bond. "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians," God says, "and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." (19:4) Within this covenantal bond, they will be God's "treasured possession," a "priestly kingdom and a holy nation." (19:6)

But two points are important to remember here. The first is that God does not give the Law as a means to salvation. God does not provide the Commandments as a way to establish relationship with the people. God first establishes relationship and then gives the Law.

That leads to the second point: the Law isn't about "us." God does not provide these Commandments in order to perfect us or even make us better people. The Law is not about us – it is about our neighbors. God gives the Law, not so that you can become more spiritual or have your best life now, but so that – in community – our neighbors might have their best lives now.<sup>1</sup>

The commandments reflect God's profound concern for relationship. For a people that – for many generations – knew nothing more than slavery, the Law outlined how Israel must now relate to God and to one another with fidelity and respect. In Egypt, the Hebrews lived within a system of bullies and victims, people on top and people on the bottom. God understood that – in freedom, without direction – the Hebrews might fall back into these patterns of bondage.

Thus, for example, God commands that the people practice Sabbath. As God's people, they are not meant to only work, to be defined by how much they produce. By resting, and by extending this command to entire households – children, servants, and even animals – we are reminded that it is God who provides, and we can trust that there is enough for all of us.

Functioning communities require the respect of others and what they have: for their lives, their property, and their relational bonds. The Commandments ask us to respect the integrity of those around us: their existence, their values, and their words.<sup>2</sup> These relational bonds are cross-generational and – as the ongoing story of

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<sup>1</sup> Rolf Jacobson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

<sup>2</sup> Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*

God's people will reveal – especially important cross-culturally and when sojourn in one another's lands.

So, the Law outlines how the people must relate to God and one another. In the Hebrew scriptures, it will be filled in with over six-hundred other laws and commands; and then, in the New Testament, will be summarized by Jesus as the greatest commandment: loving God with our whole heart, mind, and soul; and loving our neighbors as ourselves. How does this inform the ways that we will live out our initial learnings from Thriving Congregations?

Our first action item is to engage in relational meetings: one-on-one conversations that seek to thicken the bonds within our congregation; to strengthen the fabric of the bonds we share as participants in the life and ministry of this church. Members of the Thriving Congregations team – those who traveled to Montreat and others who will join in the work here at Valley – will be inviting many of you to engage in these intentional conversations – each lasting about thirty minutes – to deepen the relational bonds within this congregation and, hopefully, learn what we are passionate about, what brought us to Valley, and what brings us back. These are not intended to be structured interviews or therapy sessions, but they also are not merely chit-chats – their purpose is to go deeper in order to grow stronger; to better discern together our future direction as God's people.

Our goal, over the next six months, is to conduct at least eighty of these relational meetings. Some of us may engage in more than one. For some of us, thirty minutes may seem like just enough time to start scratching the surface; for others, it may seem like an eternity. It's okay; we all have different personalities and communication preferences. But, after having spent the last two-and-a-half years at least partially disconnected from one another while watching the world literally change before our eyes, there could not be a better time to re-engage, re-connect with our neighbors in community.

Our second action item is to engage in the practice of observation; taking an intentional, close look at the everyday patterns and routines of our ministries and activities. If we are truly to connect with our community, we need to take notice of the things we do, how we do them, and what they mean. You might notice a member of the Thriving Congregations team sitting with a notebook in the narthex or Fellowship Hall or at bench in a local park. Don't worry, they are not spying on you – they're not thinking, "why did she pick *those* shoes?" – they are simply trying to become better observers. If we believe that God is at work out ahead of us, inside these walls and beyond, then we need to become better lookers and listeners of what is happening around us.

These two practices – relational conversations and observation – are aspects of what is known by researchers as qualitative analysis. They seek to get at the quality of life – in this case, the life of the church and its ministry. It is different from quantitative analysis – data that focuses on numerical trends. Qualitative work, therefore, is about relationships – how we operate in and as communities: those who respect common bonds; the values, traditions, properties and habits that we share together.

For some of these church bonds, there are clear rules. All of us – we tend to think – know where the narthex is, what a deacon does, what a creed is, and to stand up when the little asterisk in the bulletin tells us to. Then again, some of us do not know who is welcome for communion in this church, or what Presbyterians think about infant baptism, or why that big white barn is back there. We may not know where the offering goes or what we'd each like it to do, how decisions are made at session meetings, or which of us were raised in a different denomination, or none at all. We're not sure who is caregiver of a sick relative or checks in on their lonely neighbor each day. We may not realize who in our community has a special needs child or aging parent and needs respite or which teens are struggling to catch up or escape bullying at school.

We seek to create deeper bonds within our congregation because God wants us to live in community; to develop stronger relationships where we know, care for, and support each other more fully. God gives us freedom; God desires that we not be bound to any person or system that would oppress us. But, God also knows that in order that set and maintain healthy boundaries, we need to understand who one another are; we need to do the qualitative work that will reveal and help strengthen common bonds.

And, as we strengthen those bonds – with God and each other – we will, at the same time, thin the dividing line between our congregation and the community around us. We trust that God – who lifts us up on eagles' wings and brings us to Godself – will provide all that we need; even if, and when, we do not yet fully know what are looking for. Thanks be to God. Amen.