



Taking Egypt out of Israel

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given October 8, 2017

Exodus 20:1-20, Proper 22A

When I was in seminary I obviously had to read a lot of things, and one of the things you might be surprised was on my assigned reading list for one class was a chapter from a book called “God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything” by renowned atheist and journalist, Christopher Hitchens. In this chapter Hitchens lays forth the summary of his argument about religion. He said that far more often than religion inspires ethical action, it inspires violence, intolerance, racism, bigotry, misogyny, and every other evil of which human beings are guilty. He concludes by saying that he would leave religion well enough alone if only religious people would leave him well enough alone, but he believes they are incapable of that so he must dismantle the whole system. And you know, reading this chapter, I had to concede a lot of points. Yes, religion, including Christianity, has been used for all kinds of awful things. The Crusades, the genocide against Native Americans, the enslavement and torture of millions of Africans in this country, not to mention the failure to recognize women as full human beings capable of leadership and authority, and the list goes on and on. Hitchens mostly targets the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, but he lists the sins of the Eastern religions like Hinduism and Buddhism as well, and concludes that organized religion in general has done far more harm than it ever has done good.

One of my sponsoring priests and professors at Luther Seminary, Dwight Zscheile, says that when he encounters atheists, he asks them, what kind of God don't you believe in? Because I probably don't believe in that kind of God either. Do we believe in a God who justifies violence or racism or sexism? I'd say most of us would immediately say that no, we don't, even though there are parts of our scripture that might seem to indicate otherwise. Are we human beings that are sometimes guilty of these things? If we're honest, I think we'd have to say that yes, sometimes we're guilty of these things, but we do have a blueprint for what a

life without violence and racism and sexism and plain old sin looks like, and we find it in today's text from Exodus, in one of the most important texts of our scripture called the Ten Commandments.

Over the past few months I have been preaching almost exclusively the story of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and their descendants the Israelites in Egypt, as our lectionary has moved through the first two books of the Bible, Genesis and Exodus. We've watched how God helped Joseph see to the shalom of his brothers even though in their bitter jealousy they sold him as a slave to Egypt. We've seen how God empowered those amazing midwives, Shiprah and Puah, to defy the Pharaoh when the Israelites had become slaves in Egypt and when the Pharaoh had required them to murder the baby Israelite boys. We've seen how God liberated the Israelites from Egypt without raising an army and how God heard their crying in the wilderness and gave them water to drink and manna to eat, just enough for every day. And now, in today's reading, the Israelites are fifty days after the liberation from Egypt, on the day that Jews later came to call Pentecost or Shavuot. On that day, the Jewish Pentecost, Moses went up on Mount Sinai, and God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, which is a picture of how the Israelites need to live in relation to God and in relation to their fellow human beings. I hope you notice that the commandments are these two things: first, they are a description of how the Israelites need to understand their relationship with God – as requiring a love and allegiance that supersedes every other – and second, they also describe what an ethical life toward one's fellow human beings ought to look like. Our tradition is right to elevate this teaching as one of the most important parts of the Bible, because in it God shows us very clearly how we ought to live – a way that, if we followed it, Christopher Hitchens would have no claim.

Before God ever told the Israelites how they needed to live, God first took care of their needs. God cared about their suffering and the monstrous injustice of their slavery under the Egyptian empire. God liberated them and then cared for them in the wilderness. But that wasn't enough. It wasn't enough to care for their needs. God also needed to show them how to live. I once heard of a minister named Marc Olson who said, At the Red Sea God took Israel out of Egypt. But at Sinai, in the Ten Commandments, God sought to take Egypt out of Israel.

By Egypt Reverend Marc did not mean the nation state. He meant the lingering effects of slavery in the Israelites. The Israelites had been steeped in a culture of

slavery and oppression and hatred and loathing, and God needed to liberate them from that environment in every sense: in an external sense, but also in an internal spiritual sense. God needed to paint a picture of what true Shalom looks like – what it looks like when a people are truly free to live into God’s image, which is always characterized by loving God with one’s complete heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving neighbors as ourselves.

You see, the Israelites needed Sinai as much as they needed the Red Sea. They need allegiance and love for the God who not only liberated them and provided for their needs but also made moral demands on the way they live. And we need Sinai, we need the Pentecost of having God’s laws written into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, so that we can live truly as followers of the way of Jesus. We need this so that we will not use religion to continue to justify violence, and oppression, and every evil thing that Christopher Hitchens talks about.

Some people see the Ten Commandments as just the Judeo – Christian version of a good ethical life, but I would say it is far more than that. The Ten Commandments begin with our relationship with God. All of our ethical behavior toward other people is grounded in a prior relationship with and utter allegiance to the God who liberates the oppressed, the God who provides manna in the wilderness, and the God who teaches us a better way to live. This God IS great. This God speaks to the former slaves of Egypt and asks nobility of them, of them who previously were loathed and treated as less than human. God asks them to live according to the Ten Commandments with true nonviolence, grounded in continual relationship with an utter loyalty to the God who liberated them first. And God asks exactly the same thing of us, here at St. Stephen’s in 21st century Edina.

The Ten Commandments are worth studying in their individuality, because they contain a lot of wisdom about what good relationships with God and human beings look like. But Jesus summed them up for us by asking us to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

This week I would like to invite you to a daily reflection. You might try this at the beginning of the day, or at the end of the day before you go to bed. Where is God inviting you to increase your capacity to give and receive love? What in you needs healing or forgiveness in order to enable you to love the Lord your God with all

your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself? If you aren't sure, look at today's text, what we call the Ten Commandments. You shall worship God alone. You shall not limit God's freedom by insisting God comes in only one image or form. You shall honor God's name. Guard your Sabbath, your capacity to stop your endless production in order to delight in God and God's good creation. Honor your parents and the elderly. Do not kill. Do not steal. Do not commit adultery. Do not distort the truth in your dealings with the justice system. Do not covet the possessions of your neighbor.

Let us love God with everything we are and everything we have. Let us treat our neighbors as we wish to be treated. Amen.