

“The Funny Math of Mercy”

Exodus 20:1-21 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be revived and our souls restored by the promise of your goodness. In Jesus' name, Amen.

I'm curious: when you hear the phrase “Old Testament God,” what are the adjectives that come to mind? How would you describe the “Old Testament God”? Or if you personally might not make such assumptions, what would you say are the stereotypes of the “Old Testament God”? [conversation]

I ask because how we see God matters. We are just beginning to realize just how deeply our understandings of God impact how we see the world, how we relate to one another, even how we understand and treat ourselves. There are people who have latched onto a wrathful, authoritarian God who judges and punishes, and the damage they've done in the name of that God is immense. To be clear, there are textual excuses for worshipping an angry, punitive God in the New Testament as well, but somehow, we have allowed this sloppy (and quite frankly, antisemitic) simplification of the “Old Testament God” to become a thing. And it seems that one of the places this caricature is most likely to emerge is when people are talking about the scripture passage we just read, the Ten Commandments. Ironically, given the second commandment about what the King James translation calls “graven images,” some folks have put an inordinate amount of energy into forcing this punitive God on

others by making literal monuments of the Ten Commandments and placing them in courthouses. When I lived in Alabama, we were just one county south of the courthouse where one of those crusades began.

What's interesting about those graven images of the Ten Commandments, though, is that they leave out some parts. And if we look at what is missing – what you might call the fine print of the Ten Commandments – you can see why it was removed. Because the God revealed in the fine print doesn't look much like that stereotype of the "Old Testament God."

You don't even have to get into much detail to read these verses and see a different portrayal of God, if you're keeping in mind that the Old Testament God is the God of Jesus. So often, we think of the Ten Commandments as a list of "shall nots," implying that faith is about a lot of rules. But if we read these commandments through the parental lens with which Jesus related to God, they can land differently. There's a certain amount of "Don't touch the stove" going on here. When we tell our children not to touch the stove, it's because the stove is often hot, and they're not yet very adept at discerning when they might get burned. When we tell them not to touch the stove when they're about to and it is, in fact, hot, the tone we use is likely to be urgent and loud and imperative, because we are deeply concerned about their imminent danger.

The Israelites, at this point in their history, were quite young as a people. It's not that they hadn't been around for a long time, but that they had just emerged from

generations of slavery, when they were not allowed to govern themselves and thus the community capacity for self-regulation had atrophied. And so when God is handing down the Ten Commandments, it's kind of like the basics for how to hold a community together. It's not that God was expecting them to be flagrant philanderers and thieves, but that God knew how damaging robbery and adultery and covetousness could be to the fabric of a community, especially a vulnerable minority community.

Once you assume that these “rules” were coming from a place of love, the whole thing starts to feel different. God is giving these commandments to the Israelites because they are the apple of God's eye. God adores the Israelites. God wants them to thrive and flourish. And God knows just how flawed they are. So just a few guardrails, maybe, to help them keep it together?

I will take the risk here of admitting that I have some theological issues with the whole concept of God having a “chosen people.” It does not fit well into my understanding of who God is and how God relates to the world and all its inhabitants. But the preciousness of this people to God cannot be denied, and it is the only lens through which this passage makes sense to me, given everything else Jesus has shown me about God. And thus, my high school chorus teacher, Ms. Malon, comes to mind. After a concert, when everyone was milling around and parents were congratulating us on a solid performance, if you bumped into Ms. Malon, she would tell you that “you were the best one in your row.” And there was something in her tone that made

clear that on the one hand, she totally meant it and you were awesome, but on the other hand, she was probably saying this to every kid she spoke with. And even though you suspected she said it everybody, you also knew that she meant it when she said it to you.

So the God of the Old Testament is a parent and a chorus teacher. But that's not all. It's important to pay attention to what God says right there at the beginning, the framing of these commands in which God names the authority with which they are given. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Loyalty is not being demanded to just any old god. The Israelites are being asked to be faithful to the God of Liberation, the One who makes a way out of bondage. As a defining characteristic, "liberatory" is a pretty distinctive and powerful thing to know about your God. It not only tells you how God has and will relate to you, but also puts certain boundaries around what faithfulness to that God can and cannot look like.

To be made in the image of a liberatory God makes it impossible for faithfulness to include the exploitation of anyone else. Full stop. To have no other gods before the God of Liberation means there is nowhere to turn for justification of actions that diminish the lives or dignity of others. If we were to apply this proclamation to its fullest extent, there would be no need for the other nine commandments, but God knows that's not how we roll, so we keep going. And that's where we bump into the funny math.

In that second commandment, when God is warning against idols – the “graven images” of King James’ translators – God starts to indulge in some explanatory clauses. It’s not just “don’t worship idols,” but here’s why. God claims to be jealous. Such an interesting and human thing to name about Godself. I generally think of jealousy as being rooted in low self-confidence, but that can hardly apply here, can it? Perhaps we’re back to the parental image, and it’s God as the parent, no longer of a toddler approaching the stove, but of a teenager awash in a new blend of hormones that bring forth all sorts of bad attitudes, sullenness, and accidental cruelty.

And then there’s this thing about the generations. And it’s like God is trying really hard to be stern, setting up a threat that sounds super ominous: I will punish children “for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me.” But in the next breath, that severity collapses because what God is actually going to do is show “steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.” Did you catch the math there? The measure of God’s punishment is 3 (or 4) minus 1000. So negative 997? Negative 996? Maybe it’s easier to see what’s really happening if we look at the measure of the steadfast love instead: It’s at positive 996 or 7.

Put another way, God gives 10 commandments and multiplies them by 0 for the chances that we’ll follow all of them flawlessly and comes up with 1000. This is the funny math of mercy. It doesn’t add up. It doesn’t have to. You can do that

when you're God. When I say it matters how we understand God because it shapes how we see the world, what I mean is that it's clear the world doesn't always make sense, but what we need to keep coming back to is mercy. We need to know that our bottom line is compassion, because the God we have been called to be faithful to is a God of love and liberation, not a god of judgement and punishment. We need to declare, again and again, that the Old Testament God, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, of Moses and John and Jesus, is the One whose faithfulness is great, who causes us to sing "morning by morning, new mercies I see."

There is another funny contradiction at the end of this story of Moses and the Israelites receiving the Ten Commandments (not involving math!). "Don't be afraid," Moses tells them, "for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin." Even when we note that "the fear of God" is something more akin to "awe" in this context, there is a sense of paradox here. In some ways, I wonder if that "to 3 or 4 generations" but also "to 1000 generations" thing is a way of explaining why bad things – and good things – happen in ways that don't seem fair. Life is mystifying. Humans often make choices that make it harder. But when we shape our lives – and especially our shared life, our life in community – around faithfulness to a God of mercy and liberation, it gets easier. It may not make more sense and difficult things will still happen. But joy will be closer at hand and wholeness will seem more achievable. May it be so. Hallelujah and Amen!