

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Third Sunday in Lent – March 8, 2015 – Theme for Lent: Covenant
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Exodus 20:1-17

For Our Reflection

The people of the earth having agreed
that the advancement of man [sic]
in spiritual excellence and physical welfare
is the common goal of mankind [sic];
that universal peace is the prerequisite
for the pursuit of that goal;
that justice in turn is the prerequisite of peace,
and peace and justice stand or fall together;
that iniquity and war inseparably spring
from the competitive anarchy of the national states;
that therefore the age of nations must end,
and the era of humanity begin.

- World Constitution: Preamble to the preliminary draft (1948)
Peace Prayers (p.119) edited by the staff of Harper San Francisco c.1992

Covenant: The Book(s)

Let's start with a definition:

The Bible [comes] from Greek βιβλία—**biblia**, meaning "books", which in turn is derived from βύβλος—**byblos** meaning "papyrus", from the ancient Phoenician city of Byblos which exported papyrus... These scriptures are groups of what were originally separate books, written over a long period of history, but sharing the same overall God-view. The first group, which later formed the [Hebrew or] Jewish Bible (**Tanakh**) consisted of 24 books, though Protestant Christians count this as 39 books. Other Christian denominations have even more books in their Old Testament called deuterocanonical books. Later additions after the birth of Jesus made up the [Greek or] New Testament consisting of 27 books in almost all Christian dominations...

A book of the Bible is an established collection of writings. For example, the book of Psalms consists of 150 songs (151 in some editions of the Septuagint), while the book of Jude is a half-page letter. Canon refers to the accepted books of the Bible differentiated from other sacred writings not accepted as inspired by God, which are not accepted as part of the Bible...

The Protestant Bible consists of 66 books. The Roman Catholic version... counts ...73 books, while the Eastern Orthodox version includes 77 or more.

<http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Bible>

Put simply: The Bible is actually a Library. And this LIBRARY or COLLECTION of books varies depending on what books are considered worthy of inclusion.

Jews, Christians and Muslims all consider this library, in various forms, a sacred collection of texts. Jews have at the core of their tradition the Torah or Law, the first five books. In addition they have historical, prophetic and interpretive books – some of which we find in our collection. Christians have what we call the Old and New Testaments – the latter includes stories about Jesus and letters describing the faith of the first Christians in the Mediterranean world. Muslims have both the Bible as we know it – from which they find their faith history rooted in the story of Ishmael – and the Quoran provided to them by their founding father, Muhammad. They consider Moses, Jesus and Muhammad to be God-messengers - prophets of their tradition. All of us consider ourselves people of The Book(s).

Muslims are adamant that the Quoran can only be properly read and understood in its original language, Arabic. Jewish rabbis study Torah in Hebrew in order to plumb the depths of a multivalent language written down over thousands years of shifting cultures and contexts. For 1500 years the Roman church insisted that our New Testament be read and understood in Greek and Latin – and that only ordained priests interpret for the people. In 1517 Martin Luther changed all that – for better and for worse – when he insisted that the people be allowed to interpret scripture for themselves. The combination of the Protestant movement and the printing press meant that the Bible was translated into the languages of the people – every language, every version an interpretation.

As Jewish rabbis know, every text has at least 70 interpretations. This is true in Christianity as well – except that each person tends to believe that their particular interpretation is the RIGHT one. If we as PROGRESSIVE Christians can loosen our grip on the need to be RIGHT – we will find that The Book(s) are more relevant, more meaningful, more universal than we once believed. And we might find that we have much in common with our fellow People of The Book(s) – which could lead to less tension, more peace in the world...something worth striving for.

Within The Book(s), The Book of Exodus (lit. “these are the names”) is the defining story of liberation and covenant for and with the Hebrew People and, therefore, for and with US. In this Book God liberates the Hebrew slaves from bondage to the Egyptians – and THEN – binds these people to Himself – as servants of the Lord God – through a Covenant of Obligations.

For to me the people of Israel are servants; they are my servants whom I brought out from the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. (Lev. 25:55)

The core of this Covenant of Obligations – elaborated upon in the Law of Moses – is:

עֲשֵׂרֵת הַדְּבָרֹת

Aseret Hadiberot

The Decalogue – The Ten Words –

interpreted in English (from the Greek mistranslation) as The Ten Commandments.

It is believed by scholars that The Ten Words may have served as a Creed for the early Hebrew people – as it did in later Judaism and then Christianity. This text was placed in the Ark of the Covenant and believed to have been inscribed by God on tablets of stone. (Ex. 31:18; 32:16) In various elaborations it is made clear that the penalty for breaking any of these “Words” is death. Therefore, to “choose life” one must voluntarily choose to abide by these ten “Words.”

The core instructions found in these Words is a Behavioral Covenant that forms the basis of most known ethical frameworks. These ten Words might be rendered in English as follows:

1. Worship no other Gods
2. Make no idols
3. Don't misuse my name
4. Observe the Sabbath
5. Honor your parents
6. Don't murder
7. Don't commit adultery
8. Don't steal
9. Don't bear false witness
10. Don't Covet

A modern scholar (and psychiatrist) whom I deeply respect, Dr. Leonard Felder, wrote a book I will suggest for our future study – The Ten Challenges. His translation / interpretation of the Ten Words – from Hebrew – helps us to think more deeply about what this Behavioral Covenant means for us:

1. Worship no other Gods • Choose me as your partner in life.
2. Make no idols • Keep me at the center of your life. Avoid losing yourself in petty or destructive pursuits.
3. Don't misuse my name • Speak my name with respect.
4. Observe the Sabbath • Rest one day out of seven. Restore yourself, as I do, and keep our relationship healthy.
5. Honor your parents • Honor the covenant you have with those who gave you life and/or raised you to adulthood.
6. Don't murder • Celebrate and protect LIFE itself.
7. Don't commit adultery • Honor the covenant you have made with your human life partner.

8. Don't steal • Be satisfied with what you have and allow all interactions with others to be free of coercion.
9. Don't bear false witness • Be honest; protect your integrity and the integrity of others.
10. Don't Covet • Honor and respect the covenant you have made with your neighbors, your community; respect the boundaries that make communal living possible and preferable.

Felder, [The Ten Challenges](#)

In Dr. Felder's translation these Ten Words are more than just orders from above and far more than some good suggestions. They are challenges to us to live according to a Divine Covenant – and, in every moment of decision, to choose life – choose the creative, healthy, loving path.

These Ten Words do not stand alone. There is a PROLOGUE that, in the NRSV, reads:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...

The Hebrew has, of course, more layers:

Anokhee [I am] **YHVH** [the mysterious and unknowable name of God, best translated as “the One who is and will always be], **Eloheykha** [your God], **Asheyr hoh-tseitikha mei-eretz mitzrayim** [who brought you out of Egypt], **me-beit avadeem** [out of the house of bondage].

Mitzrayim refers not only to the actual place Egypt – but also to anything that is narrow, restrictive or limiting. The root of **mitzrayim** is the word **tsur**, as in **tsuris**, which means troubles or worries.

Many Hebrew scholars suggest this translation:

I am the One who is and will always be, your God, who can bring you out of a narrow way of seeing things, out of your enslavements and worries.

Felder, [The Ten Challenges](#) p.17

It is this prologue that sets the tone for the Decalogue – the Behavioral Covenant that shapes how we are to live in God's world. In Felder's translation God states:

I Am God. I care about your freedom and well-being.

Let me say that again:

I care about your freedom and well-being.

That understanding of The One Who Made Us is the fundamental basis of ALL healthy relationships. When we seek to control – we destroy the health and life of our relationships. When we care about the other person's freedom and well-being – anything is possible. This is true in parent-child relationships, marriage and life partnerships, collegial and even hierarchical relationships that are healthy.

With freedom comes responsibility – and consequences follow when we do not act responsibly. But that is part of tending to our own well-being – as well as the well-being of others.

God – who cares about our freedom and well-being – asks us to choose God’s Self as our Life Partner. If we do, God will guide our decision-making without coercion – and bless our relationships with depth and authenticity. This Covenant of the Book – written in stone by God’s own hand – offers us a quality of life unparalleled. It is the Way to Peace – for each of us and all of us – whatever challenges we face.

Hear again the Word(s) of The One Who Is and Is Becoming, The One Who Chooses Us – and waits on one knee, heart in hand, in hopes that we will reciprocate:

I Am God. I care about your freedom and well-being.

These are the challenges and opportunities I lay before Humankind

- in hopes that every human will step up to the challenge

- in hopes that humankind will recognize the responsibilities that come with cognition, self-awareness, conscience, spiritual sensibility.

I choose you - humans being - as my partners in creation.

Choose me in return - and your life will have purpose and meaning, clear challenges and worthy goals.

Choose me, choose life, choose the honorable path - and I will help you to survive the rest.

Exodus 20:1-17

20 Then God spoke all these words:

2 I 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.

4 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.

⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

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

8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹For six days you shall labour and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

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

13 You shall not murder.

14 You shall not commit adultery.

15 You shall not steal.

16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

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

Addendum

An interpretation of the Ten Challenges based on Leonard Felder's book

I Am God. I care about your freedom and well-being.

- Choose me as your partner in life.
- Keep me at the center of your life. Avoid losing yourself in petty or destructive pursuits.
 - Speak my name with respect.
- Rest one day out of seven. Restore yourself, as I do, and keep our relationship healthy.
- Honor the covenant you have with those who gave you life and/or raised you to adulthood.
 - Celebrate and protect LIFE itself.
 - Honor the covenant you have made with your human life partner.
- Be satisfied with what you have and allow all interactions with others to be free of coercion.
 - Be honest; protect your integrity and the integrity of others.
- Honor and respect the covenant you have made with your neighbors,
your community;
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Benediction

I will leave you as Leonard Felder leaves us in his book The Ten Challenges:

The search for inner peace and the quest for peace in the world go hand in hand. The overall impact of the Ten Commandments is to show us how being a good person in the world and finding a sense of spiritual wholeness deep within are intimately connected to each other...

I will end...with a traditional [Hebrew] prayer that asks for support in finding peace both in the world and deep within ourselves:

“May the One who creates peace in the heavens and on earth help us to bring peace to our world, to all the peoples of this world, and to the place deep within us that longs for wholeness. Amen.” (p.224)

Bible – Definition
<http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Bible>

The **Bible** (From Greek βιβλία—*biblia*, meaning "books", which in turn is derived from βύβλος—*byblos* meaning "papyrus", from the ancient Phoenician city of Byblos which exported papyrus) is the "sacred" scripture of Christianity. The Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible (so called because it is written almost entirely in the Hebrew language), is also part of the Jewish faith. It is also called "the Word of God", from the belief that the writings were inspired by an all-powerful creator (although the term "Word of God" has historically had a somewhat wider meaning). These scriptures are groups of what were originally separate books, written over a long period of history, but sharing the same overall God-view. The first group, which later formed the Jewish Bible (Tanakh) consisted of 24 books, though Protestant Christians count this as 39 books. Other Christian denominations have even more books in their Old Testament, called deuterocanonical books. Later additions after the birth of Jesus made up the New Testament, consisting of 27 books in almost all Christian dominations.

The Bible is the most widely read book in history. As such, it is probably the most influential collection of books in human history

The English word "Bible" comes from the Greek word for "books", *biblia*: βιβλία . A book of the Bible is an established collection of writings. For example, the book of Psalms consists of 150 songs (151 in some editions of the Septuagint), while the book of Jude is a half-page letter. Canon refers to the accepted books of the Bible differentiated from other sacred writings not accepted as inspired by God, which are not accepted as part of the Bible. Those who do not accept writings in the Catholic and Orthodox Bibles as canon call those texts Apocrypha, while Catholics and Orthodox call them deuterocanonical books. Additionally, other religious writings that no major Christian sect accepts are referred to as Pseudepigrapha.

The *Protestant Bible* consists of 66 books. The Roman Catholic version, including the Deuterocanonical books, counts altogether 73 books, while the Eastern Orthodox version includes 77 or more. (4 Maccabees and "Prophecies of Ezra" may be included in some)
