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Exodus 20: 1 – 17  
1 Corinthians 1: 18 – 25Ps. 19  
John 2: 13 – 22

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It is not your average day in the wilderness. An average day would be yet more manna, along with a pillar of cloud by day and one of fire by night. And people, always people, milling about, on the move. But today...today, there is thundering and rumbling! And there is shaking and quaking – some of which is the earth itself, and some of which is the people. Because God, the almighty, omnipotent Yahweh, has descended upon Mt. Sinai.

The Hebrew people have been in the wilderness for three weary months since they escaped Pharaoh's troops at the Red Sea. They have followed Moses out here into the middle of God knows where. Literally. The people quake with fear – fear of the unknown they face each day, fear of the future, and fear of this wondrous and powerful God.

God has chosen these people to *be* the people of God, to be the people who show the rest of the world how it's done, and God wants to tell them how this is going to work. Up until now, the Israelites have been a wandering and rather fractious bunch of people. God wants to let them know how to be in relationship, how to *be* community. So, God proceeds to give them some directives – what we have come to know as the Ten Commandments.

"The statutes of the Lord are just and rejoice the heart," the Psalmist writes. "...more to be desired are they than gold, more than much fine gold, sweeter far than honey, honey in the comb." That is probably *not* how many of us think about the Ten Commandments when we drive by them in someone's yard or see them in a county courthouse. They have come down to us as a rather black and white, harsh, legalistic religious code, and not really as something that is sweet or makes one's heart rejoice.

But what if we *could* hear them as something to be desired and enjoyed? What if we could hear them as God's way of loving us into relationship – with God and with one another? We might begin by referring to them by their more traditional Greek name, the Decalogue, or the Ten Words. These Ten Words are the loving gift of a gracious, merciful God who woos us just like a lover longing for the intended.

It is important to God that God's intentions are clearly understood by the people of God. Which is why God comes in person, so to speak, to speak to all the people. God chooses to deliver these words of love first hand, and God has chosen to wait until just the right moment to speak, and that moment is now.

In the three months since their flight out of Egypt, this loosely organized bunch of people have gone from being slaves to being sojourners. They have very little in common with each other than their relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and their former status as slaves. So, they have been in the process of becoming one people, God's people, under the leadership of Moses. They've had three months of resting from their experiences of oppression and mistreatment. They've had three months of being healed and renewed in body, mind and spirit by the gracious providence of Yahweh. Now, they have spent three days preparing and purifying themselves for this encounter with God.

So now, God speaks. Not as some distant, unconcerned, great and powerful Oz, or as a clockmaker god that sets things in motion, then walks away. For if that was the case, God would not choose to speak at all. But God *does* speak because God is a loving, personal, creative God who deigns to dwell with humanity. God is a God who deeply desires to be in an intimate relationship with the people of God. God desires community. So, God speaks. Perhaps not quietly or gently, given the thunder and rattling, but with great love and familiarity.

God addresses the people in the singular, familiar “you,” as one does for a close friend, a family member, a lover. Is God speaking to each individual person, or to the nation of Israel as one people? Yes. It is both/and. It is God speaking to the people of God in all places and for all time. It is God calling all people universally into a loving relationship. It is God speaking to each of us.

We have heard and seen these Ten Words so many times. They are deeply familiar, and to many people, they seem harsh, stern, abrupt. They sound like the “No, no, no’s!” that a parent says to a small child, not able to explain all the love, experience and wisdom that lie behind the rules. And perhaps that is not such a far-fetched metaphor for the relationship between God and these people. Can we hear the loving, the caring and the nurturing that are behind these words? Can we hear the words, if not as a serenade exactly, then as a loving proposal of covenant? Can we hear in these words what is being commended as well as what is being condemned? Listen once again with your heart.

And God speaks saying, ‘Let’s start with the relationship between you and me. I am the Lord your God; I have delivered you out of oppression. I have watched over you, nursed you, and nurtured you. I have set you free so that you might willingly choose to love me. There is to be nothing that means as much to you as I do, so that nothing stands in the way of our relationship. Let go of all those other things to which you cling so tightly. Desire me more than anything else in your life.’

‘You are not able to make any idols, any images, of me because I am beyond your wildest imaginations! There is nothing of which you can conceive, in heaven or on earth, that I am not greater than. Any representation of me is inadequate to express all that I am and all that I shall be to you. An image or an idol cannot think or feel or act in relationship. If you choose to worship some unmoving and unmoved idol, then you take away who I really am to you. I am a zealous and impassioned God! I suffer your pain. I rejoice in your joy. I revel in your life. My judgment is nothing compared to my mercy. I *do* forgive. I *am* merciful. I love you. Be open to all that I am.’

‘I want you to show the rest of the world what it is like to be loved by me. And to love me. So, declare my name throughout the earth! Don’t speak ill of me either in jest or in anger. Don’t use my name frivolously. For if what you say is heard by others, perhaps they will not want to be drawn to me as you have been. My will to be in relationship with them will not be fulfilled. Honor my name.’

‘When I created all that is, seen and unseen, I also created rest on the Sabbath. Rest is what complements – what completes – creation. Without rest, creation is in chaos. And so are you. So, set aside Sabbath time – each day, each week, each year. Time to just be, not do. That way, for at least some period of time, all of creation is as I have intended it to be. This rest is a reminder to you that I’ve got this. Just rest in me.’

‘Now, let’s look at your relationships with one another. Look after your parents as you and they grow older. Your mother and father have been co-creators with me of you. They are also in my image, no matter how brightly or how dimly that shows. Your life shall be immeasurably enriched by your

faithful care of them, just as I have faithfully cared for you. And your children will learn by example how to follow in the faith. Honor your parents.'

'Embrace and preserve life because it is precious and sacred. I have given life to all things that have life, and I have set you as stewards of creation that you might respect and uphold that gift of life in each part of creation. Choose life.'

'Be faithful to one another, but especially to the person to whom you are most committed, the one with whom you share your life. For in that relationship, you represent the smallest of faith communities. It is the model for how to love, how to sometimes fail but be forgiven, how to be renewed. You must *be* the right person as well as find the right person. Be faithful.'

'Remember – have a special regard for – others as I have remembered you. Enjoy and share your blessings without usurping those of others. Be mindful of their needs and desires. Rejoice in their blessings. Remember that everything you have in life – and your very life itself – is a gift from me. Be generous.'

'Uphold one another so that you might live in trust with each other and might preserve the well-being of everyone. Commit yourself to truth and speak well of one another. Be gracious'

'Decide carefully what you truly need, so that no one or no part of creation is diminished because of your choices and actions. Be satisfied with less. Live simply. Care only for what nourishes you. I will provide all that you need because I love you and you are mine.'

And so God speaks. [Is this the sacred and original forerunner of Robert Fulghum's *All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten?*] God speaks about love and relationship and community. God speaks to the people in the wilderness that day, and down through the generations to us. They are the same issues with which Jesus wrestles in the Temple. Jesus is condemning what the Temple leadership have done to pollute the relationship between God and the people of God. And with one another. The Jewish leaders have forgotten what the real point of the law is: loving God and one another. Instead, they have stacked law upon law that have built barriers and a rigid structure that have squeezed the life out of God's loving covenant. And Jesus will have none of it.

God doesn't speak in terms of laws that might be broken – there is no mention of penalties, though obviously there are consequences for our choices and actions. But the Hebrews respond in fear to God. The people in the Temple probably respond in fear to Jesus. How do we respond?

A more appropriate response than fear to this loving proposal, this courting of our hearts by God, is reverence, which is not the same as either fear or obedience. Reverence is a choice to center ourselves, deeply and engagingly, with all our heart and soul and mind and strength on God as Lord of all. And then that reverence is reflected in our relationships with others, which then creates community.

God continues to get our attention from time to time, calling us back into relationship when we stray. Just like the people at Sinai, just like the people around Jesus, we turn away from God and away from each other in that separation known as sin – or broken relationships. The good news is that God never rescinds the offer to be in relationship with us. Or to help us be in relationship with each other.

May we learn to hear God's revelations, God's ten words to us, as God's love song that keeps playing, over and over again. +