

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

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Most Americans would agree that we are currently experiencing an economic crisis in our country. Prices are high, jobs are low, and the government is in “rescue mode.”

Could it be possible that our so called financial crisis is actually a symptom of what might better be understood as a moral crisis? As people of faith, we are called to practice moral theology. We are called to ask ourselves, how does religious belief guide our everyday choices? What kind of life does God desire us to lead here and now, in 21st century America?

Today our Old Testament reading addresses such questions in a profound way. The intersection of this reading with the news of the day clearly demonstrates the work of the Holy Spirit and the power of Scripture to speak to our contemporary lives. At a time of intense debate, heightened anxiety, and tremendous change, we pause to stand with our fellow Israelites at the base of Mt. Sinai.

We tremble in awe, daring to look up at the high, smoking mountain. We gasp in fear at the boom of the thunder, the crack of lightning, the piercing sound of the trumpet. We know the presence of the living God is real, and we shudder with wonder as we await God's word. Thank goodness Moses is up there on Mt. Sinai and not us!

And God gives us the Ten Commandments.

The rabbinic commentary found in the Jewish Bible, the Tanach, vividly describes this sacred moment of history: "When the Holy One, Blessed is He, presented the Torah at Sinai, not a bird chirped, not a fowl flew, not an ox lowed, not an angel ascended, not a seraph proclaimed Holy. The sea did not roll and no creature made a sound. All of the vast universe was silent and mute. It was then that the Voice went forth and proclaimed, "I am -----, your God!"

What grabs me about this description is the image of God connecting full force, with all of the created world, through the giving of the Ten Commandments. Instead of just handing Moses a list of helpful guidelines—like a new student handbook for the year—God is giving the gift of relationship with the people of Israel in the form of covenantal law. And through this gift of relationship, this gift of covenant, God desires for Israel to be made a kingdom of ministers, a kingdom of priests, a holy witness to the world.

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As we seek moral guides for the disturbing events facing our own time, can we turn to the 10 commandments, also known as the Decalogue? Throughout history, many Anglican Churches have displayed the 10 Commandments along with the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed at the front of the Church. In our country, some lawmakers want to post the 10 commandments in public places, hoping to shore up the moral integrity of our citizens.

Martin Luther implored Christians to read the 10 Commandments

daily to remember our inability to maintain such laws and recognize anew the need for the grace found in Jesus Christ.

As we engage the 10 Commandments today, we quickly realize they do not cover the moral complexities of specific situations.

For example, the commandment, “Honor your father and mother” is subject to distinct cultural interpretation. To honor one’s parents in India is perceived very differently than honoring one’s parents in the U.S. The commandment “do not murder” becomes complex when dealing with war and peace as well as end-of-life issues. If the 10 Commandments do not address specifics, how can they shape our ethical life as people of faith? How can we stand with the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai and have our lives transformed by this encounter with the living God.

One framework that helps us delve into the Decalogue is to notice the structure. The first three commandments establish our relationship with God:

1. I am the Lord your God
2. You shall have no other God’s before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol.

3. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of your God

The last 6 commandments focus on our relationship to one another:

5. Honor your father and mother

6. You shall not murder

7. You shall not commit adultery

8. You shall not steal

9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor

10. You shall not covet your neighbor's house or your neighbor's wife

So, we have our relationship with God and our relationship with one another as the two integral components of the 10

Commandments. What is the hinge between the two? For all you careful listeners out there-- Which one did I skip? The 4th commandment—Honor the Sabbath and keep it holy.

It is in the act of stopping to rest, the act of taking time out to recognize that all of life belongs to God, that we are empowered to live out the 10 commandments. By observing the Sabbath, we ground ourselves in our relation to God and thus are properly guided in our relation to one another.

Sabbath. What does it mean to honor the Sabbath and how can Sabbath rest solve the crisis of morality on Wall Street and Main Street? Turning once again to the Jewish Biblical Commentary, we encounter the Jewish understanding of Sabbath in the words of Rashi: “The commandment of the Sabbath includes not only deed, but attitude, for when the Sabbath arrives, one should feel that all his work is finished, even though his desk or workbench is still piled high. Sabbath means that no matter what is still left to be done, one should feel as much at ease as if everything was finished.” The Jewish Sabbath seeks to stop work and recognize we are not God. To stop and rest, turning our attentions toward the power of God, the creator of all life.

As Christians, Sunday is our Sabbath. We gather for Holy Eucharist, Holy Thanksgiving, to celebrate our new life in Christ. Early Christians gradually moved away from the Jewish practice of Sabbath on the last day of the week. Instead, Christians gathered for worship on the first day of the week, the day of Christ’s resurrection. They gathered, just as we do, to partake in the holy

meal of bread and wine that is the gift of Christ's living presence.

Early Christians called this day, the Eighth day, connecting with a heavenly vision of time beyond our present time.

So we, too, gather on Sunday, on the eighth day, the day of new life, and we offer our lives in thanksgiving to God.

And, yes, I do believe the practice of Holy Sabbath can call us back to right relationship with God and one another. The practice of Holy Sabbath can call us to look deeply at the complex moral judgments we make on a day to day basis. Why? Because the practice of Holy Sabbath reminds us that we are not in charge. As we listen to the Word, the stories of our faith, we hear how Jesus reaches out to the poor and outcast and challenges notions of greed and materialism. As we partake of the Sacrament, we see how Jesus offered his life freely, overcoming the power of sin and death. We awake to the presence of Christ within us, giving us a view of eternity that defies the pressures of greed and selfishness.

We can remember the Sabbath as a hinge—the Sabbath as a connector between the first 3 and the last 6 commandments. A connector that helps put us in right relationship with God and one another.

As the idols of economic strength shatter all around us, the harsh reality of disconnect comes clear. Now we know the hurt. The ancient practice of keeping a holy Sabbath moves us beyond our shattered idols, beyond our broken economy. We have been given a precious gift in the community of St. George's, and at this time of difficulty and anxiety in our culture, we turn to worship God together. We turn to relish the true gift of Sabbath, realigning our minds and our hearts with the life of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

From this Sabbath community, we boldly step out into the world with a renewed sense of thanksgiving, a renewed sense of care for all of God's creation. We reach out in love towards our neighbors who are suffering from present economic hardship as a witness to God's gift of the covenant, God's gift of the 10 Commandments.

The living God is present among us. The 10 Commandments are God's gift that calls us to a life of holy relationship with God and with one another.

For reference or further study:

Timothy F. Sedgwick, *The Christian Moral Life* (Eerdmans/Morehouse, 1999)