

Words of Life: 2. Promise Keepers
Exodus 20:7-11; Matthew 5:37
February 21, 2021
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We all need guardrails. If ever there was a question why, Tami sent me this news story. Maybe you saw it. [video] If that happens to you just one time, I guarantee you will be eternally grateful for guardrails. But we also need guardrails in our personal lives. On Wednesday, I arrived at church to find a fresh baked peanut butter cookie by my office door and I immediately ate the cookie only to remember that I'd promised myself that I would eliminate sweets from my diet during Lent and that was the first day of Lent. If only an alarm had gone off before I took the first bite. We all need guardrails. In this series of sermon, we are looking at the guardrails that God gave us to keep us from danger. 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.

How did you feel about your name growing up? I never much cared for my middle name, even wondered why I needed a middle name. The only time I heard my middle name was when I was in trouble and my mother would say, "Stephen Leonard." I knew she meant business! When I went off to college, I had a different feeling about my name. Every student was assigned a mailbox in the student center. The mailboxes were arranged alphabetically with two students sharing each mailbox. It turned out that my mailbox partner was Stephen Richards – spelled identically. For much of the first semester, we opened each other's mail. Most frustrating was the time he opened a package that contained my chocolate chips cookies from home. I guess he was hopeful. After being called to the registrar's office over an academic problem and finding the office had contacted the wrong Steve Richards, I began adding my middle initial and sometimes my middle name, and I began to appreciate the name. It was my grandfather's middle name and my father's middle name – and now it is also my grandson's middle name. Have I told you about him? Now I really like the name.

Last week, we learned God's name. In Exodus chapter 20 when Moses was at the top of Mt Sinai, Moses heard God's voice: "**I am Yahweh...**" It is a Hebrew word that means I AM. I am being itself. I am the Source and Sustainer of all that is. The name tells us who God is and how God exists – the source and sustainer of everything. And it's also why you exist. **I am Yahweh who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.**

And now that Israel is free, if they are to function as a community, guardrails will be necessary. So God reminds the people that God has been with them in the past and now that they are free they have a purpose and a destiny. God provides a path to that purpose and destiny. The first step is to acknowledge that God is the source and sustainer of everything - and accept no substitutes, no idols, no other gods. These commandment will enable the people of Israel to reach the Promised Land – and more importantly, to reach the very heart of God. Which brings us to the third command (I won't have time to address the fourth command but the second half of this week's GPS – Grow, Pray, and Study will offer insight into the fourth commandment). Here's the third command: **Do not use the LORD your God's name as if it were of no significance.** Many of us learned it – "do not take God's name in vain."

Of all that God could possibly address, why would God rate the misuse of God's name as number 3 on the list? Surely God is not easily offended? Could it be that God knows something about the words we use? Could it be that the words we use, even the words no one else hears – like when a car cuts in front of us and we mutter something under our breath – could those words still matter? Could they matter to God?

Swearing or profanity may be part of this commandment but that's not the purpose of the command. The primary thing is promise keeping and truth telling. In the ancient world, they didn't have written contracts so to make a promise they would swear to God – and there are times we still do that. Enter a courtroom to give your testimony and you will be asked to raise your hand and say, "I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help me God." Most states still use some version of that oath. If you were watching the presidential inauguration, Joe Biden put his hand on a Bible and said, "I will so help me God." My most important vow was 39 years ago next month on a Saturday afternoon in a Presbyterian Church in Charlotte North Carolina. I stood before the altar and made a promise: "In the name of God... to have and to hold from this day forward for better for worse for richer for poorer in sickness and in health as long as we both shall live. This is my solemn vow." And what I was saying is that I promise to keep this vow. What I'm saying is absolutely true.

There is a second part to this verse: **Do not use the LORD your God's name as if it were of no significance; the LORD won't forgive anyone who uses his name that way.** In other words, don't invoke God's name for a promise you don't intend to keep. Otherwise, you are saying you have no respect for the God in whose name you make the promise. Israel had just come out of slavery in Egypt, and God was building them into a nation. Being able to trust each other and accept what they were saying as true would be fundamental to nation-building. It's fundamental to any relationship. The Jewish Bible translates the verse like this: **You shall not swear falsely by the name of Yahweh your God, for Yahweh will not clear one who swears falsely by his name.** I will not acquit you. I will not forgive you. Jesus would tell us God does forgive but this verse is a warning. It's a guardrail. Do not make a promise in God's name that you do not intend to keep. It's one of the things I learned from my Dad. His word was his bond. You could count on him to uphold his end no matter what. He did not take God's name lightly.

During the winter, I put my Mustang away and drive a pickup that belonged to my dad. Last winter I took the truck to a repair shop for an oil change. We received a discount coupon in the mail for an oil change, so I made an appointment. They completed the oil change and then called me about another repair that was needed – an expensive repair that they told me was vital for the safety of the truck. I wasn't prepared to spend that much on a truck that is 16 years old, so I took it to someone in our church who has a repair shop and he told me there was nothing wrong with the truck. Then he told me that there are repair shops that use an oil change as an excuse to do more expensive repairs even when such repairs are unnecessary. It makes me wonder - What price does your integrity have?

I was in the checkout line at the grocery store last week when the bar code on an item didn't work with the scanner. So the cashier entered the numbers above the bar code and still it didn't register. And the cashier said, how much is this? In that moment, she was willing to give me a deal. And because there was a line of people waiting, she didn't want to send someone to check the price. But I told her I don't want a deal. I want to pay what it costs and I ran back to the aisle to get the price. A dollar or two may not have mattered to the store, but What is the price of my integrity? Psalm 15:4 **who honors those who honor the Lord: someone who keeps their promise even when it hurts.** What's the price of your integrity if it costs you something? Jesus said: **Let your yes mean yes, and your no mean no. Anything more than this comes from the evil one.**

There have been a few times when I accidently wore my nametag out in public. My nametag doesn't just contain my name but identifies me as pastor at Messiah Church. What if I wore this

everywhere? Even when I don't, I still represent Jesus in this world. And so do you. Jesus said "Let your light shine." Years ago in one of our trips to Kenya, we decided to do something for the community near Light of Hope school. We contacted the pastor of a church in the town and he made arrangements for us to paint the inside of a part of the primary school that housed disabled children. On the first day that we were painting, a little girl stood at the door pointing toward me and saying something in Kikuyu. I asked the pastor what she was saying. She was saying I was the first muzungu (white person) she had ever seen. And in that moment I felt a huge responsibility. Her impression of a white person was being formed by what she saw me and the other muzungus doing. You may be the only picture people have of what Christian looks like.

Who are you representing in this world? Do you know the story of Irena Sendler? In 1940, at the age of 29, Irena was a Catholic social worker in Warsaw Poland. This was when the Nazis forced 400,000 Jews into a 16 block area of Warsaw creating the Warsaw Ghetto. It was so crowded that nine people were sharing every room, and due to the overcrowding, illness spread rapidly. 100,000 people died as a result of the conditions and as many as 300,000 were shipped to a concentration camp where they were murdered by the Nazis.

Irena saw what was happening and said, I have to do something. Nazis were terrified that typhus would spread from the ghetto to the soldiers and then the general population, so they were glad when a health care worker offered to go into the ghetto and treat the sick. She was given authorization and would carry in boxes of medicine. But the boxes also had false bottoms filled with food and other supplies. And there were holes in the bottom so she would carry out babies that had been sedated. At the risk of her own life, she carried out 400 children. She also inspired others to do the same and together they saved the lives of 2500 children. To find people to care for the children, she forged birth certificates and kept track of every child, places that information in glass jars that she buried under her neighbor's apple tree so that she could reunite each child with their family when the war was over. But almost all of the families died.

In 1943, she was arrested. The Nazis demanded she confess and tell her where all the children could be found so they could be sent to the concentration camp. But she refused to tell them. She was tortured, her feet and legs broken so badly that she would be disabled the rest of her life. Still she refused to give them the names of the children. Sentenced to death, she only escaped when supported paid a bribe to the soldiers who were guarding her.

She lied. She forged documents. She was dishonest. Did she do the right thing? What's the point of this commandment? Where is your heart? Whose name do you represent in this world? If Irena Sendler could do what she did risking her life, could you live as a person of integrity, to keep your promises and represent God in this world? Can other people see God reflected through your words and actions? That's why God is the source and sustainer of your life.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of February 21, 2021

Weekly Prayer: Loving God, You have given us guardrails to keep us on the way that you have placed before us. We want to honor you first with our lives. But we get so busy, we forget that you command us to rest and renew ourselves. Forgive us. Help us to keep your commandments on our hearts that we might follow you faithfully. Amen.

Monday, February 22

Scripture: Psalm 9:7-11; 24:7-10

But the LORD rules forever!
He assumes his throne
for the sake of justice.
He will establish justice in the world rightly;
he will judge all people fairly.
The LORD is a safe place for the oppressed—
a safe place in difficult times.
Those who know your name trust you
because you have not abandoned
any who seek you, LORD.
Sing praises to the LORD, who lives in Zion!
Proclaim his mighty acts among all people!

Mighty gates: lift up your heads!
Ancient doors: rise up high!
So the glorious king can enter!
Who is this glorious king?
The LORD—strong and powerful!
The LORD—powerful in battle!
Mighty gates: lift up your heads!
Ancient doors: rise up high!
So the glorious king can enter!
Who is this glorious king?
The LORD of heavenly forces—
he is the glorious king! *Selah*

Observation: The Hebrew poetry of the Psalms reflected Yahweh's people speaking to and about Yahweh in times of fear, joy and everything between. All of them were reasons for worship. In many ways, they put their ultimate trust not in their own strength and skill, but in the goodness and justice that Yahweh's name communicated. The Psalms made it plain that God does not ignore the cry of the oppressed. It's just not God's nature.

Application: At Abraham Lincoln's funeral, Methodist Episcopal bishop Matthew Simpson said, "To a minister who said he hoped the Lord was on our side, he replied that it gave him no concern whether the Lord was on our side or not.... 'But God is my witness that it is my constant anxiety and prayer that both myself and this nation should be on the Lord's side.'" How does Yahweh's character make it worthwhile to be sure that you are on the Lord's side?

Prayer: Great "I Am," thank you for being a safe place in difficult times. Help me keep learning how to keep my mind and my heart always open to your loving, guiding presence. Amen.

Tuesday, February 23

Scripture: Leviticus 19:12; Deuteronomy 23:21-23

You must not swear falsely by my name, desecrating your God's name in doing so; I am the LORD.

When you make a promise to the LORD your God, don't put off making good on it, because the LORD your God will certainly be expecting it from you; delaying would make you guilty. Now if you simply don't make any promises, you won't be guilty of anything. But whatever you say, you should be sure to make good on, exactly according to the promise you freely made to the LORD your God because you promised it with your own mouth.

Observation: Many of us, especially if raised religiously, have heard a narrow grasp of the third commandment's meaning. Some well-meaning persons applied the commandment only to avoiding a few swear words, especially when we're angry or frustrated. Yes, habitual profanity is usually a limited way to express ourselves. But today's readings show that the commandment spoke to a far more serious point—using God's name to confirm a promise we do not keep.

Application: Jesus echoed Deuteronomy 23:22 when he said, "I say to you that you must not pledge at all....Let your yes mean yes, and your no mean no. Anything more than this comes from the evil one" (Matthew 5:34, 37—more about this tomorrow). Have you ever, intentionally or by mistake, over-promised and under-delivered? In what ways can you practice greater honesty in your dealings with others and with yourself?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount was not the first time you tried to teach your people the importance of honest promises. Guide me, as one of your people, to live out the full reach of the third commandment. Amen.

Wednesday, February 24

Scripture: Matthew 5:33-37; Matthew 7:21-23

"Again you have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago: *Don't make a false solemn pledge, but you should follow through on what you have pledged to the Lord.* But I say to you that you must not pledge at all. You must not pledge by heaven, because it's God's throne. You must not pledge by the earth, because it's God's footstool. You must not pledge by Jerusalem, because it's the city of the great king. And you must not pledge by your head, because you can't turn one hair white or black. Let your yes mean yes, and your *no* mean no. Anything more than this comes from the evil one.

"Not everybody who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will get into the kingdom of heaven. Only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven will enter. On the Judgment Day, many people will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name and expel demons in your name and do lots of miracles in your name?' Then I'll tell them, 'I've never known you. Get away from me, you people who do wrong.'

Observation: In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount he forcefully taught the value of honesty in what lies behind our words as well as in the words themselves. Our integrity shouldn't come and go ("I swear I mean it this time"); it should be a given. And when linked with God's name, partial integrity dishonors God's name. An oath invoked God's witness that one was telling the truth.

Application: Honesty begins with being honest with yourself and God (often a trusted small group, counselor, or accountability partner can help us). How well do you understand the inner or outer forces that most often tempt you to shade your words or promises to other people, especially those you care deeply about? How easy or hard is it for you to be honest with yourself and God?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, there are easy ways for me to claim your name – a sticker or fish symbol on my car or a cross around my neck, for instance. Give me strength to do the harder, but much more important, work of living out your eternal goodness and mercy. Amen.

Thursday, February 25

Scripture: Genesis 1:31 – 2:3

God saw everything he had made: it was supremely good. There was evening and there was morning: the sixth day.

The heavens and the earth and all who live in them were completed. On the sixth day God completed all the work that he had done, and on the seventh day God rested from all the work that he had done. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all the work of creation.

Observation: The creation narrative from Genesis 1:1 through 2:3 reflected the essential rhythm of life. “There was evening and there was morning: the first day” (Genesis 1:5). Six days of work. One day of rest. This daily, weekly, and yearly rhythm of life provided a life structure that centered around stopping, giving thanks to God, resting in God’s mercy and recognizing that what God has created is very good.

Application: Exodus 31:17 recounted, “In six days Yahweh made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day Yahweh rested and was refreshed.” The word for refreshed (*naphash*) means “to breathe.” Take a deep breath. Hold it for a count of four. Exhale for a count of six. Imagine God exhaling peace and tranquility into the world. When and how do you find tranquility or rest? How can God’s gift of Sabbath rest help you to be a complete creation?

Prayer: O creator God, sometimes I’m proud of my ability to do all that I do. Thank you for reminding me that, from the beginning, rest and renewal are a vital part of a truly human life. Amen.

Friday, February 26

Scripture: Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Remember the Sabbath day and treat it as holy. Six days you may work and do all your tasks, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. Do not do any work on it—not you, your sons or daughters, your male or female servants, your animals, or the immigrant who is living with you. Because the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and everything that is in them in six days, but rested on the seventh day. That is why the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Keep the Sabbath day and treat it as holy, exactly as the LORD your God commanded: Six days you may work and do all your tasks, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. Don’t do any work on it—not you, your sons or daughters, your male or female servants, your oxen or donkeys or any of your animals, or the immigrant who is living among you—so that your male and female servants can rest just like you. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, but the LORD your God brought you out of there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. That’s why the LORD your God commands you to keep the Sabbath day.

Observation: The Old Testament provides two versions of the 10 Commandments giving different reasons for Sabbath. Bible scholars believe Exodus and Deuteronomy compiled

traditions and stories passed down from earlier in Israel's history, and took the form in which we have them today around the 6th or 5th century before Christ. The setting for Exodus was Mount Sinai after Israel's deliverance from slavery, while Deuteronomy's was about 40 years later just before entering the Promised Land.

Application: Exodus 20 said to rest on Sabbath "because Yahweh made the heavens and the earth...but rested on the seventh day." The purpose of the Sabbath was to give the Israelites time to reflect, not on their works, but on God's works. They were then to find refreshment in knowing that their physical needs were supplied not by their work, but by the God who had created the universe and had given them life. In what ways does reflecting on God as creator move you to worship and praise?

Prayer: O God, you are both my creator and my redeemer. Remembering and honoring both are reasons for me to make Sabbath a regular part of the rhythm of my life. Amen.

Saturday, February 27

Scripture: Matthew 11:28-12:14

"Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I'm gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light."

At that time Jesus went through the wheat fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry so they were picking heads of wheat and eating them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are breaking the Sabbath law." But he said to them, "Haven't you read what David did when he and those with him were hungry? He went into God's house and broke the law by eating the bread of the presence, which only the priests were allowed to eat. Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple treat the Sabbath as any other day and are still innocent? But I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. If you had known what this means, *I want mercy and not sacrifice*, you wouldn't have condemned the innocent. The Human One is Lord of the Sabbath."

Jesus left that place and went into their synagogue. A man with a withered hand was there. Wanting to bring charges against Jesus, they asked, "Does the Law allow a person to heal on the Sabbath?" Jesus replied, "Who among you has a sheep that falls into a pit on the Sabbath and will not take hold of it and pull it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! So the Law allows a person to do what is good on the Sabbath." Then Jesus said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he did and it was made healthy, just like the other one. The Pharisees went out and met in order to find a way to destroy Jesus.

Observation: Did you know that different approaches to Sabbath were one reason Jesus' enemies sought to kill him? Devout Hebrews in Jesus' day saw keeping the Sabbath as a key way to let God govern life's pace. But too often, they lost the spiritual purpose of Sabbath in a blizzard of rules and regulations. Jesus, "the Lord of the Sabbath," hated that. The point of Sabbath rest, he said, wasn't to conform to detailed rules (especially those that forbade doing good) but to rest in God's grace and caring.

Application: Matthew arranged his stories to show his readers the contrast between Jesus' easy yoke and a complex, legalistic system that criticized acts of mercy and healing. If you make Sabbath mainly about what you cannot do, you imply that the reason for the Sabbath is that God is against enjoyment and in favor of solemnity. How can you make your Sabbath practices Jesus' kind of "yoke," easy and light to bear?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, it seems as though the more I rush, the farther behind I get. Yet you promised me “rest”—not passive idleness, but deep inner calm that can keep me from feeling frantic, aimless or helpless. Fill me with your rest. Amen.