

"VOICES OF LENT (#3): THE VOICE OF AWE"

Exodus 20:1-20

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--I--

1. Read Text: Exodus 20:1-20 (as dramatic scripture monologue by Miriam).
2. Today as we continue our series Voices of Lent,<sup>1</sup> I'm thankful for the wonderful character monologue by \_\_\_\_\_ from Exodus 20, telling the story of Moses' delivery of the "Law/torah" of God (or "Ten Commandments" as we call them today) to the people of Israel from the perspective of Moses' sister Miriam.<sup>2</sup>

A--And in that story, we often get the impression of a God who is a harsh, legalistic task-master who is to be feared and dreaded.<sup>3</sup>

B--In Verses 18-19, for instance, we read that "*When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the horn, and the mountain smoking, [they] shook with fear and stood at a distance. [And] they said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we'll listen. But don't let God speak to us, or we'll die'.*"

C--And scriptures like this have caused many people today (including some Christians) to view the Bible as a book of rules and regulations -- of legalistic "do's" and "don'ts" -- handed down by a harsh and somber God, who's job it is to be a "spoilsport" to keep us from having too much "fun."

D--And as a result, this same sense of harsh legalism tends to define what we sometimes think it means to believe in and follow God -- to the point where it's not surprising why some people view "being a Christian" as just a burden, a drudgery, and a tiresome responsibility that's unrealistic and nearly impossible to live out.

--II--

3. Yet, today as we're looking at the "10 Commandments," I want to suggest that this view of God as one of wrath, anger, and legalism is based on a *flawed* understanding of the nature and purpose of God's Law<sup>4</sup> -- especially when we explore them collectively as a whole, *rather than* separately or individually.

A--Think about it: when we tell our children not to play with fire, or touch a hot stove, or play in the street, is it because we're trying to be a "killjoy" -- to keep them from having enjoying or having fun in life? Of course not! It's to keep them safe from harm

B--Well, in today's scripture portrayal, I want us to notice that's essentially the argument Miriam explained that her brother Moses gave to the people of Israel when he was responding to their fears about God being "out to get them!"

C--Verse 20: "*Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid, because God has come only to test you and to make sure you are always in awe of God so that you don't sin.'*"

4. In other words, God knows that sin harms us spiritually, emotionally, & sometimes even physically... so that whether we appreciate it or not, dabbling in the practices of sin is like playing with fire: sooner or later we're going to get hurt!

A--So, in Verse 20 Moses essentially is saying to the people,...

1--"*Look, you've got it wrong! These Laws -- these 'Ten Commandments' -- are not given for the purpose of 'killing' you with 'rules and regulations.' They're NOT given to be a 'killjoy', or to keep you from having fun.*"

2-- "*No! They're given in order to instill in you (and in us all ) such a sense of AWE and reverence for the presence of God so that that presence will keep us safe from the dangers and harms of sin.*"

B--Far from being a dry recitation of a harsh, *negative* code of ethics, the "Ten Commandments," you see, are *best read* and understood as a *positive* description of WHO God is, who WE are in relation to Him, and HOW we are to relate to our fellow human beings.

C--In other words, they're spiritual *boundaries* meant to *protect* us in our relationships both with God, others, and ourselves. <sup>5</sup>

--III--

5. And for me, at least, the key to understanding this whole passage is found in one word from Verse 20: the word "AWE" (the Hebrew word *yiraw*) <sup>6</sup> -- which is where today's sermon title comes from ("*The Voice of Awe*")....

A--...and which Miriam-Webster defines as "*an emotion variously combining dread, veneration, and wonder, inspired by authority, or by the sacred or sublime.*" <sup>7</sup>

B--In other words,... it's something that "Wows our socks off" and is "Awesome"! -- in most older Bible translations, *yiraw* is translated as "*FEAR*" (as in, "*the fear of the Lord*").

C--However translated, though, in the Bible it always refers to the *human* response to the overwhelming power, presence, majesty, and beauty of *GOD*.

1--I can think of many times in my own life when I've experienced this kind of awe: when our daughter was born; when we visited the Grand Canyon, or Niagara Falls, or Hawaii; or when I've watched a beautiful sunrise or sunset, or when I go outside and view the night sky through my telescope,

2--But not only that, I experience *yiraw*/awe when I see or hear a story about how God has brought about hope and healing in the life of someone else.

3--This past week it was my privilege to be part of one of the interview teams for our North Georgia United Methodist Conference's Board of Ordained Ministry as we interviewed candidates for ordination as new potential clergy.

4--And I was amazed to hear many of the stories and testimonies of how God had brought our candidates through personal challenges to be there.

(a) One, for example, had grown up in an abusive and dysfunctional home, yet God had saved, redeemed, and helped her to find who she was in Christ, and answer a call to become a Pastor.

(b) Another was a young man who had gotten caught up in a cycle of alcohol addiction when he was younger and ended up before a judge who gave him grace, but who (many years later after he had been redeemed by God and answered a call to ministry) found himself on the first Sunday of his new church surprised to see that same judge sitting in his church as one of his new parishioners.

D--Each of these stories and experiences are examples of a God so mysterious and magnificent that they leave me feeling humbled, small, and (at times) *under*-equipped to understand them.

E--Yet they're also all, stories/experiences that give me a greater awareness of, and appreciation for, the God who is Lord of all things.

F--And my response to these was (and still is) a sense of AWE for a God who makes beautiful things out of the dust and brokenness of US.

6. You see, *that's* what God's Law (like the "Ten Commandments") exists to do -- *not* to take the joy *out* of life, but to provide healthy boundaries that help us realize our own human *limitations* --...

A---...Boundaries that prod us to see how inadequate and ill-equipped we all are in our *own* strength for the task of living life in today's world.

B--And THAT humbling knowledge then requires us to more intentionally *trust in*, and fully *rely upon*, the *LORD* to help us make it through these. <sup>8</sup>

C--God Law teaches us to be more dependent upon *GOD*, rather than in our own technology, government, economy, medicine, or any other *human-created* thing.<sup>9</sup>

--IV--

7. So, the next time you are reading or talking about God's Law as found in "The Ten Commandments", just remember that they're *not* there to take the fun out of life, but to remind us all of our own human frailties and limitations -- ....

A--...That *without* God, we could not make it through the dangers and pitfalls that seek to break and destroy us in today's world.

B--...But that *with* God, and through our *responding* TO Him with a "***Voice of AWE***," we'll be able to find spiritual, emotional, and physical peace from the struggles and dangers of life.

8. [PRAYER]

**ENDNOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> This series is using the spiritual themes of the season of Lent to explore ways in which God *speaks* in order to sustain and empower us in and for life.

<sup>2</sup> They were originally called the "ten words," later the "Decalogue" or "Ten Commandments."

<sup>3</sup> And if *that's* our view of God, then no wonder people don't want to have anything to do with Christian faith!

<sup>4</sup> My purpose today is not to separate these commandments and explain each of them *in detail*, but instead to talk about their purpose *as a whole* -- to explore the meaning of God's "Law" and its role and significances in our lives today.

<sup>5</sup> Notice that these "Laws" first define who GOD is (Commandments 1-4) -- they are a direct expression of the nature and character of God through worship. By implication these same commandments tell us who WE are. But then notice that the next six commandments (Numbers 5-10) also define what it means to be together a covenant people OF God with our fellowship human beings. Taken as a whole, then, these commandments teach us who GOD is, who WE are in relationship to God, and how that knowledge should transform the way we live life in COMMUNITY.

<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew word used here is *yiraw* ("*moral reverence; dread; afraid*", Strong's Dictionary of Hebrew and Greek Dictionaries, Hebrew Word #H3372). This term and its 23 synonyms occur several hundred times in the English translations of our Old Testament, and more than a hundred times in our New Testament ("Fear," Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, p. 256). This sense of "awe/fear" is a common reaction by the biblical characters when confronted with God's divine presence.

<sup>7</sup> Miriam-Webster Dictionary Online, "Awe," <http://www.mw.com/dictionary/awe>.

<sup>8</sup> In other words, God's Laws set standards that seem so high and lofty that it would be *impossible* for us to achieve them *without* God's help and presence. In Galatians 3:19-26 in the New Testament, this is exactly what the apostle Paul also says is the role of the Law, as well. There he says that the Law serves to make one aware of our own human limitations, including sin. My point is that "*Awe/Reverential Fear*" is a good, healthy thing. It keeps us humble, prevents us from getting a "big head," and motivates us to keep our lives pure. "*It is in the exacting, inclusive sense of an absolute love that the fear of the Lord becomes the principle of human behavior and the beginning of wisdom*" (S. Terrein, "Fear," Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, p. 259).

<sup>9</sup> Notice, too that the people to whom these Laws are given (the people of Israel) have already been saved, quite literally -- redeemed from slavery in Egypt, and chosen by God to be His own covenant people. In other words, grace and salvation *precede* the requirement of obedience -- obedience is to be a *response* to salvation, not a *condition* of it. For the person of Christian faith, this means that obedience to God's Laws is to our *response* to His love, NOT the *stipulation* for us receiving it.

Former homiletics teacher and Bible commentator Fred Craddock explains it this way, "*Before these laws [i.e., in the exodus out of Egypt], God has already taken the initiative to save people. To obey, then, is to act in grateful response, to live out one's role in a covenant.... [The Decalogue, therefore,] defines the limits of what it means to be a covenant people. One who fails to live by these stipulations has placed him or herself outside the covenant*" (Fred Craddock, et al, Preaching the New Common Lectionary, p. 49).