

TBZ -- WPC, I – THOU

EXODUS 20:1-17

2/1/02 @ TEMPLE BETH ZION, 2/3/02 @ WESTMINSTER

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Let me make some personal remarks. First, I want to express, for myself and also on behalf of Westminster Presbyterian Church, my gratitude for this singular honor – worshipping with you this evening and having the opportunity to bring to you some words of reflection on tonight’s portion from Exodus. Secondly, I want to thank-you for bringing Harry and Michele Rosenfeld to Buffalo. It is always a gift to have a soul-mate in ministry and that is the kind of relationship I sense emerging between Harry and me. I also look forward very much to Carol and me spending time with Harry and Michele – so that we can gossip about all of you!

Unfortunately, Carol is not able to be here this evening. She is the director of education and outreach at the Buffalo Philharmonic and is running two programs there this evening. When we were preparing breakfast this morning she asked me, after hearing the weather report which called for more ice and wind and snow, she asked me if we would be having the service tonight. I told her that I did not know and that I was glad it wasn’t me who had to decide.

But our recent weather woes do remind me of the quip by Lady Talmudge Astor as she was being helped over the rail of the Titanic into a life boat. She turned to her escort and said, “I rang for ice but this ridiculous!” It could be worse I suppose!

We are the inheritors of an historic relationship, you and I. A friendship of fifty years between our congregations and clergy.

It started with Joe Fink and Al Butzer. The fire that destroyed your sanctuary many years ago allowed Westminster to open our doors to you, so that you could keep shabbos in our sanctuary during the construction of this remarkable building. Marty Goldberg and Tom Stewart carried the torch during their long and fruitful ministries. Their affection for each other reflected the warm relationship our congregations had come to enjoy. Their tours of the Holy Land are fondly remembered by members of Westminster and I am sure some of you here tonight.

Coming back to Buffalo four years ago one of the most persistent questions I was asked was, “when are we going to get our friendship with Temple Beth Zion going again?”

I can tell you it is going just fine. Not only am I indebted to Harry for introducing me to Buffalo’s best deli – Mastman’s – but when our caterer moved to Seattle he gave me the name and number of your caterer Karen Goodman. I had to swear on a stack of Bibles to Harry that I would not steal her away but I will tell you everyone loves her at 724 Delaware Avenue.

More seriously this pulpit exchange that begins tonight and will be completed when Harry preaches at Westminster next Sunday morning was one of several joint activities planned at a luncheon hosted by Arnold Gardner at the Buffalo Club last fall. The friendship is alive and well!

Tonight's portion from Exodus, the giving of the Ten Commandments, is an auspicious text for a Presbyterian pastor to reflect upon with a Jewish congregation.

When I emailed my sister in Cincinnati to tell her I would be with you tonight offering some thoughts on the Ten Commandments I told her about this incredible sanctuary. The magnificent rendering of the Tablets of the Law by Ben Shahn here in the bima behind me; the scalloped walls of your sanctuary rising in praise to God – like the arms of this congregation raised in gratitude to the Holy One of Israel – the ten sections of these massive, permanent walls representing the Ten Commandments, these may be all the exposition on the Commandments we need. How can I add to Ben Shahn and Max Abramovitz! But here I go.

My thesis this evening is that the Ten Commandments at the heart of the Jewish community, in the very mortar and aura of this worship space, these Commandments are also at the heart of the vision which has inspired our friendship for these 50 years and inspires us still!

One last personal remark. Fifteen years ago the Presbyterian Church issued a statement that appeared on the front page of the New York Times. So noteworthy was it that my history of science professor in graduate school David Kohn – a confirmed agnostic at best – pulled me aside to tell me how pleased he was someone in Christendom was finally making some sense and a little progress.

The statement entitled, “A Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews” called for, among other things, 1) the recognition by Presbyterians that the God we worship is the same God; 2) that dialogue not proselytizing should define our relationship; and 3) that Christians would do well to remember, contemplate and honor Jews as the first people of the covenant.ⁱ

It is in that spirit that I venture to make some comments tonight about the Ten Commandments and what they might mean for our friendship. In the venerable tradition of Protestant preaching I have come tonight with an introduction to the text, three points and a conclusion.

Introduction to the text: when it comes to the Ten Commandments Christians are a bit myopic. We see the giving of the Commandments as an event that took place in something of an historic vacuum – or at least in the wilderness. Because we did not experience oppression under pharaoh we tend to overlook the Exodus that precedes God speaking to Moses on Mt. Sinai and Moses thundering to the people.

But the key to understanding the commandments is, indeed, the deliverance.ⁱⁱ When they were wandering the wilderness those former slaves were not so far removed from old pharaoh that they had forgotten what it was like back in Egypt. In Egypt, they had food and water. In Egypt, they knew what to expect the next day. Longing for Egypt caused them to question what in the world they were doing out there in that wilderness. And so they grew rebellious.

This is human nature. We filter out hardship. Whether it's the Depression or wars or the stomach flu I had last week we filter out the hardness of the experience. At the Martin Luther King, Jr. breakfast a week ago one of the wise older women said to the audience, “we forget how hard it was for our ancestors.” It's why Yom Hashoa is so important.

So I say to the confirmation class if you want to understand the Ten Commandments you have to understand the Exodus. What we discover is that the God who commands Israel is also the God who delivers Israel.

We had a marvelous pediatrician by the name of Chuck Mache when our first son was born here in Buffalo. Some of you may remember him. He came to the hospital to ensure Ian's safe delivery, performed Ian's first physical, visited with us to pronounce that we had a very healthy little boy, celebrated our good news. Later, as we got to know Dr. Mache, we discovered how tough he could be if he thought we were too permissive or casual about our son's health.

The God who delivers us out of bondage is also the God who takes a vested interest in our continuing well-being and way of life. The Ten Commandments are the moral medicine, if you will, that protect not just individuals but the entire community from recreating the disease of injustice and oppression suffered under pharaoh.

Understanding then that God's people had deliverance fresh in their hearts and minds **point number one tonight is: the Ten Commandments represent God's alternative to the forces of death be they in Egypt, Rome, eastern Europe or Buffalo.**ⁱⁱⁱ

Sometimes we don't see or believe that there is an alternative to the forces of slavery, the forces of death and darkness. I attended a retreat recently. As part of our getting to know one another we were asked to share one of our deepest fears. In our little circle of twelve, four people said quite plainly their greatest fear was death. Either their own or that of a loved one.

Death the great leveler. I am now reading The Iliad of all things for a men's book group that I belong to. Ken Friedman is a member of this group. His candid observations about the connections of our reading with life are some of the richest moments our group enjoys. But you remember when the Achaeans were being routed by the Trojans and the leaders of the army go to Achilles to enlist him to fight the Trojans and he refuses. "One and the same lot," says Achilles, "awaits the man who hangs back and the man who battles hard. The same honor for the coward and the brave. They both go down to Death."^{iv}

Sometimes we don't see or believe there is a viable alternative to the forces of death. We become lethargic or angry or cynical or all three.

It describes a certain malaise I sense in our city right now. After years of turf battles and jockeying for power between city hall and the police and fire and teacher unions we have an irony of major proportions: a city-wide fiscal crisis and a mayor ushered into office unopposed with the lowest voter turn out in years. If this were California we would be in the midst of a revolution.

But the good news from Exodus tonight is that there is an alternative to the life of slavery, the forces of death. The God who delivered us is the God who commands us. This God is above every other god. This God cannot be managed or recruited or co-opted by anyone or anything. God's Ten Commandments give us the alternative of life to the despair of death.

Point two. The Ten Commandments make human community possible.

Rabbi Harold Kushner talks in his new book, “Living a Life That Matters: Resolving the Conflict Between Conscience and Success,” about the “yetzer ha-ra” in each one of us. The will to selfishness, the impulse to evil.

But, says Kushner, we cannot live without yetzer ha-ra. Even if it a skilled surgeon could remove yetzer ha-ra from us it could not be done without doing irreparable damage to our soul.

He recalls a “Star Trek” episode in which Captain Kirk is split into two Kirks: one totally good and moral, the other mean, selfish and scheming. The point is the good Kirk is totally ineffective as a leader, wanting to make good things happen but unable to do so. Finally, he has to be reunited with his worst half to become an effective leader again.^v

The Ten Commandments recognize the reality of human nature. That each one of us has the capacity to seize and confiscate by power or cunning. We see this in young children who in their earliest training learn how to share and respect other’s space and property. Such training is the foundation of moral development.

I’ll never forget a comment made by one of my housemates when I was living with six other people in a house we rented in New Haven, CT when I was studying theology. At our first meeting, in early September, we were figuring out how to live together and get all the chores done – cleaning, food shopping, and so on. When one of our housemates suggested a system for keeping track of and scheduling who did what I said, “Oh, heck why do we need that? We are all responsible, nice people.” To which she looked me in the eye and said with deep conviction, “You can’t solve everything with love and goodness,” Tom.

Self interest is real. But it needs boundaries and limits and principles. Commandments. Or it runs amuck and destroys community. Although we may be experiencing something of a shift since September 11th I worry about this culture in which we are raising our children. If it feels good do it, think what you want, do what you want as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone. Poppycock as my grandmother used to say. God’s commandments make marriages and families and neighborhoods and schools places where people respect and honor and care for one another. That’s good news, as Lana Benatovich will tell you, for a region like ours where people are segregated by race and class and religion.

Point three. The Commandments reveal a God who extends the invitation to rest.

Hebrew scholar Walter Bruggemann says the conduct of God on the seventh day is in sharp contrast to the world of pharaoh. A world where there is no rest but only feverish productivity.

The command to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy describes a peaceable kingdom if you will, neighbor-respecting shalom that reveals the rule of God. Life not driven by anxious production and consumption. Life that knows limits to such activity and finds alternative ways of being free of exploitation and covetousness.

Of all the commandments this is the one that speaks most personally to me. Somehow many of us clergy end up in this profession because there is something of the rescuer or do-gooder in us. It turns out to be a hand in glove relationship because someone always needs to be rescued. There aren't enough hours in the day.

It is very easy to fall into the trap of rescuing everyone else and victimizing your family or your friendships or your personal growth. I have been there and I have done that.

But you do not have to be a minister or a rabbi to fall into this trap – you can be a doctor or lawyer or teacher or business person, you can even be “retired”; anyone can succumb to slavish work in some brickyard of the soul or in your day to day world at home or work or school.

Let me close this way. When Arnold Gardner and Rabbi Rosenfeld got us together last autumn it wasn't long after September 11th. There was, I remember, a discernable sense of responsibility around the table. The sense that it was time to seize the moment and do everything we could not only in our personal lives and our congregational life, but also with this wonderful friendship of fifty years, to do everything we could to make the fabric of our community better and stronger.

And so a veteran of this Temple Beth Zion/Westminster friendship, Doug Kirkpatrick, suggested it might be a good thing for us to revisit Martin Buber's masterpiece I and Thou. Especially, said Doug, the first chapter where Buber talks about the I-It versus the I-Thou relationship.^{vi}

The absence of the I-Thou, says Buber, signals the reign of death. The kind of thinking that professes there are no reliable values. The kind of thinking that established pharaoh's brickyard and Auschwitz's ovens and leads to acts of terrorism like we witnessed on September 11th and are seeing now in Israel.

But the Ten Commandments embody the I-Thou relationship God desires to have with each one of us and the I-Thou relationship we are called to have with one another.

I-Thou. That is the message this fifty-year friendship sends to our community.

A message at the heart of Mitzvah Day. A message that is a cool drink in the hot desert of bigotry and prejudice and fear that suck the life out of our city and region.

Temple Beth Zion/Westminster Presbyterian. I-Thou. As relevant today as when Joe Fink and Al Butzer reached across Delaware Avenue to embrace. Amen.

ⁱ “A Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews,” a paper commended to the church for study and reflection by the 199th General Assembly (1987) Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). This paper includes the commissioning of the study committee and the seven points of understanding with detailed explanation.

ⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann makes this point in his essay on the Ten Commandments in his Theology of the Old Testament: testimony, dispute, advocacy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) 187ff.

ⁱⁱⁱ This and the following two points of interpretation of meaning of the Ten Commandments are made in Brueggemann's essay.

^{iv} Homer, The Iliad from book 9 “The Embassy to Achilles,” translation by Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990) 251.

^v Harold S. Kushner, Living a Life That Matters: resolving the conflict between conscience and success. (New York: Knopf, 2001) 57.

^{vi} Martin Buber, I and Thou (New York: Scribner, 1958) 34.