

LIGHT FOR THE JOURNEY IV

Ordinary Time

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20
Matthew 22:34-40

A Sermon Preached by
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Seattle, Washington 98125
October 8, 2017

Scripture.

First Scripture Reading. Listen for the Word of God

Exodus: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20¹

Then God spoke all these words:

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

You 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.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses the Lord's name.

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

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

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You 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.

When 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, and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of God upon you so that you do not sin."

Second scripture reading. Listen again for the word of God.

Matthew 22:34-40²

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Old Testament. 1989.

² The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New Testament. 1989

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This is the greatest and first commandment. “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Prayer:

May these words and our time together
be in service to you and your ministry and your call, O God.
—Amen.

David Anderson, Church Administrator and Guest Preacher

Greetings to you on this sunny Seattle morning!

I generally write the introduction to our church weekly email that Erin Lovejoy-Guron puts together, and I always start with a brief weather report. It’s a habit and a discipline to get me into the moment and out of the tasks in front of me. It’s a chance to look beyond the walls. I try to remember what’s going on in Seattle can be very different from the reality of those reading that greeting in other places, with other weather and other situations. So we share the reality of weather and circumstance with the reminder that the one receiving is often in a different place than the one delivering.

This year we’re on a sermon series of migration. This fall we begin the first of four parts with the theme of Light for the Journey. It reflects the two senses of both being light with what we’re carrying, and also the light of hope that goes with us and before us. So far this fall Peter Ilgenfritz talked about leaving behind grudges, fear, paranoia, and self-pity. Debra Jarvis talked about leaving behind the desire to hoard, whether manna or spiritual food. Amy Roon talked about leaving behind our need for proof and certainty. And today the theme is about leaving behind narcissism and selfishness. That’s a lot to leave behind!

Yet the scripture today is the Ten Commandments. There seems to be a certain irony in taking on the Ten Commandments when we’re trying to travel lighter! I have this image from the 1956 movie “The Ten Commandments”, Charlton Heston hauling these heavy stone tablets down the mountain... not exactly a scene of packing light for the rest of the journey!

And yet...scholars remind us that the reason and purpose for ancient Israelites to list these commandments was exactly to help them travel. They are an articulation of what society needs: commitment and community. Moving from a place of self-interest to a place of respect for and appreciation of neighbors, friends, and strangers. Supporting the common good, helping all people, and not treating some people as objects for the comfort of others. They’re lessons we still need to learn and hear in this culture, in this society.

And these Ten Commandments are not overridden by Jesus’ commandment to love. Love God, and love one another, yes! That is the core. And, love is an action verb. So how do we do that? We acknowledge and respect the Force greater than us; reject false gods, respect a rhythm of life that can sustain us all, honor elders, and don’t kill, and respect relationships and all people. These are tools and helps. These commandments are one set of the tools and helps that can help us. Our own covenant is another that helps us as this community affirm and articulate our common values and commitments. How appropriate that we’re in the process of exploring a revision to ours, as we seek

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to name understandings and aspirations. It's about traveling light, with necessities, and listening to the Still Speaking God.

And all of that is a way for me to look inward and realize how healthy it is to look at the baggage I can drop, and refocus on the necessities! This week marks my 20 years on staff here at University Congregational United Church of Christ [UCUCC], and I confess that I have some baggage, and that it's a good time to refocus and travel lighter! So what would I name as baggage to shed for me? for us? Certainly some of the meetings and agendas and details. Certainly some slights and difficult or painful conversations: those I've been on the receiving end of, and those where I've slighted or offended. That sets me free to learn from and change my self and my behaviors.

There are other things I want to leave behind, and invite you to do so also. But it's not as simple as setting something down. I want to leave behind my inherent racism, my unconscious white privilege, my inherent male privilege. My ways of separating and implying "other" with people I know and with people I love and with people I've never met. Yet I don't just set that down. It takes work and intentionality and study and staying aware. It takes hearing the pain of those who hurt, and it takes me listening, not discounting or fixing or explaining or defending. That's a lot to leave behind and it's a life-long journey. I'm grateful for Black Lives Matter and our own Racial Justice work here, who call me to the ongoing work and awareness, and change and action. This setting down is one of liberation for others, and for me, for my relationships, for those I care for, for all of society. It's moving toward a vision of equality and appreciation and justice.

Other things to leave behind: My propensity for perfection and fear of failure and push to do everything. I have failed often. [Laughter.] And in the midst of that I have failed often. I remember the time I was caught up in the budget process and made a weekend call, launched into some issues with someone's budget, only to find out they'd just had a death in the family. The times I mis-projected some numbers and a committee had to scramble. Times I didn't communicate, or was difficult or unhelpful, or did the wrong thing, or didn't do the right thing. The public failures can be hard on the ego. The private ones can be hard on my heart. And, yes, I must try to do what I can, and to do as well as I can. And that takes discernment and challenge and reflection. And sometimes failures are just what's needed. Some failures I feel just fine with. Sometimes the trying and learning and moving ahead are what allows for growth. So I invite us to leave behind the propensity for perfection even in our striving.

I invite us to continue to find ways to set aside unhealthy hierarchies. Those can be with power, with privilege, with knowledge. There's another hierarchy I invite us to try and set aside: a hierarchy of faithfulness, either in programs or people. I'll call it an unhealthy holy hierarchy, where it's easy to give the work of some programs or ministries more weight or virtue than others. But it takes worship *and* education *and* care *and* service. We each have passions and commitments, and I believe we're called to live those out, and in community to celebrate and honor those of others and the variety of perspectives and the variety of ways of service.

I also invite us to find ways to focus our ministry. It's easy to covet programs or strengths of other churches and feel we have to replicate them. It's harder to be in a process of discernment for what we're called to do and be, and to rest into the knowledge that we can't and don't need to do it all, but rather to do what we *do* do well.

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I also invite us to set aside a false god of the status quo and being nice as ultimate good. I'm learning how the status quo keeps us in places of power and disempowerment, of unhealthy norms that are soul-crushing and disheartening. We can embrace a commitment to call out injustice, to disturb calm deadly waters, to make room for the new, and to find ways to affirm and honor and embrace and respect and hear.

I also invite us to set aside the false god of "to be busy is to be good and faithful." Easy for me to say, with my to-do lists and sometimes frenetic ways! But I know we *do* need to act, and we *do* need to rest. Sabbath rhythm gives strength for the journey and life-giving essence for the challenge.

And the scripture today reminds me that there are some things I hope we carry can forward and carry lightly.

I hope we carry forward a commitment to process, as we talk and discern and decide and act. Because process is about respecting and honoring people, with a variety of perspectives and passions. Process is about being willing to listen and being willing to be changed. Sometimes that's really hard when I want to just get some things done, or move ahead. But relationship is important. It's what Moses demonstrated in his commitment to the Law of Love and hanging in there with his people. It's what Jesus showed in all his relationships.

I invite us to carry forward an awareness of the need for a faithful structure, even as we continue to work and adapt and correct ours. Our structure may not be the most efficient one. But I think efficiency can be a false god: it can ignore the human factor. Top efficiency? Perhaps not. Effective and faithful? Yes -- undergirded by the Law of Love. But one to carry lightly.

I invite us to carry forward ongoing gratitude and appreciation. We're blessed with this ministry, and with God's gifts. It is an amazing privilege to be with this with people who have values of care and service, and worthy of our care and embrace. What a legacy we have. And what a future!

Other things I want to carry forward on this journey: In my work here I want to continue to try to be self-aware. I confess: I'm an introvert and I'm shy and sensitive. Those traits can make it harder for me to be out there, in front, visible, vocal, vociferous, preaching. Yet sometimes that's just what's needed: what the system needs, and what I need. And, yes, there are other times when I just want to spend some quality time with a good spreadsheet!

Other things: I want to carry the reminder that my work, my ministry here, is not about me; it's about the ministry. And yet it is about me; it's about my own commitment, conscientiousness, and experience. And it's that for us all: about the way we're together in community, to hold the pain of events like this week in Las Vegas³ and Puerto Rico⁴ and Seattle and in our own community. And also how we're together in times of joy and celebration, and care and support. That's the ministry we support.

³ Las Vegas: A shooting by one person resulted in the deaths of 48 and injury of 546. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2017_Las_Vegas_shooting. Accessed 11/16/2017

⁴ Puerto Rico: Hurricane Maria (category 5) made landfall on Puerto Rico with catastrophic effect that hampered rescue and repair efforts. See <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/10/what-happened-in-puerto-rico-a-timeline-of-hurricane-maria/541956>. Accessed 11/16/2017

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I invite us each to carry forward commitment. Commitment to this ministry, with prayers and pledging and time and care. I believe it's commitment that's not ultimately to the institution, but to this ministry. This institution is a vehicle for ministry and cannot be a sacred cow above criticism. And yes, I am a part of this institution as it supports this ministry. But I believe we can't make a false god of the institution, or even the ministry. God alone is God. And God is still speaking. And our invitation is to respond.

Those are some of the places I'm heading between now and next May when this worship series on migration concludes. And it's where I hope we're heading together in the next five or 10 years, or 20 years or 500 years.⁵

Let us continue on this journey together, in deep commitment, in truth-telling and appreciation and honesty, in love together, with our Creator, with each other, with this world. Migration can be difficult, unwanted, and full of painful loss. This series reminds me of how much we need each other. I know the importance of tasks and duties and responsibilities. And I also know that those are all for the sake of ministry, of service. Twenty years ago I came here full of excitement and trepidation. Today I still have the excitement – and trepidation. I also have amazing connections and people and stories and shared ministry together.

For all of that, and for all that lies before us, I am grateful and hopeful. I do believe God is with us as we journey together, upheld with the Law of Love. For all of that, thanks be to God!

Amen.

Benediction

Let us go forth, loving God so much that we love nothing else too much,
and fearing or respecting God enough so that we need fear nothing else at all.

Amen.

UCUCC: DA

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2017/11/15/2017

⁵ A reference to the 500th anniversary this month of the Martin Luther's going public with his 95 theses and thus setting off the Protestant Reformation.