



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

God Never Forgets

Exodus 32: 7-8, 15-16, 19-20; 34:1-2, 28

This is the seventh and final sermon in a series on the life of Moses. We will be specifically looking at the second occasion when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. And I think it fits the themes for today, for today is Christ the King Sunday and certainly the Law of God points to our King who fulfills the law, and we just celebrated Thanksgiving, and in our Reformed tradition we are taught that the only legitimate reason for obeying God's commandments is thanksgiving for what God has accomplished for us, especially through the work of our King Jesus Christ.

The first two sermons in this series focused on Moses' early life in Egypt. The second two came from Exodus chapter three where Moses encountered God in the burning bush. We remembered the time when Moses stood on mountain and saw the Promised Land but did not enter, but trusted that God would complete his life work. Last Sunday, we looked at the time when Moses needed assurance of God's presence and leadership. In today's text we join Moses on Mt. Sinai where he received the Ten Commandments a second time.

It is quite a journey from the third chapter of Exodus to the thirty-second chapter. Obviously, I have left a lot out of the story. But, you probably know most of the story.

At the burning bush, Moses was awestruck by the presence of God and made excuses as to why he should not return to Egypt. Moses, like all of us, had no desire to sound like a crazy man. "Lord, what are the people going to think if I tell them I speak for God, that I have heard your voice, and I say, "God told me to tell Pharaoh to free the God's people"?"

I mean when was the last time you heard someone say, "I heard the voice of God, and God told me. . ."? That's crazy talk.

Moses carefully explained to God, as though God did not already know, that he was not good at oratory, like that really matters when God is calling.

Moses reluctantly went to Egypt, entered into the court of Pharaoh and told Pharaoh the mind of God, and things did not go so well. As a matter of fact, things backfired as Pharaoh gave the order that the Hebrew slaves who were making bricks were now going to have to collect their own straw to make bricks, without reducing their quota. Moses was blamed for the extra burden. The Israelites wanted Moses to go back from where he came, and I am sure Moses was thinking, “God, I told you so.”

But then came the plagues.

The Nile turned to blood. Then came the frogs, followed by swarms of gnats and flies. The Egyptians were physically afflicted with the plague, then with painful boils. Then came hail which destroyed the crops, and what survived the hail didn't survive the locusts. Then God blocked out the sun, and darkness covered the land. And Pharaoh's heart remained hardened.

The final plague came when the angel of death took the first born of the land, except for the Hebrews who took the Passover lamb and spread its blood on their door posts. That horrible night the Hebrews ate their first Passover meal, and they ate wearing their traveling clothes with their staffs in their hands.

Pharaoh gave the command and with great rejoicing the Israelites began their travel to Canaan – “the land flowing with milk and honey.” Then Pharaoh had a change of heart and sent the chariots to fetch the Israelites back, but the Red Sea parted, and the Hebrews never saw the Egyptians again.

Of course, there was controversy out in the wilderness. The first watering hole they stopped at was filled with bitter water. And the people complained, and God told Moses how to sweeten the water.

Then there was a food shortage, and the people complained, and God sent the manna and the quail. They got thirsty again and they complained again, and water was provided from a rock.

Guiding a band of former slaves requires a lot of one's time and Moses was no exception. There were too many complaints and administrative duties and Moses was so busy he had little time for family life. When Moses' wife Zipporah complained to her father Jethro, he went to give his son-in-law a little talking to. But when Jethro saw the pile of work on Moses' desk, he suggested that Moses find some help. And thus we have the birth of the office

of elder. Taking the advice of his father-in-law, Moses found some able people to help with the ministry and administrative duties of this new nation that was given birth out in the wilderness.

But to establish a nation you have to have a constitution. So God led the people to the foot of Mt. Sinai, where they would experience his presence as never before. There was lightning and thunder and a thick cloud covered the mountain. Loud trumpet blasts horrified the people. They were warned not to approach the mountain on pain of death; however, Moses was called to go up to the top of the mountain where he received the Ten Commandments.

Following the giving of the Ten Commandments, which is recorded in Exodus 20, we can read another eleven chapters listing various laws:

There are laws given to protect human life,
laws dealing with property,
miscellaneous social laws,
and a cultic calendar is given.

There are instructions on various rituals. Instructions are given as to how to build a tabernacle, including how to furnish the tabernacle. More instructions are given concerning priestly vestments. There is even a service for the ordination of the priests.

All this time Moses was up on the mountain, writing everything down, that is, except for the Ten Commandments which were etched by the hand of God on stone tablets. Moses was on Mount Sinai for so long the people decided he was not coming down. And Aaron had the great idea to forge a golden calf to worship and he took charge in Moses' absence.

This brings us to today's text. So hear the word as I read selected verses from Exodus chapters 32 and 34:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.'

Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands. They were inscribed on the front and the back. The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.

When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. And he took the calf they had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it.

The LORD said to Moses, “Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. Be ready in the morning, and then come up on Mount Sinai. Present yourself to me there on top of the mountain. No one is to come with you or be seen anywhere on the mountain.”

Moses was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments.

I fear we live in a day when the average person on the street knows more about various controversies concerning church and state issues that surround the Ten Commandments rather than actually knowing the content of the Ten Commandments, or for that matter the purpose of the Ten Commandments. Rather than the Law of God, to some the Ten Commandments represent, at worst, the evils of religion, or at best, simply a symbol of religion that must be separated from the state.

Of course, putting the shoe on the other foot, there are those who may know something about the Commandments, but they are not so interested in the commandments, they simply want to make a statement that the state has no right to prohibit the exhibition of the Commandments in schools and courthouses.

There are, of course, some who blame the moral decline in our nation on the decision to take the Commandments out of the public eye, as though we practice a greater degree of morality today than we did during the days of slavery and Jim Crow laws.

I wish that posting the Ten Commandments on every street corner, at every public building, would deepen a moral conviction in our nation, maybe even bring us back to God, and who knows--it may help. But once again, the best way to accomplish the God given responsibility to bring a nation to God, is actually God's job using our witness to the grace and love of Jesus Christ.

As I read the account of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments a second time, did you learn anything new? Did you realize that God inscribed the words on the front and back of the stone tablets, and that God produced a duplicate copy? I guess he wanted to save paper, or in this case stone tablets which I am sure were hard to come by. But what about that duplicate copy? What is at stake there? Why were there two copies?

And have you wondered what the purpose of God giving Ten Commandments is. It seems to me that God left out a few. Why not have a commandment that says, "Thou shalt attend church on Sunday," or, "If you see your brother in need, help him," or my personal favorite would be the thirteenth commandment, "Thou shalt tithe."

If God had been clearer, Jesus may not have had to redefine some of these commandments in the Sermon on the Mount. Remember Jesus saying, for example, about the Sixth Commandment, "You have heard it said, do not kill, but I say whoever is angry with his brother has killed."

Paul even wrote, "The entire law is kept by loving others as you love yourself." Why didn't God simply give the two great commandments to Moses: "Love God," and "Love others?"

It is important to remember that the giving of the Ten Commandments is closely associated with the golden calf incident. You see, the Hebrews had a short memory:

God delivered them from Egypt.

They saw Almighty God part the Red Sea.

God fed the people with manna and quail, and quenched their thirst with a rock,

and as soon as Moses left for a few days, the people forgot everything. They forgot their past and created a golden calf to worship.

The Ten Commandments are given in a context of forgetfulness. And they begin with the reminder, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me.” I want you to remember that, for no sooner than Moses climbed the mountain the people made a calf of gold and said, “This calf brought us out of Egypt.”

How did they so quickly forget who brought them out of Egypt? Almighty God or a man-made golden calf?

God was saying to the people, “I want you to remember that you were slaves. You had nothing. You were not citizens in the land you lived. You enriched the Egyptians and your only reward was a whip across the back, so don’t forget, don’t forget that I the Lord your God brought you out of Egypt.”

In Deuteronomy the people were warned not to forget. But people forget, especially we forget our responsibility to God. The Israelites forgot the salvation from God by delivering them from Egypt. I mean, Moses was not gone but a few days before they cast a golden calf, so what was going to happen to their memory during prosperity? What happens when they eat and are satisfied, when they have built fine houses and settle down, and when their herds and flocks grow large and their silver and gold increase? As we read in Deuteronomy, “Then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God. Don’t forget that I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt.” That is the purpose of the Ten Commandments. Of course, they represent specific commands, but at a deeper level they tell us not to forget.

The Ten Commandments tell us, don’t ever forget the Lord your God who is a living presence in your lives, so don’t even attempt to place an idol in God’s place.

Don’t forget the Lord your God, who he is holy, that He is your hope and salvation, by taking His name in vain.

Don’t ever forget the Lord your God by dishonoring your fathers and mothers.

Don’t ever forget the Lord your God by killing that which God has given life.

Don’t ever forget the Lord your God by debasing yourself by breaking the covenant with your spouse.

Don't ever forget the Lord your God by stealing that which God has not given you.

Don't ever forget the Lord your God, who stands for truth and light, by committing perjury.

And don't ever forget that the Lord your God gives you all that you need by coveting.

We are so prone to forget that the Lord instructed his people that every year for one week that they were to construct a little tent in their backyards and live in it to remember that their ancestors lived in the wilderness. They were stuck in that barren place because they at one time forgot their God.

How prone are we to forget? So God gave his commands and said, "You are so prone to forget that so, one day out of seven; you will give to me your God. Concentrate on me and get rid of the frantic, always on the cell phone, always on the e-mail, always texting, always on the go life. Slow down one day in seven and remember me the Lord your God.

When you put bread and drink on the table, I want you to remember me. And so at the table when we sit down, before we eat we may bow our heads and say "Blessed art thou, O Lord, Creator of the Universe, you care for all your creatures and fill our hearts with good things. Amen."

Or we may pray, "For health and strength and daily food, we give you thanks, O Lord."

"Bless this food to our body's use and us to thy service."

Or, "God is great; God is good, let us thank him for our food." Every day give thanks. Do what is necessary so you will never forget the Lord your God.

One thing more, remember there were two copies of the Ten Commandments. In the time to come these tablets would be placed in the Ark of the Covenant. One is to remind us to remember God, and the other is to remind God to remember us. It is the oldest prayer in the world, "Please God, don't forget us." And where we may forget, God never forgets us.

This is thanksgiving, to remember God, who in Christ remembers us. Amen.