



“Good News - Bad News”

Text: Exodus 19:3-7; 20:1-17

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One of my favorite performers was the late, great Elaine Stritch. In her one-woman show, *At Liberty*, Miss Stritch said, “There’s good news and there’s bad news. The good news is that I have got a terrific acceptance speech for a Tony. The bad news is that I’ve had it for 45 years.”

Good news and bad news are traveling companions. Let’s try it. You get to respond “yay!” to good news and “boo!” to bad news. Ready?

“God so loved the world.” - Yay

“This is the day the Lord has made.” - Yay

“The Lord God sent Adam and Eve out of the garden,
to till the ground from which they were taken.” - Boo!

“At once, Judas came up to Jesus and kissed him.” - Boo!

“God gave us the Ten Commandments.”

Good news or bad news?

The way in which most of us were taught the commandments made them sound like restrictions. “Here’s the stuff you can’t do and here’s the stuff you have to do,” is the way it sounded. Living with God, if it involved commandments, didn’t sound like something a sensible person would want to do. And then, to frighten us into faith, they dangled us over hellfire and brimstone and taught an advanced course in teeth gnashing so we would be ready if we didn’t follow the rules.

So, here are the commandments again. Are they good news? Or bad news?

To get a proper start at the subject, we have to back up a bit to what happens just before the giving of the commandments to the people. God says, “If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” (Ex. 19:5-6) God is offering the people something they could not obtain for themselves. God is offering them an identity as God’s own people, God’s treasured possession, the servant nation by which the world will come to know God.

The qualifier in that statement is “if.” “If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, then you shall be my treasured possession out of all the people.” If you would be who God intends and calls you to be, then the life you are called to live will be different from other ways of living. If you will be God’s covenant people, then here’s how you do it.

God has been traveling with the people. God has heard their grumblings. God has seen their tendencies to abandon God’s way. God has experienced what it’s like to have the people lose their trust in God. God knows that without some direction, some instruction, some guidelines, they will not be the people God created and called them to be.

And that leads us to the Ten Commandments. The commandments lead us to see what life can be – what life can look like. The commandments created a freedom for being in relationship with God and with one another.

The first commandment sets the tone:

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.

As tempting as it may be to place other things as the supreme authority in life, God tells the people, if you want to be able to relate to me and to one another, you have to begin with God as God – and no other gods, no matter how popular, powerful, or plentiful.

Everything else that follows is about how to live in the freedom God offers. What can life look like?

If we give up making idols for ourselves, we can begin to see the glory of God’s handiwork.

If we stop using God’s name as a way to manipulate people, we can love them and care for them more readily.

If we embrace the Sabbath, we can live a more refreshed and connected life.

If we honor your father and mother, we can learn the importance of connection.

If we do not commit murder, we may not need to live in fear.

If we do not commit adultery, we may be able to discover new and deeper pathways of trust.

If we do not steal, we might lighten the burden of our worries about protecting what we call ours.

If we only speak truth, we might find an easier way of living.

If we give up yearning for what others have, we just may discover the joys of what is already ours.

The commandments create space for us to be truly who God created us to be.

Now, if we decide that they are rules that must be followed, we make them bad news. If we see these commandments as establishing wide and generous boundaries that allow us freedom to live genuinely and authentically, they are good news.

If we insist on continuing to point out that they are the “Ten Commandments” and not the “Ten Suggestions,” we only make them less desirable and diminish their power. If we see the commandments as the superstructure for life as God intends it to be, they are good news.

The commandments are promises, not restrictions. When we embrace these commandments and make them part of who we are and how we live, there is the promise of blessing, rewarding life, peace, and wholeness. This is the path of life that leads to *shalom* - the wholeness, beauty, and integration of life.

On this Sunday, when we focus on peacemaking and witnessing to our faith, what better way is there to make peace and demonstrate life as it was meant to be, than to live the good news of God’s commandments? What better way is there to create relationship between ourselves and our neighbors than to live the life God fashioned us to live? How better to connect with God than to accept God’s way of life and living as our own?

There’s good news and there’s bad news. When it comes to the Ten Commandments, it’s all in how you approach the terms of God’s covenant. If you see them as restrictions and restraints, you’ll find no good news. If you see them as holding within them the power to free us from fear, from worry, from mistrust, from greed, from disconnection - then you may just discover that the Ten Commandments creates some very good news. *Very good news.*

For now and evermore. Amen.



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