

“Blues from Gallatin”
Philippians 3:4b-14; Exodus 20:1-20 (selected)
World Communion Sunday

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

¹Then God spoke all these words:

²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³You shall not murder.

¹⁴You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵You shall not steal.

¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

¹⁸When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, ¹⁹and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.” ²⁰Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.”

Philippians 3:4b-14

^{4b}If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:

⁵circumcised on the eighth day,
 a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin,
 a Hebrew born of Hebrews;
 as to the law, a Pharisee;
⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church;
 as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷Yet whatever gains I had,
 these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss
 because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things,
 and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ
⁹and be found in him,
 not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law,
 but one that comes through faith in Christ,
 the righteousness from God based on faith.

¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own;

but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. ■

The Sermon

Upon witnessing what it looked like during God’s declaration of the Ten Commandments—thunder and lightning, the sound of a trumpet, the mountain smoking—the people had this great reaction to Moses:

They were petrified, and shaking, and stood off at a distance, and they said, “*You* speak to us, and we’ll listen, but *don’t let God* speak to us, or we’ll die.”

And Moses’s reaction is even more wonderful: he said, “Don’t be afraid; God is putting the fear of God into you.” And it’s not exactly written this way, but Moses seems to be saying, “Don’t worry about it—but if I were you, I would make sure to try real hard not to commit any of those sins.”

Historical epochs later, a young man named Saul had been getting everything right: he was a highly accomplished zealot. Zealots are irritating. It’s in the job description. And Saul was the best. He was so much more than irritating. Saul was a terrorist.

But later, having become Paul at some unidentified point in his ongoing transformation at the hands of Jesus, he looked back on that zealous kid he used to be, and on top of the raw shame of the atrocities he had helped to carry out against Christians,

he recognized that all of that zealotry—
 the merit badges he had earned,
 the perfect nationalist fervor he’d carried within him,
 the Bible verses he had memorized,
 the violence and terror he had inflicted,

the ancient rules he had long since mastered
and lorded over everybody else,
the perfection of his identity as a card carrying, DNA-proven member
of the family of the Covenant People—

when he finally really *met* the God he thought he had known, and to whom he thought his actions would have been so pleasing, he realized that not only had he misunderstood what it meant to be faithful; he had misunderstood what it meant to be human. He hadn't even really understood what it meant to be himself, which may be why, eventually, Saul became Paul.

Have you ever realized that something wonderful is out there— accessible to you if you can look for it carefully and persistently enough to find it—that connects you with a deeper truth that feels simultaneously new and exciting, and yet at some deep level inside you, you feel like you are only recognizing something you have always known about?

The Law gave people an articulation of how a people becomes the Covenant People, the People of God, and it's pretty baseline stuff.

As for each other, don't murder, don't steal, don't go after things or people for yourself that are already part of other peoples' covenants. It's not all about you and what you want as an individual. There are limits.

As for God, don't be confusing other gods with God. God is God, so respond accordingly.

Baseline expectations. Don't do this short list of negative things toward God or to each other.

And then Paul found out that for God, that was not ever supposed to be the final word.

Imagine a life that really is life.

Imagine what happens when, beyond not forgetting that God exists and not taking from your neighbor, you found your true calling—in other words you finally heard what God has been saying since the beginning—when you met Jesus and heard him teach his followers:

Give food to hungry people;
give water to thirsty people;
welcome strangers;
take care of sick people;
visit people who are imprisoned.

Love one another, just as I have loved you.

Follow me, and I will have you fishers fishing for people.

Something wonderful is out there.

In the mid-1950s when my Dad was a teenager living on the Farm in north central Indiana, if he was driving home from a date night or something, he'd always be sure to keep driving long enough so that he would still be in the car at 11:00, when a station broadcasting from Ernie's Record Mart in Gallatin, Tennessee would invariably start off their late night blues broadcast with The Clovers singing "One Mint Julep."

Dad waited for that blues broadcast, waited attentively for those radio waves to come streaming silently across the dark cornfields waving under the moonlight, in the midst of gravel roads and old trees and darkened town squares and quiet farmhouses;

and in the deep blue of midnight in the countryside, for a transcendent hour, the beat that thumps in your chest and the voices that lift your spirits even when they sing from despair, would carry the

incontrovertible evidence that there is a wide and good world somewhere out there over the horizon, and that there are some things deeper than words that all people have in common.

We get this transmission, impossibly coming out in broadcast waves that somehow still reach us powerfully enough to beat in our chest, and the broadcast goes all over the world.

And when I feel like surely the Word is overwhelmed and lost in the sea of words and information, overtaken by zealots or submerged under the fear behind the bellowing voices of our age,

at midnight, out in the country, you can still hear it: the way to live, the pathway to life, as our infinite God comes down to earth and beats the rhythm of the Word in our chests—in mountain towns in North Carolina;

in Kenya, in Hungary, in Taiwan, in Hollywood, in the Philippines, in places in the Middle East so dangerous that we can't even print or say the names of PC(USA) personnel who serve there bringing the word, and the human, physical care, of the Prince of Peace.

And God keeps broadcasting that beat, all over the world, deep into the night,

and by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ invites us to live; invites us to worship; shows us how to obey; lets us know that whoever and wherever and whatever we are,

today, we are one family,

grasping at hope in a crust of bread and a taste of grapes, remembering in our bones something we never saw, and knowing to a certainty that it is, for all of us, everywhere, the body and blood of the Son of God who gave up everything so that you and I would live.

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