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Your Friend and Guide!

Exodus 20: 1-3

And God spoke all of these words, saying: "I am the Lord thy God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me."

But those words represent just the transcript of the event.

I have come to conclude that one cannot understand these words that we call The First Commandment, unless one can conceive of the proper accompanying audio.

When we think of these words being said, we conceive of them being delivered by a voice that is stern, forbidding, authoritarian and peremptory:

"I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me."

I invite you to replace that audio with an entirely different soundtrack.

Think of these words as being delivered in the soft, dulcet tones of James Taylor, sung to the tune of "You've Got a Friend."

"When you were down and troubled, and you needed some loving care,

I was the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt.

You shall have no other gods before me,

for remember, I freed you from bondage,

and when you need aid, I'll be your Friend and Guide."

When you hear the First Commandment sung in such a fashion,

it puts those words in a whole new light, doesn't it!

We cannot understand the Ten Commandments, not the first one, not any of them,

unless we first understand their proper function.

The Ten Commandments should not be thought of as the Ten Rules.

Nor are they simply the Ten Suggestions.

Rather, the Ten Commandments are words from God intended to be regarded as advice from a Friend.

This truth became clear to me one glorious day on my sabbatical,

when I packed my golf clubs, books and computer and drove down to south Alabama to visit my folks.

I was lounging on the steps of the indoor pool, stretched out, basking in the rays of the sun

that came through the sky light, when suddenly my eye fell upon the twenty-story high-rise monstrosity that was being built next door to my parents' condominium.

My eye fell upon the series of wooden barriers that the workers had constructed on the balconies where the iron railings would eventually go.

An electric realization suddenly hit me: God's commandments function like those wooden barriers!

The workers put those barriers up to define for people the boundaries of health, safety and good sense.

Sure, if you want to break through them they are not strong enough to stop you.

You can use your freedom and strength to push through them.

But if you do, you will do it to your own destruction.

So, too, with God's commandments: they are words of wisdom meant to define for us the way of health, safety, fulfillment and wisdom.

If we want to ignore these words of advice, these words will not keep us from doing so,

but if we exercise our freedom in that fashion, we will transgress them to our destruction.

Now the fact that the God of the universe, Creator of heaven and earth, would stoop to offer us advice, and would stoop to offer us this particular advice,

offers us a valuable glimpse into the character of the Divine.

Equally important, these words offer us a valuable glimpse into our tendencies as human beings.

God would not say to us first and foremost, "Have no other gods before me,"

if we did not have an inveterate predilection to give ultimate concern to that which is not ultimate.

In truth, we are prone to orient our lives around allegiances that are not worthy.

Yet, oddly enough, when we hear God say, "Have no other gods before me,"

We tend to regard such advice as irrelevant, for we think they are aimed at an ancient, superstitious age when people tended to see gods everywhere, in the sun, moon, stars, mountains and waters.

But are the gods we worship and around which we orient our lives more deserving of the claim to deity?

I read not long ago of a deceased Pittsburgh Steeler fan whose family dressed him for his funeral visitation in his Steeler jersey and put him in his easy chair before the television. Why? they were asked.

Because, they said, "The Steelers were his whole life." Sad to say, they were probably telling the truth.

Our God is anything to which we look for our definitive identity, for our ultimate love, comfort and security.

As the great theologian Karl Barth once said, "The commandment does not state simply that those other gods have no reality. On the contrary, it assumes that they *do* have a definite reality,

just as it assumes that there are people who *have* them as gods, who give their *hearts* to them.

Precisely where that occurs *there* are gods."

I find it interesting that Karl Barth wrote those words in Nazi Germany in 1933.

He knew firsthand the relevance of the First Commandment.

He knew firsthand the importance of orienting one's life around the true God and none other.

In the wake of the Holocaust, Albert Einstein shrewdly observed that every official institution in Nazi Germany caved into the desires of Adolph Hitler except the obstinate Confessing Church.

What did the Confessing Church have that the others did not have? They had the First Commandment.

What did the Confessing Church have that the labor unions did not have, that the newspapers did not have, that the legal system did not have, that the political parties and military leaders did not have?

They had the First Commandment!

They knew the value of heeding the wisdom, "You shall no other gods before me."

What induced pastors like Martin Niemoller to stand against Hitler and say, "Christ is my Fuhrer"?

He had the First Commandment.

What could empower the little village in France, Le Chambon, a town of 3,000 people who housed 5,000 Jews, most of them children, in full view of the Nazi government, refusing to turn them over to the railroads to be shipped to the gas chambers. What did this little town have that the towns around them did not? They had the First Commandment!

They lived with the central conviction that there is one God and none other could claim their conscience.

It really does matter what God you choose around to orient your life around and to which you give your ultimate allegiance, who gives you your defining values.

So the God of the universe offers us this initial guiding word: "Put me first! Put me first in your life!"

"You just call out my name, and you know wherever I am, I'll come running, to see you again.

Winter, spring, summer or fall, all you've got to do is call,

And I'll be there, yeah, yeah, yeah, you've got a Friend."

That's really what the First Commandment is saying to us.

When our Lord says, "I am the Lord your God," we must remember that the word "Lord," is a substitute for the sacred, unspeakable name of God, which we best translate, "I will be the God whom I will be."

This is God who calls upon us to call upon the Divine as Friend and Guide.

Notice that this God does not identify the divine self in terms of attributes but by action.

God does not say, "I am the Lord Omniscient, Omnipotent, and Omnipresent."

No, God says, "I am the God who brought you out of Egypt, who delivered you from bondage."

There's a great rabbinical commentary on this passage that goes back centuries.

When God announces, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt,"

the people say, "How come you didn't tell us the Ten Commandments at the beginning?"

God replies, "Well, it's rather like a situation where a king comes to a people and says,

'May I rule over you?' and the people say, 'Have you done us any good, that you should rule over us?'

and instead of answering the king goes and builds a wall for them, brings water for them, raises crops for them, and fights their battles for them.

Then the king returns and asks, "May I rule over you?" and the people say, 'Yes, indeed.'

So, says the rabbinical tradition, "God brought the Israelites out of Egypt,

divided the sea for them, brought manna down for them, gave them water, provided quail for them,

made war for them and guided them by smoke and by fire.

Then God asked the people "May I rule over you? and the people said, "Yes, indeed."

The power of the First Commandment hinges on the integrity and power of the personal pronoun, "I."

The God of the First Commandment says, "*I* am the Lord your God.

I am the God who delivered you out of Egypt. *I* am the God who delivered you from bondage.

Perhaps some of you realize that we have just passed the tenth anniversary of Tom Green's death, our church's former associate pastor and my good friend.

I recall the insight that came to me as I drove to the cemetery to participate in his burial. I thought,

"How intensely personal are the promises of God. They are bound up in the character and personality of God. Our Lord says, '*I* am the One who goes to prepare a place for you.

If it were not so, *I* wouldn't tell you that it was. And if *I* go to prepare a place for you,

I will come again and take you to myself that were *I* am you will be also.'"

That's the God of eternal relationship, who in trying to give us guidance in how to structure our lives, counsels us, "Put Me First!"

Some years ago, a high school kid lived across from us who owned a lime-green roadster, a sports car.

It was not hard to know when he had a big date on Saturday night.

He'd be out early on Saturday afternoon washing and waxing that roadster until it gleamed in the sun,

and then he'd disappear into the house and emerge a few hours later with his hair combed

to nonchalant perfection, and he'd be checking his shoes, shirts and pants in the mirror.

It was obvious that everything he did that day was governed by his focus upon that upcoming date.

That is how we are made.

So our God says to us, "First and foremost, let everything you do be governed by your allegiance unto me.

Put me first!"

The love of God is restrictive love, restrictive in the best sense.

God's love is the restrictive love of a caring friend, a loving parent, a concerned guide.

When the Bible says that God is jealous, it does not mean that God is not jealous for God's sake,

but rather God is jealous for our sake.

God is jealous for our happiness, jealous for our fulfillment, jealous for our contentment, jealous for our health.

“Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” states the same truth negatively that Christ states positively when he says,

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind, and all your strength.”

That’s why Paul, in his sublime letter to the Ephesians, says to those young Christians,

“You are no longer strangers; you are no longer sojourners;

rather, you are fellow citizens in God’s community with all of the saints and apostles

in the household of God. Your faith is built upon the testimony of the prophets;

your communion is built upon the sacrifice of the saints.

And the cornerstone of the building is Jesus Christ. And you are being built into the temple of God that the Spirit of God might dwell in you, too.” (Ephesians 2: 19-22)

The First Commandment, like the other nine that follow, provides a building block for creating a positive life.

Christ is the cornerstone. We shall have no other gods before him.

With that fundamental bit of wisdom, let us heed God’s initial advice in following the divine blueprint for building a healthy world.

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[First in a series]