

October 8th: Hear

This Fall we return to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” Over the course of the year, we’ll read a wide variety of passages, from Old Testament stories, wisdom literature, prophetic teachings, scenes from the life of Jesus, and instructions for the early church—but in each, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative. Last year’s theme was “A Family Story,” and we focused on the identity and purpose of God’s beloved children—but this time around, we’ll be taking a closer look at the movement behind that belonging—the verbs that form the foundation of our faith and life together. Of course, love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

As we study together, the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. So as we read, and as we reflect, I want to challenge all of us to respond to these stories with action—with real, tangible ways that we can each show love to our hurting world. I want us to take these words of wisdom from our text and transform them into positive change in our community—so that our neighborhood, our city, our country, can be a place where God’s love is seen and felt by everyone.

Let’s take a moment to listen for God’s voice before we begin:

Eternal God,

We listen to your Word and we remember that you have always spoken to us—you offer wisdom and guidance for our lives to combat some of our lesser impulses and unhealthy behaviors. You are ready to shepherd us towards the truth, but we often forget your advice, choosing instead to follow our wayward hearts. But this morning we are ready to listen, and we are ready to let your

commandments sink into our being in a new way. Open our ears, open our minds, open our souls to a more lifegiving way to live so that we might transform our world into the kingdom that you have always envisioned for your creation. Amen.

I think we can all agree, human beings are terrible at being rule followers. I don't know if it's in our DNA or something that we have grown into over time, but listening to instructions and obeying directions is something we are just not good at. At all.

Let me give you some examples:

How many of you have ever looked at a door clearly labeled "push" and pulled the door instead?

How many of you have looked up directions to drive somewhere, but then decided to take a "short cut" that definitely landed you in the middle of nowhere and you had to detour back to the original route?

How many of you know that you're supposed to return your shopping cart at the grocery store, but still occasionally leave it in your parking spot because you're running late to get somewhere?

How many of you have skipped past a pages long "Terms of Service" and just gone straight to the part where you sign your name?

How many of you have ever broken the law by speeding in a school zone?

How many of you have ever made cookies or brownies and thrown away the box halfway through, only to retrieve the box from the garbage because you forgot how long they need to be in the oven?

Yeah, me too. Now, I'm not saying all this to be mean, just to be real. Human beings struggle with being told what to do, we don't like someone else dictating how we should act. We prefer to do things our own way, don't we?

But what happens when human beings don't follow directions well? What happens when we don't listen to the rules? Well, I think all of us can understand that confusion and chaos happen very quickly when everyone

decides to make up their own rules. I mean, there's a reason that *Lord of the Flies* is such a classic novel, and I think it's because we all know that without any kind of structure or system, it is so easy for us to revert to our most primal impulses towards self-preservation and fear of others. We like to imagine that in a deserted island situation we'd build a pleasant and safe little utopia, but I think that would go out the window pretty quickly once resources became scarce, or if our survival was in question.

Today's story from the Book of Exodus brings us way back in human history, back to the time when the Israelites, who had formerly been enslaved in Egypt, have to reckon with their new freedom. They are newly liberated, on a journey to their promised homeland, without any of the burdens or struggles of their former life, and you would think that it would be a happy time—full of harmony and tranquility and kinship—right?

Well, not exactly.

In chapter 14, we have a moment when the Israelites are struggling with God's instructions. After the Israelites escaped from Egypt, we hear, "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to encamp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon. Pharaoh will think, 'The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert... As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, 'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!'"

And again in chapter 17, we have another example of a conflict that Moses has navigated as the Israelites are on the move. Verses 1 through 4 read, "The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no

water for the people to drink. So they quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses replied, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?” But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?” Then Moses cried out to the LORD, “What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.””

I feel for Moses, I really do. It’s not easy to lead chaotic and unpredictable human beings. Moses is pretty fed up with all this arguing and disagreement—so he goes to God at Mount Sinai and asks for help. God gives Moses quite a few directions for how to prepare for this encounter with God, and Moses shares those directions with the Israelites. After all of those preparations are complete, Moses goes up to the top of Mount Sinai to receive God’s advice.

Many of you have probably heard this passage before, and are familiar with a number of these instructions. If you’ve been paying attention, you’ve noticed that this passage is full of verbs—God seems to incorporate many specific actions into the commands that are given to God’s people. However, you might also have noticed that a lot of these verbs are written in the negative: don’t do this, or don’t do that. Don’t steal, don’t covet, don’t take the Lord’s name in vain. You shall not this, and you shall not that.

It can feel a little accusatory, right? A little harsh, maybe?

As anyone who has ever parented a toddler knows, this negative approach rarely works. Telling a young child what not to do, is often a recipe for them doing exactly what you’ve warned them against. Saying “no” to something is a fast track to making your child want and even demand that exact thing. Unfortunately, it’s often the same with adults. We’d like to believe we’ve grown up and evolved into more rational beings, but in my experience, telling someone not to covet their neighbor’s donkey or their brand new luxury car is a surefire way to stoke some jealousy.

In fact, modern parenting experts now preach about a different method of communication—speaking in a positive manner, focusing on what you’d like your child to do instead. But I think this approach could work equally well with adults—and all it takes is a little creativity. So what would happen if we reframed these historic commandments just slightly to fit this modern advice? Let’s take a look at what our list of commandments would sound like if we took away all the negative verbs and replaced it with simple instructions of what to do instead.

Number one: Make God the first priority in your life.

Number two: Worship God alone, and give God your whole heart.

Number three: Honor God’s name and say it with reverence.

Number four: Make time in your schedule to let your body, mind, and spirit rest.

Number five: Love your family, and obey your parents.

Number six: Keep other people’s bodies and souls safe from harm because all life is sacred.

Number seven: Remain faithful to your spouse.

Number eight: Respect the belongings of others.

Number nine: In all circumstances, tell the truth.

And number ten: Be satisfied with and grateful for the gifts that you have been given.

I want us to take a moment to digest these positive versions of God’s original instructions. How do they sound to you? Does hearing the Ten

Commandments framed this way make it easier or harder for you to hear them? Does this way of thinking make it easier or harder for you to want to follow them?

I can't speak for anyone else, but in my mind, I think hearing these commandments in a positive way reminds me that God's intent was always positive too. The goal was never to condemn or create restrictive rules, but to help human beings live into our freedom well. These commandments were shared with God's people so that we would have a common foundation, even in new situations and circumstances, so that we could live in harmony with each other and create a better future together. The whole purpose was to help us navigate our lives in a way that enhanced our liberty, rather than limiting it.

Our verb for today is hear: but not just in the physical sense of hearing something or being able to perceive sound, I mean hear in the deeper sense—like to absorb, to let sink in, to let those waves of sound travel down your ear canal, into the most permanent places inside your brain, so that what you hear takes up residence and puts down roots.

As we hear these commandments, let's reflect on our lives and ask ourselves: are we living in harmony? Are we trying to act in ways that bring wholeness? Are we living into the freedom that God has given us, or are we more concerned with limiting the behaviors of others? Are we treating others with dignity and respect? Are we focusing our attention on the things that are most important? Are we actually creating a better future together?

If not, that's understandable, our spiritual ancestors struggled with this too—but this is a moment when we can recommit ourselves to doing better. So if you're not living in alignment with God's instructions, today could be the day that you listen for God's voice and allow this divine instruction to speak into your current challenges. Today could be the day that you are reminded that our collective flourishing is built upon our individual, everyday actions. Today could be the day that you hear these positive versions and pick one to work on as you begin a new week. Today could be the day when you identify what

you're most struggling with, or a concept that you'd like to explore further as you grow in your faith. Today could be the day when you notice some behaviors in yourself that need to change so that you can be a better partner, or a better parent, or a better friend, or a better neighbor.

Most of all, my friends, I hope you hear this: our God loves you, our God has always intended for all of us to be free, and we are set free so that we can live in love with others.

Amen.