

A Nation of Laws

With this morning's text we rejoin the Israelites in the desert. They have continued their habit of complaining, and God has continued God's habit of taking care of them with manna, quail, and water from a rock. [Exodus 19:3-7; 20:1-17]

There are a few lists making the rounds that claim to spell out rules for teachers dating from early in the last century, including this one:

Rules for Teachers - 1915

1. You will not marry during the term of your contract.
2. You are not to keep company with men.
3. You must be home between the hours of 8 pm and 6 am unless attending a school function.
4. You may not loiter downtown in ice cream stores.
5. You may not travel beyond the city limits unless you have the permission of the chairman of the board.
6. You may not ride in a carriage or automobile with any man except your father or brother.
7. You may not smoke cigarettes.
8. You may not dress in bright colors.
9. You may under no circumstances dye your hair.
10. You must wear at least two petticoats.
11. Your dresses may not be any shorter than two inches above the ankles.
12. To keep the classroom neat and clean you must sweep the floor at least once a day, scrub the floor at least once a week with hot, soapy water, clean the blackboards at least once a day, and start the fire at 7 am to have the school warm by 8 am.¹

Clearly I was not called to be a teacher in 1915. I'd hate to lose my job for loitering in an ice cream parlor. As silly as lists like this one seem, they clearly point to a deeply held understanding about how a teacher was expected to conduct herself. But these lists do lean heavily—and oppressively—on a fair amount of condescension, a fear of jeopardizing the teacher's reputation, and that of the school. They also lean rather heavily on the notes.

The list I just read from Exodus may sound a lot like these rules for teachers in some ears. In older translations, they read, "Thou shalt not..." which should always be spoken in a deep, gruff tone, preferably with a strong pointer finger aimed at the "thou" in question. We've seen these commandments inscribed on stones weighing tons, matching the heavy weight some feel they too often place on us. We have fought or been witness

¹ <http://www.openculture.com/2013/09/rules-for-teachers-in-1872-1915-no-drinking-smoking-or-trips-to-barber-shops-and-ice-cream-parlors.html>

to fights to place them in courthouses and in the public square, even though their most vocal advocates can rarely recite them all by heart. My guess is we would struggle to name them all, too. We could write them off—as many do—as antiquated standards, as irrelevant throwbacks to a different age. But I think that would mean losing something crucial. The Ten Commandments originate in something more fundamental than society's concern to keeping feisty young women on the straight and narrow. They are more than a strict list of things we are not supposed to do. These commandments, these laws are promises spelled out between a loving God and this God's people, this God's "most precious possession," saved on the wings of eagles from the oppression of the Egyptians and saved for a life and witness as a priestly people. They are ground rules, yes, but more importantly they are a covenant intended to foster life. Listen again to the text I read moments ago:

You saw what I did to the Egyptians, and how I lifted you up on eagles' wings and brought you to me. So now, if you faithfully obey me and stay true to my covenant, you will be my most precious possession out of all the peoples, since the whole earth belongs to me. You will be a kingdom of priests for me and a holy nation.²

These are not an arbitrary list of shalts and shalls. These are the intentional words of the God who is building the nation promised to and through Abraham and Sarah, a people more numerous than the stars who are still called to be a blessing to the world. God knows the people have little experience living in relationship with God and one another. In Egypt, Pharaoh made the rules and enforced them with violence and threats. This new chapter requires new words, new rules. While these laws echo other similar law codes in the ancient world, this one is different. These laws—or "words" as the Hebrew reads—spell out a covenant between God and God's people. As scholars note:

They are addressed directly to the people. No punishments are stated; obedience is motivated not by fear of punishment but by God's absolute authority and the people's desire to do [God's] will. [Additionally, the] belief that God is the author of the laws is a distinctive feature of biblical law...[Other nations' laws were developed by human kings.] God is Israel's king, hence its legislator.³

² Exodus 19:4-6, CEB

³ As spelled out in the notes on Exodus 20 from the Jewish Study Bible, Jewish Publication Society, Tanakh Translation (New York: Oxford, 2004) 148.

At the edge of the Red Sea, Israel makes a choice about which king they will serve, honor, and follow. They choose to follow the God who rescues them from slavery, the God who makes a way when all seems lost. These laws are a spelling out of what this new life of freedom with this God is meant to look like, of who God's freed people are meant to be. Life with this God is meant to be one grounded first and foremost in worship of this God, and this God alone. Nothing and no one should be placed on a pedestal that lifts anyone or anything above God. They call the people to keep their promises and not to invoke God's name lightly. Israel is called to observe the Sabbath, not simply for themselves but for everyone in their midst, including their servants, their livestock, and the alien, the immigrant who has made her way into the community. In other words God's people are expected to care for the community beyond the confines of their own backyard. Built into the community is a concern for older generations, for those who are vulnerable and perhaps no longer able to earn their keep. The community has certain basic standards that include not resorting to murder to solve a problem, respecting another's marriage and property, and being truthful with one another. And the covenant people of God are called to be generous and grateful for what they do possess, not pining after what they do not. These seem like simple expectations, sane and rational ground rules for building a life as a covenant people, but they point to much more than dos and don'ts, shalls and shalt nots. As my colleague Becca Messman reminds us:

[The commandments] are a countercultural way of life for those who know who they are and whose they are.⁴ Their function is not to keep...[the larger] culture running smoothly, but rather to produce a people who are, in our daily lives, a sign, a signal, a witness that God has not left the world to its own devices.⁵

In other words these words, the commandments were never explicitly intended to be posted in the courthouse square in Canaan. No, these were—and still are—a road map for how we as God's people are meant to shape a faithful life in the midst of a dominant culture, a life that reflects the God who saves us and gives us life.

Following these laws is one way we exhibit to the larger world that our ultimate loyalty lies not with party or country or clan, but with the God who insists on showing up time and again to claim us and carry us into life with the ferocity of a mother eagle.

⁴ As quoted in Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *The Truth about God: The Ten Commandments and Christian Life*, (Abingdon: Nashville, 1999) 20.

⁵ From Becca Messman's paper for The Well 2014.

It is often said that the United States is a nation of laws. The past few weeks have revealed how difficult that can be. Faithful people have been wounded by and wounded others with the words spoken and the votes cast over the past few days. Many are left feeling broken, angry, fragile, and threatened. Many no longer trust our elected officials; even more find themselves unable to trust their fellow citizens to have their best interest at heart. And the church finds herself in the thick of it all, not running or hiding but seeking to be faithful in the midst of a divided nation. This morning, I hear a word of hope in these words, a call back to the foundation on which we stand. Yes, I believe we are called to be loyal citizens in a country where we affirm that all are created equal. I believe it is our civic duty to work tirelessly to help this country live up to her promise of liberty and justice for all. But I also think these Ten Words serve as a timely reminder that our ultimate salvation is found not in our Constitution or the White House or the halls of Congress or the Supreme Court, but in God alone. No politician or party can save us. Only God can. Only God does. So God alone is worthy of our deepest devotion and our highest loyalty. We who have been baptized in Christ, we who gather at this table with our brothers and sisters throughout time and around the world were a people of laws long before the first name was signed on the Declaration of Independence and long before any of our ancestors set foot on this soil. We, too, are part of this ancient holy priesthood, chosen ones saved through the rush of eagle's wings and lifted to new life in Christ's resurrection. Our King calls us to cling to compassion, decency, and justice as we build a community worthy of his name, a place and a people where the vulnerable are treasured and where health, rest, and worship are not the privilege of the few but a lived reality for all who dwell within our borders. These laws given to a fledgling people in a vast wilderness are not intended to be a weapon or a burden, but a gift, a tool to carve a holy witness in the desert. Unlike petty rules about petticoats and car rides, these ancient rules remain a blessed word from a loving God. If we take them to heart, they just may help us learn again how to thrive, serve, and grow, embraced as God's holy people in the wilderness. And with God's help we will press on in courage and faith, trusting that the God who saved us then can still be trusted to save us now.

Thanks be to God. Amen.