

Let's Start at the Very Beginning (2ND is a 4 part series – The Role of LAW) Exodus 32:1-10a
Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV – 17th Sunday after Pentecost (October 9,) 2011

^{32:1} When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' ²Aaron said to them, 'Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.' ³So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He took the gold from them, formed it in a mould, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' ⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, 'Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.' ⁶They rose early the next day, and offered burnt-offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

⁷ The Lord said to Moses, 'Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"' ⁹The Lord said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them;

Last week we began a four week sermon series on **GOD'S LAW FOR US**. Last week's sermon was the introduction – that set the thesis for the series, namely: **GOD'S LAW IS A RECIPE BY THE CREATOR FOR HOW THE CREATURES ARE MEANT TO LIVE A GOOD LIFE**. We remembered from **Psalm 19** that the **WISDOM OF TORAH/LAW** is bigger than language, and goes out to the ends of the universe, and also descends into the tiniest sub-atomic particle or wave known to quantum physics – TORAH is the DIRECTIONS FOR GOOD LIFE.

- ✦ **Jesus** said that he did **not come to do away with TORAH**. Rather, he said, he is the **FULFILLMENT** of the TORAH.
- ✦ **Jesus** said that he **came to bring us LIFE** – abundant and eternal.
- ✦ **Jesus** said that **HE is the Truth, the Way, the Life**.

Last week's sermon tried to introduce us to the notion of what would it mean to us, if we **quit treating God like a JUDGE and like a loving parent, instead**.

We didn't delve into the TEN COMMANDMENTS one by one, although we did hear them read last time.

So today, we are going to look into those BIG TEN, in a way like **Julie Andrews** lyrically suggested in ***The Sound of Music***: **when we read we begin with A-B-C**; when we **sing we begin with Do-Re-Mi**.

Let's start at the very beginning of the TEN COMMANDMENTS and we find:

1. You shall have no other gods before me. And,

2. You shall not make for yourself an idol.

That's what we get when we start at the beginning (a very good place to start). And in today's scripture lesson from the First Testament, we read about how Moses is up on the mountain getting the 10 commandments from God, while the people down below are breaking these first two.

It's easy to do the usual read and interpretation: God is big boss in charge. God gives rules and duties. God likes to punish the people who get 'em wrong. Zap. Bang. Boom.

Remember the theme of this sermon series:

✦ **GOD'S LAW IS A RECIPE BY THE CREATOR FOR HOW THE CREATURES ARE MEANT TO LIVE A GOOD LIFE.**

✦ What would it mean to us, if we **quit treating God like a JUDGE and like a loving parent, instead.**

I'm not saying, "You've got to believe it like this." All I'm trying to do is preach what I hear, and suggest that you try this on, to see how it fits. If, after it's all over, you want to stay with God as the Big, nasty Judge, who we say loves us, but we don't really believe it – then that's your choice.

First, let's look at what **SIN** means. Does SIN mean **breaking the law and getting punished if you get caught?**

Or, does SIN mean – as the old archer term from which the word originates means – **MISSING THE MARK.**

Sin, understood in this latter way, is anything and everything that separates us from God and from the **RECIPE FOR A GOOD LIFE.**

By this latter definition, the **punishment of sin is contained in its own commission.** If sin separates us from God and violates God's recipe for a good life, then that is our punishment.

What's with these Israelites, anyway?

This story tells us three things about them AND most, if not all, of humanity.

1. People long for, and need to, worship SOMETHING.
2. Anxiety may indeed be at the root of all evil, rather than the love of money.
3. Waiting is a powerful opportunity for sin to creep into our lives.

The first fact of life, from this story: **PEOPLE LONG FOR, AND NEED TO, WORSHIP SOMETHING.**

I've heard some people say they don't believe in God. And I don't believe them. Everybody worships. **Show me how people SPEND their lives and I'll show you what is their god.**

The Israelites are worried about what's going on. Moses has been gone, and they need something. What? They need something bigger than them. They decide to rely upon something that they can make themselves – a golden calf. And they get their only RELIGION GUY AROUND to cooperate with their plan.

SMALL FOOTNOTE HERE: I am both amazed and frightened by what I see happening in this story, and in the world around me. The people get scared and start making demands on Aaron to do something he knew was wrong. But, like many preachers who just want to be successful, he decides to play to the crowd, and do what they want – like a preacher (OR A CHURCH OR A DENOMINATION) who checks his polling numbers before preparing his sermon. He wraps his sinful actions in religious sounding language, but it's all just a ploy to keep the customer satisfied.

When confronted by his complicity, by Moses, we read (just a few verses past today's lesson, in verse 24) Aaron's incredible reply to Moses: "...You know the[se] people ... So I said to them, 'Whoever has gold, take it off'; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!"

Pathetic, pathetic indeed!!

I hope that if your pastor ever gets to the point where he only wants to make the people happy and not be a spokesperson of the Lord, that someone around here will tell him that he's acting like Aaron.

END OF FOOTNOTE,

Everyone believes in some god. Show me how people spend their lives and I will show you what is their god.

When we start at the very beginning, we make as the bedrock of our living the worship of the one true God. Not because God will strike us down if we don't. But because, God is God, and no one, and nothing, else can ever provide what we need ultimately for the good life.

What other gods do WE worship? *Oh, no, Monty, we don't worship anything else. No idols in our lives.*

Show me how people SPEND their lives and I will show you what is their god.

I'm not here to beat you up. All I know is that when we SPEND our lives on something, WE OUGHT TO INVEST in something that won't let us down.

Look into the mirror of your own life. I've been doing so myself, as I've wrestled with this text. What are the things upon which I SPEND MY LIFE? My TIME, my MONEY, my ATTACHMENT.

Ask yourself, as I've been asking myself: *when the storms of life are raging, will those things stand by me?* Take a look at Hymn 512, and ask if those things in which you are investing your life will do the job that God does?

The God Who created us, wants us – from the very beginning – to not invest our lives in something that will let us down.

2. Anxiety may indeed be at the root of all evil, rather than the love of money.

There are many things that make us anxious – the crashing of our retirement plans, due to the stock market; the uncertainties of our jobs; the uncertainties of our health; the challenges of human relationships – people we thought we could count on suddenly let us down; the list goes on and on.

But, let's be real, folks. We are not alone. There have always been **THESE** uncertainties, or **OTHERS JUST AS POWERFUL**.

For some strange reason it came over me just this week, as I did the rehearsal preparation for a wedding. I met with the couple, as I always do, in my office before the official wedding rehearsal. We go over their declaration of intention, their vows, their exchange of rings. In the quiet of my office, away from all the hype and hysteria of the American wedding culture, we go over their promises line by line.

When we finished the part about:

**for better, for worse,
for richer, for poorer,
in sickness and in health,
to love and to cherish,
until we are parted by death.**

I said to the couple, "I know that you think you mean all of that. But, right now, you also have a hard time picturing anything but "better, richer, health, life." But, the reality is that almost every couple that I marry is also really going to experience the "worse, poorer, sickness, and death" part as well. It's how life goes. You need something solid to hold onto when those times roll around.

In the times of anxiety – we really do need something that is solid.

In the times of anxiety – if we really have placed God first and foremost, then we are by going to be better off, because that for which we have spent our lives will not let us down.

I don't say this, just because the Bible tells me so. I say this because I've seen it proved over and over in my life, as well as the lives of others.

Just because we invest our lives in something other than God, and it doesn't "harm anyone" we tend to think it's OK. No harm, no foul.

Yeah – if God, for you is just duty and judgment, then “no harm, no foul” might make sense to you.

But, if God, for you, is the loving power that will keep you going, when all else is failing, then it doesn't make too much sense to have invested your life in **soccer** or **stock market** or **shopping** or **eating** or **drinking** or **political fortune** or **lots of different pursuits of pleasure** – **EVEN the NFL**, instead of God.

God's not against any of those things, but don't make them your idol.

Funny – no, SAD -- thing is – most people don't realize just how much they've invested in idols until the anxiety comes crashing down all around. Most people think they are building walls of security, only to discover that they have built a prison that's hard to break out of.

3. Finally, this story from the First Testament teaches us that **Waiting is a powerful opportunity for sin to creep into our lives.** It's closely related to the notion that **IDLE HANDS ARE THE DEVIL'S WORKSHOP.**

Waiting is one of the hardest things for us to do. The Israelites were tired of waiting for Moses to come back down the mountain. It brought out the worst in them.

We can hide our anxieties of life when we are busy. We can cover up all the false idols we worship when we are on the move all the time.

But WAITING involves:

⌘ [] **SILENCE**

And we don't like that too much, at all.

⌘ And WAITING involves **not being in control.** And we don't like that too much, either.

⌘ And WAITING **makes us realize** that there are things in life where the **only thing we can do** is to **depend upon that which we have worshipped** during the busy times.

And that --- THAT can either COMFORT US, or scare the bejeebers out of us -- depending on what has been the object of our worship, DEPENDING ON WHAT WE HAVE SPENT OUR LIFE.

The **one commandment** that might appear **more often than any other** in the Bible is this: **BE NOT AFRAID.**

That's hard to do when we are waiting, if we have not – from the very beginning – spent our time, our resources, our energy – in nurturing our relationship with the one God who made us and loves us and wants us to remember just how much we are loved.

Nobody gets through life without troubles.

Some people blame God for trouble in their life, as though anyone said that life is exempt from trouble.

Hardly any good lesson of life is learned outside the furnace of suffering, said one very, very wise woman.

IT happens.

But, when **we start at the beginning** – and keep it at the **center of every day** of our life – that **God is God** – then our need for something to worship, our anxiety, and our waiting will all rest upon

- ⊕ **something strong,**
- ⊕ **something loving,**
- ⊕ **something upon which we can count.**

And **because God loves us so much**, God made sure that **THESE ARE THE FIRST WORDS WE HEAR IN THE RECIPE FOR GOOD LIFE.** As Jesus oft' said, **May the one who has ears, hear.**

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.