

The Law and the Prophets

Exodus 20:1-6

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I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

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. You 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, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

In the very early morning hours of May 12, 2011, my life changed forever. That's the night that I became a father. Now, before I go any further this morning, I want to acknowledge right up front that these "Hallmark Holidays" like Father's Day and Mother's Day can be a mixed bag of emotions for lots of folks. We need to remember that in any given gathering like this one, there are likely people who have lost their fathers, fathers who have lost their children, children who have never known their fathers, and fathers who have never known their children.

In any given gathering like this one, there are almost certainly people who have desperately wanted to become parents but for whatever reason could not, and people who have experienced pregnancy and childbirth and parenthood not as a joyful and wondrous thing, but as a crisis and a burden. So I just want us to acknowledge all of that this morning, and if you're experiencing this Father's Day as a day of pain rather than a day of joy, I just want to say right up front that I see you and I hear you.

For me, being a father has changed the way I look at everything. That's not hyperbole, it's fact. It has permanently changed me. Karl Barth was a 20th century theologian who taught that we should do theology with the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. For me, being a father has permanently changed the way I read both.

We're going to spend some time over the next few weeks talking about the Ten Commandments, which is a foundational part of the bible. Whenever the subject of the Ten Commandments comes up, I get the sense that some folks seem to think that these stone tablets just fell out of the sky and landed on the courthouse lawn. But of course you and I know better. You and I know that the Ten Commandments are a part of a much larger story. So let's review just a little bit of that larger story, shall we?

We read in the closing chapters of the book of Genesis that a severe famine once struck the entire Mediterranean basin. There was no rain, so there were no crops, and therefore there were no livestock. But the people of God learned that there was food to be had in the land of Egypt, and so they left their homes and migrated there. And they arrived in the land of Egypt as refugees.

Now, let's not miss that point. The people of God did not wish to leave their homes. They had no desire to make a long and dangerous journey down to Egypt. But they and their children were hungry. Those parents recognized that it came down to a simple choice. They could stay where they were, and their children would certainly starve. Or they could risk the journey and give their children a fighting chance at a better life.

And so they migrated to Egypt, and thanks to a distant relative who occupied a high position in the Egyptian national security apparatus, they were at first welcomed. They started new lives, and as the book of Genesis comes to a close, the people of God are a prosperous immigrant community living side by side along their Egyptian neighbors.

But the Book of Exodus opens on an ominous note. A new Pharaoh came to power in Egypt, and this Pharaoh did not know the people of God's relative. And he looked out and saw the people of God not as a prosperous, thriving immigrant community. He saw a threat to Egyptian national security. He said, "The Hebrews are growing more numerous than we, the Egyptians. If war breaks out, they will join our enemies and fight against us."

And so Pharaoh began a program of forced separation of immigrant children from their parents. Pharaoh ordered that all the Hebrew baby boys should be thrown into the Nile River.

In desperation to save her infant son's life, a Hebrew woman took her baby boy, made a basket of reeds, and set him adrift on the river in hopes that he would somehow evade the Egyptian enforcement officers. And in a twist of divine providence, that floating basket was discovered by Pharaoh's daughter, who took the baby out of the river and raised him as her own. She named him Moses, which means, "I drew him out of the water."

As the years went by, God's people continued to cry out for justice and mercy in Egypt, and God heard their cries. The boy Moses grew into a man, and God used Moses to speak truth to power and to lead God's people out of their slavery and bondage.

But once they had left Egypt, there was a new problem. There was no water and no food in the wilderness. So God provided bread from heaven, which the people of God called Manna, and God provided quail to cover the ground. God provided water from a rock, and the people

drank their fill.

And then, after God's people had been delivered from danger, after their every physical need had been satisfied, God summoned Moses to a mountain called Sinai and gave the Ten Commandments.

Friends, I can't overstate the importance of understanding that sequence of events. First God gave deliverance. Then God gave provision. And then God gave the law. The law was given not as a requirement for deliverance. The law was given not as a requirement for sustenance. The law was given as a gift, as the means by which God would transform a group of ex-slaves and refugees into a holy nation and a royal priesthood, a framework by which God would bring about God's intention of blessing all the families of the earth.

And so the first commandment God gives is this: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

And the second commandment is closely related: 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. You 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, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

As many of you know, I just returned from a two week visit to the Holy Land. Last week, I visited Yad Vashem, the Holocaust remembrance museum just outside of Jerusalem. And as I made my way through the museum, I came upon this pile of shoes in a glass case. There were at least 500 shoes. Some were large, some were medium, and some were very small, obviously worn by children.

And the exhibit noted that the former owners of those shoes had once been ordered to remove them, and then they had been separated into groups. Men were sent one way, women and children another. They were told that they were going to showers, after which they would be reunited. But the black smoke billowing from the chimneys in the distance told a different story.

What struck me as I stood there in front of all of those shoes was that the who gave those orders to separate those fathers from their children were acting in perfect compliance with the law of the land. They were lawfully carrying out an order lawfully given in the interest of national security.

The following day, we visited Bethlehem, the hometown of King David and the birthplace of Jesus. Modern day Bethlehem is part of the Palestinian territory of the West Bank, and even though it's only seven miles from Jerusalem, we had to pass through an Israeli security checkpoint and pass through the security wall to get there.

Our guide, a wonderful Christian man named Iyad, took us to his church in Bethlehem. He showed us with pride the place where he was married, the place where his daughters and sons were baptized, the place which just also happens to be the Church of the Nativity, built over the cave which is the traditional site of the birthplace of Jesus.

Iyad is a Palestinian Christian who is about my age, and he also happens to be a father of three kids. His kids are a little older than mine, but we began to talk about what it was like when our wives were expecting our first kids. And Iyad told me about what it was like in the spring of 2002, when his wife was seven months pregnant, and violence broke out in Bethlehem. He told me about Israeli tanks rolling down his street, and how his wife began to experience preterm labor because of the stress, and how he called for an ambulance to take her to the hospital, but no ambulance could come because of the tanks. He was willing to be forcibly separated from his wife and unborn child if it meant saving their lives. And the people occupying his city in those tanks in his street were acting in perfect legal compliance with an order lawfully given in the interest of national security.

Friends, I am not a legal scholar. I don't pretend to have all the answers when it comes to our immigration problem here in the United States. But I know that right now, at this very moment, right here in our own beloved Texas, a tent city is being constructed to house children who have been forcibly separated from their parents. At this very moment, there are children who are the same age as my children living for months in a converted WalMart for no other reason than their parents knew that to stay where they were was to accept death, and so they left their homes in search of at least a fighting chance at a better life, and when they to the border, their parents were sent one way, and these children were sent another..

At this very moment, separating children from parents is in perfect legal compliance with a perfectly legal order given in the interest of national security.

Becoming a father has changed the way I read both the newspaper and the Bible. And through that lens, my view is that such orders may indeed be legal, but they are in no way moral, and in the long run, they do more to harm our national security than they do to enhance it. I am a man of peace, and I believe in the cause of nonviolence, but I tell you with clear eyes that if someone were to cause physical harm and emotional distress to my children or to forcibly separate me from them, I would never forget it.

Such orders that separate parents from children may be legal in the letter of the law, but they neglect the weightier matters of the law, such as justice and mercy and righteousness. And in my heart of hearts, I believe such orders are out of compliance with the law of God. Jesus said, “The greatest commandment is this: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

And so here’s what I’m going to do about it. I’m going to be a holy bother in the ear of Congresswoman Granger and Senators Cornyn and Cruz. I’m going to write to President Trump. I’m under no illusions that I’m going to change any minds, but that’s not the point.

Someday, I’m going to stand before the judgment throne of God, and I’m going to have to give an account of my actions. And so as a father, as a pastor, as a citizen of these United States, I’m going to speak out.

I’m going to speak out for Abe and Edita Spiegel, parents who, in 1945 were forcibly separated their two year old son Uziel at a place called Auschwitz in 1945.

I’m going to speak out for Iyad, a young father who, in 2002, couldn’t get his pregnant wife to a hospital in a place called Bethlehem.

I’m going to speak out on behalf of parents who, in 2018, have been forcibly separated from their children in a place called Texas.

Martin Niemoller was a Lutheran pastor who lived in Germany during the Nazi rise to power. He was an outspoken critic of that racist regime, and as a result, he spent seven years of his life in a camp. He is remembered in Yad Vashem and other Holocaust remembrance museums around the world, for this quotation:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

Amen.