

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

Philippians 3:4-14

Matthew 21:33-46

October 4, 2020

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Do not let God speak to us, or we will die.

When we meet Moses and the Israelites today, they are a few months out of Egypt and have been wandering for a bit.

And, unfortunately for them, they will continue to wander for several more decades.

Moses has been brought up to the top of Mount Sinai, given the Ten Commandments (and a bunch of other laws!) and has now returned to the people gathered below.

And, when these people see what has just occurred on the mountain top, the thunder, the lightning, the mountain smoking, they were afraid.

And rightly so.

I too am at times afraid of God and very rarely am I standing beneath a mountain that is literally smoking because of the presence of God.

And often when I hear the commandments that God has laid out, has called us to live into, my initial reaction, again, is similar to that of the Israelites.

*do not let God speak to us, or we will die*

I cannot fully live into these commandments, and surely, because of that, if God speaks to me, I will die.

After the 10 commandments, the book of Exodus is full of even more specific laws, most of which can be debated on how they still apply to our lives today, but ultimately, are from God, and are given to God's people.

And yet, God does not give us the 10 commandments and the rest of the law to Moses to cause them to stumble and ultimately die, but rather entirely the opposite.

God gives all things, the 10 commandments and laws included, out of God's desire to have us live, to draw us towards Godself and to live in right relation with our neighbors.

When I think of laws today, I think of the debates and discussion we are still having over COVID restrictions and what climate change regulations should be in law and personal and religious liberty somehow gets thrown into there as well.

And the point of COVID restrictions and climate change regulations are not attacks on personal liberties, but again, similarly to the laws that God has set forth for us, are about calling us into right relation and life with our neighbor.

A life is not ultimately liberating if by means of living it leads to the death of our neighbors.

And I think that is what God is getting at with the laws He sets forth for the Israelites.

My life, all of our lives, are bound to each other, and the laws given to us by God lays this out.

The laws and boundaries that God lays out are not meant to be stifling and lead to death, but rather liberating and life-giving.

When I think of laws, I am reminded of the collect for peace at morning prayer.

There is a line

*O God, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom.*

I spent the last year in a rectory in Tucson as part of an Episcopal Service Corps program, not unlike the one I am a part of now.

As part of the program, our house prayed Morning Prayer together each morning.

When it was my morning to lead prayer, I often chose to not say the collect of peace, as I don't like to think about serving God as perfect freedom.

We are quick to think of freedom as the ability to do whatever one wants at all times and in all places.

Yet, as we prayed morning prayer together, we rotated who would lead, so I could not just simply avoid the collect for peace.

My housemates often said it, so slowly, over the course of a year, I did hear it regularly.

And, as often happens with prayers you say regularly, you begin to find new meaning as the Spirit does Her thing.

The collect does not say, to serve God is entirely freedom or you get to do whatever you want, but rather serving God is *perfect* freedom.

Serving God and living into God's laws does not lead to the freedom that we in America often think of.

The freedom to consume so others have none, the freedom of personal safety at the cost of others, the freedom to push for the reopening of the nation at the expense of essential workers, the elderly, and those who are immunocompromised.

This is not the freedom that God is talking about, because this freedom does not lead to an abundance of life for all, but actually to death for some if not all.

To serve God *is* perfect freedom, because perfect freedom and life is what God desires for Her people.

And what I find to be even better news for all of us, is that even when we fail to live into these laws set out for us by God, God still continues to desire life for all His people. God *still* wants to draw us closer to Herself and to our neighbors.

We see in this parable in the Gospel today, the landowner continues to send people to the tenants in his vineyard to collect his produce.

First, he sends slaves, then more slaves, then finally his own son.

And, the tenants respond to each group in the same way, that is, they kill them, including the landowner's own son.

And, as Jesus often does with parables, he does not explain the ending of the parable, but rather asks those who are listening how they think it ends.

*now, what will he do to those tenants?*

And the chief priests respond

*he will put those wretches to a miserable death.*

On one hand, their response makes sense.

The tenants that continue to kill everyone who is sent to them should be put to death, or at the very least, be held accountable for their actions.

And yet, Jesus does not necessarily agree with this conclusion.

He does not straightforwardly say, yes the tenants will also be killed and will die.

He does not condemn them, but rather goes off on a thing about cornerstones that has to do with his own identity that will ultimately lead to life and redemption for all people, the murderous tenants included.

Jesus' claim that the kingdom of God will be taken from the those who do not produce fruit and given to those who do is not necessarily a death sentence.

And that, I think, is good news for us.

Not that we are free to kill and murder and live outside of the boundaries that God has called us into, as that is not freedom.

But that when we strive to live in a way that leads to right relationship with God, ourselves, and our neighbors, and stumble and turn away from God and our neighbors, God will continue to send Godself to us. God will continue to love us, to draw us closer to Herself.

And that, dear ones, is good news.