

Words of Life: 1. The Living God
Exodus 20:2-5; John 11:25-26
February 14, 2021
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We all need guardrails. Friday morning, I drove from our house in Plymouth to downtown Minneapolis. It was cold, so cold that much of the highway was covered in a thin layer of black ice. And as a result, there were cars that could not stop in time or make a curve in the road and ended up in a snow bank or the center median and in one case an encounter with a guardrail. But at least there was a guardrail. For the driver of that car, there will be the cost and inconvenience of getting the car repaired, but without the guardrail, the car would have gone over an embankment and seriously injured the driver. A guardrail is meant to keep you from whatever is beyond the guardrail. A guardrail directs us toward the road. We need guardrails to keep us on the right path in life.

It was a year ago that we began hearing about a coronavirus that surfaced in this country. Within a few weeks, we would pause our in-person worship as schools and businesses and almost everything else in this country shut down. Every day for the past year, we've heard about this pandemic and the toll it has taken on lives and our way of life. Add to that a year of racial unrest and the most tumultuous election season in any of our lifetimes. And what I think we need to hear is where are we? What is God's will for us? What will keep us on the road to what life is supposed to be? Today we begin a series meant to remind us that God has given us guardrails. We call them the Ten Commandments. And if we can see these guardrails and then look at them through the eyes of Jesus, I think we will hear the words of life that our world needs.

The Ten Commandments appear in both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 with slight variations. Somewhere around 1290 BC, the Israelites were liberated from slavery in Egypt. The Israelites had known slavery their entire lives. They were told everything they could and could not do. But now their prayer had been answered. And there were free. Once they crossed the Red Sea, the threat of the past was washed away. They were headed to the Promised Land. Three months into this journey they arrived at the foot of Mount Sinai. God knew they needed direction. Freedom without guardrails is not freedom at all. The guardrails define the path, and this path – if they will only follow this path – this path will lead Moses and the people of Israel to the heart of God.

While the people camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, Moses went up the mountain. If he was to encounter God, he would go to the place where earth touched the heavens. And from the top of the mountain, God spoke: **I am Yahweh who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.** For Jews, this is the first commandment. Christians say the first commandment is **You must have no other gods before me.** Lutherans and Catholics add to this what we call the second commandment: **Do not make an idol for yourself.** I am Yahweh. Yahweh is God's personal name. Yahweh and I am are versions of the same word "to be". God is saying, "I am being itself; I am the source and sustainer of everything." In other words, everything that exists is because of me. You are here because of me. You exist because of me. What is the appropriate response to this?

91 times in the Hebrew Bible we are told that Yahweh brought Israel out of Egypt. Remember what this God has done for you. It was no accident. God has a purpose and destiny and here's the first step. It's easy to overlook this first step – to forget how this instruction begins. But if we forget the first step, the rest of the list is meaningless. There are no shortcuts to what's ahead.

God was addressing Moses directly and personally, but Moses is the messenger so God is saying, "Steve, I am Yahweh, the source and the sustainer of your life." And what does God request? No substitutes, no idols, no other gods. You must have no other gods before me. It is a simple request, or it is? What do we mean by gods? Anything that takes the place of God. Anything that claims our allegiance. What is the one thing that drive you? I want God first but so any things occupy my time and attention. Jesus said: **No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.** He's not saying money is unimportant, but what's of primary importance? It's not just money, any number of things can become the focus of our lives. For Adam and Eve, it was their desire to be God. What is it that drives you?

The commandments call out to us: Stop! Don't go there! Stay on the road! Why? Because God wants to be your God. In my Friday eNote, I suggested this season of Lent could be your course-correction. I was reading about a group of pastors who were challenged to list ten things they could stop doing so they could start doing what matters most. Where do you need to stop – in order to get on the path with God? What would you stop in order to start doing what matters most?

Three months after Amanda and I were married, we moved from a one bedroom apartment in a suburb of Ft. Worth to a four bedroom parsonage in Duluth. We had so much space that everything we owned could be placed in one room. In the process of emptying the few boxes that we moved, Amanda came across a photo album of mine that pictured very prominently and frequently a woman who had been a prominent part of my life before I met Amanda. And in this photo album, not a single photo of Amanda. I still remember the conversation that ensued about those photographs – and by the end of the conversation the photos ceased to exist. Open your wallet or your cell phone and whose photos are there? It matters, doesn't it? I don't think Amanda would believe me if I told her that I loved her when I carried someone else's photo in my wallet! Sure. I can say, "it's my wallet, and I can carry any photo that I want." And you would be right in thinking Pastor Steve is dumber than he looks! It's a relationship issue – a love issue. In these first five verses of Exodus chapter 20, God is saying, "I am the source and sustainer of everything, and I will except to substitutes! Don't put anything in the place that belongs to me."

Jesus said: **You must love the Lord your God (Yahweh) with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.** And Jesus showed us how to do that. Start with God. Get the foundation right and you will have what you truly need for life. In my travels to third world countries, I met people who had almost nothing, did not even know if it would be possible to feed their family that day, but they were sustained and found joy, because their lives were not building on food or housing or clothing but the certainty that God is and would always be the center of their lives. On a Saturday afternoon, one year ago, Amanda came home and I said, "Either take me to Urgent Care or call 911." I was in pain greater than I could bear, and within a few days I would be in surgery. And what I was experiencing filtered out everything but what was most important to me. As she drove me to Urgent Care, my thoughts were God help me and not money help me or power help me or job help me or even Amanda help me. I've been with people in the final moments of their lives – what is it that matters most? Relationships matter and at the center is their relationship with God, knowing God is waiting to welcome them home. What's at the center of your life? What is it that drives you?

There's a story about an 8-year-old boy who sat in class, taking a test. He was so nervous about completing the test on time that he suddenly wet his pants. He looked down and saw a little puddle beneath him, and he was embarrassed and terrified. He looked up just in time to

see his teacher motioning him to her desk. He couldn't move. The teacher, realizing he wasn't going to come to her desk, got up and began walking toward him. Oh no, he thought, she's going to see this puddle and then everybody will laugh. It will be horrible. But at that moment, one of his classmates, a girl, was coming down the aisle from behind him carrying a large fishbowl. When she got alongside him, she suddenly stumbled, dropping the fishbowl which hit the floor, shattering the glass and sending water and fish everywhere, covering the boy who suddenly thought – "there is a God after all. Thank you, God." But in the next moment, it dawned on him that 8 year old boys don't even like 8 year old girls, and he snapped at her: "What's wrong with you? Can't you even watch where you are going?" And the class laughed at the girl. The teacher sent the boy to the office to see about getting some dry clothes to wear.

At lunchtime, no one wanted to sit with the girl. Her friends avoided her at recess. In the unforgiving society of elementary school, she was a suddenly pariah. When the day was over and the boy was on his way home, he saw the girl walking by herself. He began to reflect on the day and on impulse walked over to her and said: "You know, I've been thinking about what happened today. That wasn't an accident, was it? You did that on purpose, didn't you?" "Yes," she replied, "I knew what had happened to you. You see, I wet my pants once, too."

And here's the segue to the New Testament – a message worthy of this Valentine's Day. God opens up his heart and says, "I love you." For the people of Israel, the God who brought deliverance and said to slaves – You are free. Now says, true freedom comes when you follow me. Jesus would say, I am – the same two words that Moses heard from the top of Mt Sinai – I am the resurrection and the life. Follow me and you will have what you truly need in this life and for all eternity. How could I not want to put such a God first in my life?

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of February 14, 2021

Weekly Prayer: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of thy salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. (Psalm 51:10-12)

Monday, February 15

Scripture: Exodus 20:2-3; Exodus 3:11-15; 2 Kings 17:7-14

I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You must have no other gods before me.

But Moses said to God, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh and to bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" God said, "I'll be with you. And this will show you that I'm the one who sent you. After you bring the people out of Egypt, you will come back here and worship God on this mountain." But Moses said to God, "If I now come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' they are going to ask me, 'What's this God's name?' What am I supposed to say to them?" God said to Moses, "I Am Who I Am. So say to the Israelites, 'I Am has sent me to you.'" God continued, "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, Abraham's God, Isaac's God, and Jacob's God, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever; this is how all generations will remember me.

All this happened because the Israelites sinned against the LORD their God, who brought them up from the land of Egypt, out from under the power of Pharaoh, Egypt's king. They worshipped other gods. They followed the practices of the nations that the LORD had removed before the Israelites, as well as the practices that the Israelite kings had done. The Israelites secretly did

things against the LORD their God that weren't right. They built shrines in all their towns, from watchtowers to fortified cities. They set up sacred pillars and sacred poles on every high hill and beneath every green tree. At every shrine they burned incense, just as the nations did that the LORD sent into exile before them. They did evil things that made the LORD angry. They worshipped images about which the LORD had said, Don't do such things! The LORD warned Israel and Judah through all the prophets and seers, telling them, Turn from your evil ways. Keep my commandments and my regulations in agreement with the entire Instruction that I commanded your ancestors and sent through my servants the prophets. But they wouldn't listen. They were stubborn like their ancestors who didn't trust the LORD their God.

Observation: Before listing any of the commandments, God reminded Israel that he alone had freed them from slavery. The commandments were not a way to earn God's favor. The Ten Commandments came to Israel after God redeemed her from Egypt. The giving of law presumed that mutual love and loyalty had been established between Israel and God. The commandments defined how Israel could live in faithfulness to God's covenant with them.

Application: The Jewish and Christian faiths in the Bible (and, later, the Muslim faith too) taught what we call monotheism – that is, that there is only one God. Remember, the Israelites had just left Egypt, a land that worshipped multiple gods of nature in addition to their Pharaohs. How did this commandment reflect God's effort to embed the principle that there is only one God for us to worship, rather than many gods?

Prayer: Lord God, you made me. You freed me. You are the source and sustainer of all that exists. Help me to worship and serve you, and you alone. Amen.

Tuesday, February 16

Scripture: Psalm 62:1-2, 5-8

Only in God do I find rest;
my salvation comes from him.
Only God is my rock and my salvation—
my stronghold!—I won't be shaken anymore.

Oh, I must find rest in God only,
because my hope comes from him!
Only God is my rock and my salvation—
my stronghold!—I will not be shaken.
My deliverance and glory depend on God.
God is my strong rock.
My refuge is in God.
All you people: Trust in him at all times!
Pour out your hearts before him!
God is our refuge! *Selah*

Observation: You must have no other gods before me. Psalm 62 was a particularly focused poetic reflection on Israel's faith in the one God. There were two key words in this psalm. The word "only" from verse 1 occurs also in verses 2, 5, and 6. The effect is to intensify the profession of faith in God alone. The other key word is "trust." Whereas the peoples around Israel sometimes had to shop for which of their multiple gods might help them, this writer was certain Israel could always depend on the one and only God.

Application: At times, most of us find rest from everyday stress in a wide range of activities: taking a nap, binge-watching a favorite show, watching our favorite sports team, shopping, listening to our favorite music, etc. What are the more serious issues for which those everyday sources of rest do not work very well, if at all? When do you, like the psalmist, find it essential to “find rest in God only”?

Prayer: Lord God, my hope comes from you. But there are times when I feel shaken indeed. Keep teaching me and reminding me that you are my strong rock even at those times. Amen.

Wednesday, February 17

Scripture: John 11:17-26

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Bethany was a little less than two miles from Jerusalem. Many Jews had come to comfort Martha and Mary after their brother's death. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him, while Mary remained in the house. Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died. Even now I know that whatever you ask God, God will give you.” Jesus told her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha replied, “I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

Observation: You must have no other gods before me. If you have time, read the whole story in [John 11](#). Jesus' friend Lazarus fell ill. However, Jesus did not arrive in Lazarus' hometown of Bethany until four days after his friend's death. The man's grieving sister Martha greeted Jesus with an “if only” type of statement. His answer began with the explosive words “I am”: “I am the resurrection and the life.” With that “I Am,” as is noted in N. T. Wright's commentary: “He is challenging her, urging her, to exchange her ‘if only ...’ for an ‘if Jesus ...’ . If Jesus is who she is coming to believe he is ... If Jesus is the Messiah, the one who was promised by the prophets, the one who was to come into the world ... If he is God's own son, the one in whom the living God is strangely and newly present ... If he is resurrection-in-person, life-come-to-life ...”

Application: Martha and her sister Mary had “if-only” questions for Jesus: “if only” he had done things differently, they thought, things would be better. Jesus made seven “I am” statements in the gospel of John. His words to Martha are probably the most cherished of those statements: “I am the resurrection and the life...everyone who believes in me will never die.” Jesus has many ways of bringing good news, hope, and new possibilities into the mess and grief of life. He asks us for trust, as he did Martha and Mary. Often our “if-only” questions, like theirs, reflect our limited understanding. We face the question Jesus asked Martha: “Do you believe this?” How easy or hard do you find it to trust that Jesus is working for your good, even when what you wish would happen doesn't?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, sometimes it is hard for me to trust you amid my “if-only” questions. Thank you for offering me an eternal hope when I put my faith in you. Amen.

Thursday, February 18

Scripture: Genesis 31:3, 14-19

Then the LORD said to Jacob, “Go back to the land of your ancestors and to your relatives, and I will be with you.”

Rachel and Leah answered him, “Is there any share or inheritance left for us in our father’s household? Doesn’t he think of us as foreigners since he sold us and has even used up the payment he received for us? All of the wealth God took from our father belongs to us and our children. Now, do everything God told you to do.” So Jacob got up, put his sons and wives on the camels, and set out with all of his livestock and all of his possessions that he had acquired in Paddan-aram in order to return to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan. Now, while Laban was out shearing his sheep, Rachel stole the household’s divine images that belonged to her father.

Observation: This is a part of the story of Jacob, one of Israel’s founding patriarchs. At first it may be a bit startling to read that this Hebrew patriarch’s wife stole the divine images (what we’d call idols) from her father’s household as Jacob and his family moved away. Of course, Rachel (and Jacob) hadn’t heard the second commandment. Most people in that world valued tangible images of their multiple gods, which made the second commandment important in shaping Israel’s faith.

Application: Genesis called the items Rachel took *teraphim* (in Hebrew). That word also appeared later in the Old Testament. According to Ezekiel 21:21 and Zechariah 10:2, these images were consulted in order to learn what a person should do in particular situations. According to Judges 17:5 and 18:14-20, they were held in high regard by the people. What are some sources today you might consult about what to do instead of consulting God? When can those sources become spiritually perilous?

Prayer: Lord God, so many of Jacob’s family ways seem ancient, foreign, even offensive. Teach me how much I am like them beneath the outward trappings of culture and custom. Help me learn about you from their story. Amen.

Friday, February 19

Scripture: Exodus 20:4-6; 32:1-8

Do not make an idol for yourself—no form whatsoever—of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. Do not bow down to them or worship them, because I, the LORD your God, am a passionate God. I punish children for their parents’ sins even to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me. But I am loyal and gracious to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

The people saw that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, “Come on! Make us gods who can lead us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don’t have a clue what has happened to him.” Aaron said to them, “All right, take out the gold rings from the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” So all the people took out the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. He collected them and tied them up in a cloth. Then he made a metal image of a bull calf, and the people declared, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf. Then Aaron announced, “Tomorrow will be a festival to the LORD!” They got up early the next day and offered up entirely burned offerings and brought well-being sacrifices. The people sat down to eat and drink and then got up to celebrate. The LORD spoke to Moses: “Hurry up and go down! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, are ruining everything! They’ve already abandoned the path that I commanded. They have made a metal bull calf for themselves. They’ve bowed down to it and offered sacrifices to it and declared, ‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’”

Observation: After God gave the commandments in Exodus 20, he called Moses to climb Mount Sinai to meet together (Exodus 24:12). While Moses was gone, the Israelites relapsed into their Egyptian ways, demanding: “Make us [visible] gods who can lead us.” (Unspoken, but clearly implied in their demand: “Ignore the second commandment”). Moses’ brother Aaron gave in to their pleas, sculpted a golden bull, and identified the statue as “Yahweh” (verse 5).

Application: The second commandment might seem obsolete. In our developed world, who worships hand-carved stone or wood figures? What (besides money and fame—the most obvious, easy answers) do some people worship? “I am a passionate God” was the Common English Bible’s translation of God’s self-description in verse 5 (not the “jealous” God of many other translations). How can it deepen your link with God to see God, not as petty or possessive, but as passionately eager to start and sustain a loving relationship with you?

Prayer: Loving God, you call me to be faithful. I really want to be. But I thank you that I can trust your grace more than you can trust my faithfulness. Amen.

Saturday, February 20

Scripture: John 1:18; Colossians 1:14-20

No one has ever seen God. God the only Son, who is at the Father’s side, has made God known.

He set us free through the Son and forgave our sins.

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the one who is first over all creation, because all things were created by him: both in the heavens and on the earth, the things that are visible and the things that are invisible. Whether they are thrones or powers, or rulers or authorities, all things were created through him and for him. He existed before all things, and all things are held together in him. He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the one who is firstborn from among the dead so that he might occupy the first place in everything. Because all the fullness of God was pleased to live in him, and he reconciled all things to himself through him— whether things on earth or in the heavens. He brought peace through the blood of his cross.

Observation: From Barclay’s Commentary of John 1:18: “When John said that no man has ever seen God, everyone in the ancient world would fully agree with him.... But John does not stop there; he goes on to make the startling and tremendous statement that Jesus has fully revealed to men what God is like. What has come to men is what J. H. Bernard calls ‘the exhibition to the world of God in Christ.’ Here again the keynote of John’s gospel sounds: ‘If you want to see what God is like, look at Jesus.’” The letter to the Colossians said Jesus was “the image of the invisible God,” a living person being what a carved image could never be.

Application: Jesus came to earth, not to change God, but to change us. Colossians 1 said, “Once you were alienated from God and you were enemies with him in your minds, which was shown by your evil actions. But now he has reconciled you by his physical body through death.” List all the actions and qualities of Jesus that Colossians 1 named. Which of them mean the most to your spiritual journey? In what ways has Jesus changed you, and drawn you closer to God?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you told Phillip, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). With so many distractions in my world, help me keep my heart’s gaze focused on you as God’s true image. Amen.