

How Burdensome is God's Scarf?

You may remember that three weeks ago the title of my sermon was “How Wide is God's Scarf?” I was talking about God's covenant with Noah—specifically, God's promise to never again destroy the world with a flood. That covenant, we saw, was “infinitely wide,” in the sense that it embraced not just Noah and his immediate family, but the whole earth, and every living creature on it. And it was entirely God's unilateral initiative—there was nothing Noah or anyone else needed to do in return. I once again brought my favorite wall hanging, which beautifully depicts God's wide love for the world. [Place in front of Communion Table.]

Two weeks ago my sermon was titled “How Long is God's Scarf?” We talked about God's covenant with Abraham, namely God's promise to bless him with descendants as numerous as the stars. That covenant was “long”—or as God said to Abraham, and by extension to us (since we too are Abraham's descendants), “everlasting,” extending through both space and time. And once again, it was unilateral; there was (and is) nothing that Abraham and Sarah or the Children of Israel or we need to do in return.

Today we are looking at God's covenant with Moses and people of Israel. And this covenant is significantly different. This time it is not unilateral but multilateral. Two-way. God promises his people something (specifically to be their very own God, complete with a personal name: Yahweh). But this time, God expects something in return—namely for them to live according to the rules of God's covenant.

It's ironic, when you think about it. God had just rescued the Children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. And now God puts them right back into slavery of a different kind.

We humans have a hard time with rules. “Do this; but don't do that.” It's confining. It's burdensome. Especially when you consider that God's Torah as a whole contains not ten commandments, but 613 (according to Rabbis ancient and modern). 613! I have a hard time with ten! No wonder Jesus reduced it to two: love God; and love your neighbor as yourself. (But then, I'm not sure those two are any easier than the 613!)

Speaking of Jesus, according to common Christian theology, Jesus came to do away with the law. At least, this is how the Apostle Paul is often interpreted. No more law. Which is impossible to obey, anyway. All that matters now is accepting Christ as our Savior. What matters is not law, but rather grace. But then what do we do with Jesus' many teachings about how to live, including the so-called “Golden Rule?” Once again, we're back to rules. [Turn picture so it faces away from congregation.]

One of the very first things Lois and I learned at seminary, in one of the very first classes we took, involves this very passage from Exodus 20. We usually think of verses 1-2 as merely a superfluous introduction to the Ten Commandments: “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.” After which, at verse 3, the Ten Commandments themselves begin, number one being: “you shall have no other gods before me.”

But what Lois and I learned at seminary is the crucial importance of verses 1-2. They are not merely the introduction. They are the centerpiece—the most important part. They are grace, all grace, and nothing but grace. They are God’s doing, and only God’s doing. “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” It would probably help us if verse 3 began with the word “therefore.” In which case the Ten Commandments are understood to be one long “therefore” in response to what God has already done. Not only here, but throughout the Bible (Lois and I learned), God’s law is always preceded by God’s grace. Grace comes first. Law is nothing more than one long “therefore.”

This past week I emailed Rabbi Michael Davis at Congregation Emanu-El, to get his take on this topic. “How burdensome is God’s Torah?” I asked him. He replied that the Torah is not a burden at all. Rather, it is a symbol, an example, a reminder of how much God loves God’s people. [Turn picture back around so it faces the congregation.] God loves us so much that God gives us guidelines for how we can best function together. Every guideline, every commandment, is like a beautiful reminder of what God has already done for us, a reminder of God’s grace, of who God is, and who we are in relation to God. And, by the way, in relation to one another.

Understood this way, we can see that the so-called Ten Commandments sum things up pretty well. God begins by telling us how much God wants to be our God. So much that God invites us to a covenant relationship with him. Almost like a marriage. (That’s the kind of passionate, permanent, committed love we’re talking about.) God wants to love us completely, and be loved completely in return. And God gives us examples for how to do that. Have no other gods before me. Don’t make for yourselves a bunch of false idols. Don’t use my name in vain—which is another way of saying, Don’t try to use me like you would an idol, because whenever you do that you forget how great and gracious I am. Celebrate the Sabbath, as a constant reminder of my greatness and grace. And then, share that same love and grace and respect with one another. For example, honor your parents; don’t murder; don’t commit adultery; don’t steal; don’t bear false witness against your neighbor; and don’t covet what your neighbor has, but let what you have—what I have given you out of grace—be enough. And in case it would help you to have more examples, here they are. 603 of them. And really, when we think about them in this way, the more examples or reminders or commandments we have, the better.

How burdensome is God’s covenant? It’s not burdensome at all. Think of it as a beautiful, many-colored scarf that God wraps around us all to keep us warm.

Amen.