

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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Ten Best Ways

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After a storm, traffic stops. When the sky fills with shades of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet fading into one another, people pull out their phones to snap pictures.

We want to preserve that image hanging among the clouds. God must smile. That's God's intent.

God wants us to stop and remember that universal covenant made long ago with Noah: never again will God's fury at humanity's evil produce floods. God put down God's bow.

The rainbow symbolizes God's promise to preserve all life – plants, animals, including slithering beast despite humanity's worst behavior. I contend, God places breathtaking splendor into a rainbow to plead with us to set down our weapons.

Later in our faith history, God chooses Abraham and Sarah in a covenant, blessing the weary, the barren, and those with checkered pasts. God's blessing flows from them to us and into all generations.

Today's story of Exodus tells of the next covenant.

Through Moses, God frees the Israelite people from enslavement in Egypt and leads them into the wilderness. After 400 years of slavery, they needed every hour of those 40 years to untangle their identity as enslaved.

While wandering, they complain. They rebel. They demonstrate their greed. They ignore Moses. They think they know what was best. On their own, they fail.

Into their disarray, God speaks. God gives detailed instructions to infuse everyday life with a holiness. This covenantal law comes from the literal translation of the “ten words” is known as the Decalogue and as the Ten Commandments.

I invite you to hear these not as restrictions or prohibitions, but rather as the ten best ways to preserve and order their freedom. These loving limits guide the people to justice, grace, and dignity.

Before we hear them in their entirety, please pray with me,

God, we confide that we wander. We cannot or will not agree on how to live with one another. We justify ourselves, exclude others, and stray from the life you intend. We don't do a very good job. Silence any voice but yours. Speak to us as you spoke to our ancient faith ancestors and startle us with your truth. Amen.

Exodus 20:1-17

¹Then 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 serve 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. ⁹Six days you shall labor 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.

¹¹ For 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 “Honor 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 neighbor.

¹⁷ “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, male or female slave, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

Earlier this year, what could have been a disaster became a story of triumph. In the face of mortal danger, people worked together rather than give into selfish impulses when a Japanese Airlines jet collided with a Coast Guard plane at Tokyo's Haneda airport.

Passengers described a horror unfolding as smoke filled the cabin and they saw an orange glow outside the windows.

Those onboard remember one woman said, "Please get me out of here!" and a child politely asked, "Please, why don't you just open [the doors]."

Against the potential for mass panic, the flight attendants urged everyone to "please cooperate." Within eighteen minutes of the collision they had all 357 passengers down the inflatable slides and off the plane. Witnesses say just ten minutes later, the fuselage was engulfed in flames.¹

Marveling at the story, I heard many people credit the Japanese culture towards compliant behavior as integral to the success.

And yet, *The Miracle on the Hudson*, with one of my favorite actors, Tom Hanks, tells the story of a US Airways flight departing New York City need to make an emergency landing after a bird strike.

Captain Sully Sullenberg ditched the plane on the frigid Hudson River at 3:31 pm and the last of 155 passengers and crew exited the craft at 3:55 pm. It took the passengers twenty-four minutes to follow crew instructions to exit onto the wings and floating rafts.

¹ The Japan Airlines plane collision was 20 minutes of horror, but the industry will learn invaluable lessons - ABC News

Was the movie called *Miracle* for Sullenberg's skill? Or because a craft built for the sky could float on the water? Or for all passengers and crew to follow instructions given to them?

Every new airplane model must receive a 90-second evacuation drill certification from the FAA before it can fly.

Is that even possible?

Airbus conducted a mock evacuation of superjumbo in Hamburg, Germany. Over 850 people of different ages, genders, and sizes were loaded onto a plane, buckled in, and then told to evacuate.

To create a more authentic situation, Airbus made sure the plane was dark, smoke and debris filled the cabin, and blocked half of the emergency exits. An actual Lufthansa flight crew guided the passengers.

When it was over, all passengers and crew safely evacuated the plane in 78 seconds.²

Think about it. In less than the time to microwave your lunch-time soup, they proved a superjumbo plane could be safely evacuated.

² How Long Does it Really Take to Evacuate a Plane? | WIRED

The reason most evacuations fail to meet the 90 seconds in real life is because most people want to take care of themselves; do it their own way.

Sitting and waiting for others to exit ahead of them feels threatening. It demands trusting others, engineers and the FAA, with protocols. Following instructions requires confidence in fellow passengers.

Most of all...no one wants to leave behind their baggage.

This airline evacuation serves as a parable for the Israelite flight (pun intended) from enslavement into freedom. Funny. Not funny. Those Israelites felt their lives were threatened with every step they took.

Once no longer confined to Pharaoh's demands, who ordered every day of every hour, and able to live with complete freedom, chaos ensues for the Israelites.

No longer remembering the miraculous escape as God's gift and God's will for their freedom, they bind themselves to the old ways.

They devote themselves to idols and small gods, attempting to curry favor by their own means.

Even though God provides sufficient food and water, they hoard.

Its rather human nature to think it all depends upon us and we need to save ourselves. We justify the lifestyles we create. We place limits on others to control.

Just like in the airline evacuation, we hold on to our baggage, our stuff, our ideas, our ways.

Our problems emerge when left to our own devices, we behave as if it is everyone for themselves and a winner take all. That leads us to divide by nation, tribe, family, and even within family.

The world is divided. We divide by poor and rich. Those who have and those scraping for daily sustenance. Those who amass influence and control. Those who always seem to come up short because the rules get twisted.

There are those who long for justice, and those who fear the implications. Those who long for freedom, and those who have freedom but become so afraid of sharing they clamp down.

The chaos of the Israelites wandering for years points to all of these conditions.

God speaks, giving another covenantal gift: these are the best ways to live.

God reminds the Israelites and us that God created us and who redeems us: “I am the Lord your God.” Whether enslaved or free, in civilization or the wilderness, at no time in our mortal existence do we exist apart from God.

Then God invites us to belong to God alone. God warns us away from idols who take and never give...celebrities, wealth, accolades, false promises of security. Belong to God by refraining to use God’s name for your purposes. That puts yourself in the place of attempting to control God...a very dangerous place.

For those who had been enslaved to work every day, God enshrines the gift of rest. Yet today, the single best way to live a life of freedom, we dismiss, because our use of time matters more.

The remainder of the ten best ways govern relationships between neighbors, spouses, parents, and the material possessions.

God could have given the Israelites a walled temple with security. God could have endowed the Israelites with super-human capabilities. This covenant endures regardless of where we live or with whom we live. We will flourish.

Jesus simplifies this list with two commands: Love God and love your neighbor.

But, when life begins to feel chaotic, go back and meditate on this list, one by one, and be honest. Meditate not with an intent towards scorekeeping of right and wrong, sin, or failures. That only spirals into shame and blame. Be honest with yourself and God to set down that baggage and allow yourself the grace to take up life-giving ways.

These ten words come as gift, not burden, as the best ways to grow in deeper relationship with God in Christ. These constitute a kind of trust God has in the reality of our goodness.



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