



**LIVING WORD
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

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**You Shall Not Make
a Carved Image
Exodus 20:4-6**

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August 4, 2019 – Trinity 7

Last week we heard the Lord's voice rumble from the thick cloud covering Mt. Sinai as he spoke the words of the preamble to the Decalogue and the first of its ten words or commandments:

"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. (Exodus 20:2-3)

The Israelites knew only the practises of the pagan people amongst whom they had lived—for four hundred years in Egypt—and as they enter into life in the promised land they will be surrounded by people with similar ideas a practises. The gods of the pagans were many and they worked in community. There were big gods and small gods. Kings worshipped and offered sacrifices to the big gods, but the ordinary folks were their ordinary concerns, while affirming the existence and power of those big gods, took their concerns to the lesser gods of hearth and home, fields and flocks. And so the Lord has declared: I brought you out of the land of Egypt and out of your slavery. I have done it myself. I have shown you that the gods of Egypt, the greatest power on earth, are nothing as compared to me. Do not bring them or any other gods like them into my presence. In my land, the land to which I am bringing you, you shall worship me and me alone, because only I am worthy of worship.

As we look now at Exodus 20:4-6 the second word or commandment rumbles out of the cloud on the mountain:

"You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is

in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

What's being prohibited here? As with the first commandment, Christian interpretation of the second commandment has, for the most part, been shaped not so much by our understanding of the historical and cultural context in which the command was given, but by later commentary by the rabbis and by controversies in the early Church and then again at the Reformation. In later Judaism this was taken to be a ban on any kind of artistic representation of any kind of living creature. In the early Church there was a major controversy over the use of icons. At the Reformation there was a revolt by the more radical wing against any and all images whether crucifixes, stained glass, or statues. And from that time to the present, the main concern here for Christians has been on the understanding that God, who is transcendent and entirely "other" cannot be adequately represented by an image. J. I. Packer in his popular book, *Knowing God*, gives a good, short overview of this problem as it's typically been addressed in classical evangelical thought.¹ He sums up the problem of images under two headings. First, images dishonour God because they obscure his glory. God is entirely other and any human depiction of him falls short of who he really is. Aaron's golden calf, for example, was meant to depict the Lord's strength and might in leading the people out of Egypt. But depicting the Lord as a bull obscures other aspects of his character: his righteousness, his loving-kindness, for example—the list is endless. And that leads to Packer's second heading. Images mislead us. When we focus our attention in worship on an image that cannot adequately depict God in all his glory, we run the risk of constructing in

and mind and then worshipping a false god.

Now, Christians disagree on the details. The Puritans spent much of the Reformation smashing statues and stained glass windows while Anglicans and Lutherans preserved them. Is it wrong to draw a diagram showing the relationships within the Trinity when the purpose is to teach and not to worship? What about Bible storybooks? Can you have a picture of Abraham eating with the Lord or Jacob wrestling with him? What about a movie where an actor depicts Jesus? There are some who take issue with these things, but for the most part they're usually not seen as a problem because they're not used in worship. The Presbyterians who built out church building, however, would be very upset to know that later generations erected this cross at the front, because they feared such things would become the focus of worship rather than God himself. This is why our church building is a white-washed hall in contrast to the other St. Andrew's down the hill. Anglicans, in contrast, have seen these things as aides in telling the story of God and his people. Yes, there's a risk some may misdirect their worship to images, but we've generally seen that the benefit outweighs the risk, especially in light of the fact that we teach about their significance.

These are all important concerns. I've read and listened to more than a dozen sermons on the second commandment this week and every one of them has focused on these things. But as I said, they're a long way from the original context and the original concerns addressed by this commandment when it was given to Israel at Mt. Sinai. So I'd like to look at that before transposing it into our context and making some applications.

This commandment has three parts—the others aren't this detailed. First, there's the commandment itself, then an explanation, and third a warning or curse. Let's look at them in that order.

So, first, the instructions again, "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth

¹ Chapter Four. *Knowing God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 43-51.

beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them..." In a sense this is pretty straightforward. The Hebrew word behind "carved image" is *pesel* and when it's used in the Old Testament it refers almost exclusively to images of deities carved of wood or stone (and later cast in metal) for the purpose of worship. In the plural, it is always a reference in general or collectively to the idols of the pagan peoples. But it's important to understand what the purpose of these idols was and why and how they were used. We need to understand that in order to understand what it was that the Lord was forbidding.

As much as Christians have historically emphasised this commandment as protecting our understanding of the transcendence of God, one of the things we've learned about Ancient Near Eastern people is that most all of them understood this concept too. The Old Testament scholar, Gerhard von Rad writes, "The pagan religions knew as well as Israel did that deity is invisible, that it transcends all human ability to comprehend it, and that it cannot be captured by or compromised in a material object."² As important as it is to remember God's transcendence, it doesn't seem that this is what the Lord was getting at with this prohibition against idols.

Particularly in the last century, we've learned a lot about the religious practises of the Ancient Near East. Things varied a bit from one people to another, but there are some general ideas they shared in common.³ These are what the Lord was trying to keep from his people. So, first, the gods were believed to initiate the process, commanding idols to be made. Humans would carve them and then elaborate rituals would follow in which the idol was purified from the contamination of those who carved it. It would be moved into the

temple. And incantations would be made to transfer the god from the spiritual world into the idol. The high point was what's called a mouth-opening ceremony, which enabled the deity, through the idol, to eat and drink food offerings and to smell incense—basically to receive the worship of the people.

Worship then centred around providing for the needs of the god. Priests would wake the idol in the morning, bathe it, dress it, feed it, play music for it, and put it to bed at night. The idol would reciprocate in different ways. In Egypt, court cases would be brought to the god Amun, and the idol would issue decrees through the manipulation of the priests. In other cases we know of, priests would read the entrails of the animals sacrificed to the idols. This was understood to be the god's way of giving direction. But in a general sense, it was expected that if the people cared for the god by means of the idol, that god would take care of them, bringing order and peace to the land and victory over enemies.

So the idea was that the idols were animated by the gods themselves. The idols were thought to manifest the presence of the gods. This didn't mean that people thought the idol *was* the god; it was a vehicle or a container to mediate the presence of the god. It was a place where the people could go to meet with their gods and to be in their presence. The best modern-day thing I can think to illustrate it is the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation—the process by which they believe that the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper literally become the body and blood of Jesus. The bread and the wine mediate his presence to the worshippers and when they reverence and worship the bread and wine, they don't think of it in terms of worshiping actual bread and wine, but Jesus mystically in them. (This, too, highlights why the Reformers had such a problem with this doctrine!)

On the simplest level, what Israel was to avoid was other gods. But that was dealt with in the first commandment. The Lord reminds them again here.

That's the second part of this commandment: I am a jealous god. Have no other gods in my presence. But this commandment deals more specifically with the *way* worship was thought of amongst Israel's neighbours. It's sometimes referred to as the Great Symbiosis. Basically, that means that in worship the people would provide for the needs of the god so that, in return, the god would meet whatever their needs were, answer their prayers, fight off their enemies, make their harvests plentiful, and so on. It was a divine-human quid pro quo. We scratch God's back and he'll scratch ours. Can you see how that's a problem?

And this is why it's not *just* a prohibition of making idols representing *other* gods. To make an image of the Lord would be to think of him as the pagans thought of their gods and to worship him in this manipulative way that they did. The Lord—the God who is I AM—does not need to be awakened in the morning, bathed, clothed, fed, or put to bed at night. And he cannot be influenced or manipulated or swayed by our worship. Now, we may laugh at that and think it's primitive, but Brothers and Sisters, this thinking is still a problem even when we don't use idols. How often do we try to make deals with God? I talked with a guy a while ago who was getting angry with God. "I keep giving and giving and giving to him, but he never gives me what I want in return." He said in frustration. Someone else once asked me, "I've tried really hard and I've totally given up such-and-such sin that I really loved, but God still hasn't blessed me with that thing I really want." Even Martin Luther in his school days confessed to crying out in the midst of a horrible lightning storm, "Save me and I'll become a monk!"

You see, we still do it. And it's still just as displeasing and dishonour to God. He desires our all, but he needs nothing and we can not manipulate him—not even with our repentance. Our life with him is all of grace. He owes us nothing and there's nothing we can earn or merit. So if we struggle this much *without* idols, imagine how much their presence amplifies this problem.

² *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), I:214.

³ John Walton, in *The Lost World of the Torah* (pp. 241-245), offers a brief summary of these concepts and what follows is largely dependent on that material.

The other thing the Lord is getting at here that comes into focus in light of the cultural context is the problem of fragmenting the god's identity. Because a god's identity was extended to his images, having multiple images fragmented that identity into different local manifestations. Cities would go to war calling on the same god so that the Ishtar of Ninevah and the Ishtar of Arbela would actually be at war with each other. This was a problem for the Lord. He held one covenant with all of Israel. There could not be multiple manifestations of the Lord. But this is just what Jeroboam tried to do when he led the ten northern tribes into revolt and set up an alternative sanctuary in Samaria. The Lord was to be worshipped without images and in the Jerusalem temple alone. Jeroboam, however, built a new sanctuary and constructed calf altars, idols meant to represent the Lord. He tried to "create" a Lord of Samaria as a rival to the Lord of Jerusalem.

And this leads into the third part of the command, the warning or the curse associated with disobedience. Look at verses 5 and 6 again:

You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

These verses remind us of the covenantal context of the Decalogue. This is Israel's end of her covenant with the Lord. This is how she is to be his people, in his land, with him in her midst. We get another reminder in the fourth commandment: "Honour your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land". There are blessings associated with the covenant, but there are also curses. If Israel fails to keep her end of it, she will be expelled, much as Adam and Eve were expelled from the Lord's presence. It's

important to understand what that word "visit" means. This is the same Hebrew word used of the Lord "visiting" the Egyptians in judgement and destruction. Now the tables are turned. If Israel fails to live up to her end of the covenant, the Lord will visit her as he visited Egypt. She will be driven from the land. This is what the bit about "to the third and fourth" generation means. It's figurative language referring to the consequences to the covenant community. Remember, the Lord isn't addressing individuals; he's addressing the whole people. If they disobey and persist in disobedience, they will be exiled and the consequence of that exile will be felt by succeeding generations. This is exactly what happened, first to the ten northern tribes and later to Judah. They were disobedient. They did not fulfil the covenant stipulations. You could say that they broke their contract with the Lord. That was the condition for living in his land, and so he allowed them to be conquered and exiled—driven from his presence. In contrast, the Lord says, he shows his steadfast love to those love him and keep his commandments.

I wouldn't have thought to mention it, but it came up several times in my study of this passage. Have you heard of the concept of generation sin or generational curses? I hope most of you have never heard of those ideas, but some no doubt have. This passage and the parallel passage in Deuteronomy 5 are the sole biblical prooftexts used by people who teach this idea of generational sin or cursing. This is the idea either that specific sins are somehow passes in a spiritual nature from a parent to a child over multiple generations or that curses or God's punishment can be passed on in a similar way. First, the context here rules out this idea. It's simply talking about the covenantal consequences of sin for the community—exile from the land. And, of course, exile from the land will impact future generations as well. This idea of generational sins or curses has nothing to do with the Bible or Christian theology. It originated in African shamanism. North Americans exported the Word of Faith and Prosperity Gospel heresies to Africa and

this shamanistic belief was absorbed into that and then exported back to North America by other Prosperity Gospel teachers. The name associated with that came up again and again was Derek Prince, someone I wasn't familiar with until this week. Again, the only texts they cite to support this are this passage and the parallel passage in Deuteronomy and neither has anything to do with it. It does, however, highlight the trouble we can get ourselves into when we go to the Bible looking for something and pull verses out of context or when we read the English translation in a way that the Hebrew or Greek disallows.

Now, in conclusion we're brought back to this question asked last Sunday: What do Israel's covenant stipulations mean for us? Jesus has forged a new Israel and brought us into a new and better covenant as he has brought the old to its fulfilment. But, as I said, we worship the same God who never changes. And as much as the usual Christian conversation about this commandment and the use of images in worship is important, it's getting away from what this commandment was really getting at in its original context. And as modern people, we're not very much in danger of using an idol to mediate the Lord's presence.

I do think some of what we see in looking at those Ancient Near Eastern practises serves as a warning. In particular, the idea that somehow if we give God what he wants, that he's then obligated to give us what we want. This is what ancient people tried to do with idols. Friends, to think that we can put God in our debt is to undermine the idea of grace and God's own gracious nature. We can't make deals with God. And that's good news, because there's nothing we could possibly offer God that really would put him our debt. We must rest in his grace and trust in his love and goodness towards us. When we're tempted to doubt this, we need only look to Jesus and the cross. God gave himself for us. We cannot repay that kind of grace. We can only rest in it with joy and obediently devote ourselves to him in loving gratitude.

But as I've thought on these verses the other important thing that has come to mind is this idea of image. Pagans put stone or wood images of their gods in their temples to manifest the god's presence and rule in their lands. But think about what the Lord did. Genesis depicts him creating the cosmos with a garden at its centre. The language throughout is the language of temple-building. The garden was a sort of holy of holies. And in it he placed the man and the woman to bear his image and to be his stewards. Brothers and Sisters, to create idols is to disregard who *we* are in God's economy. Again, we are the image he placed in his temple. We were created to mediate his presence and his rule to his creation. When we rebelled and rejected that vocation and turned creation upside down, the Lord called Israel to pick it back up. Israel was to be the people in whose midst the Lord dwelt. Israel was to be the people who mediated the Lord's presence and rule to the nations. They were to pick up the long-lost vocation of the human race, to be the Lord's image bearers.

Israel's vocation was fulfilled in Jesus. St. Paul writes in Colossians:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.... And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:15, 18-19)

So Jesus has taken up that mission originally given to Adam and then to Israel. He is the image of God in whom the fullness of God dwells. But he has also swept up the Church, the new people of God, into this vocation. Because we are reconciled with God, we're summoned back into the presence of the Lord, back into the garden, back into the place of life. The writer of the book of Hebrews tells us:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Hebrews 10:19-22)

But it's not just being brought back into the Lord's presence. Israel lived with the Lord's presence in her midst. Through Jesus we have and are called to something even greater. Here's what Jesus says in John 7:

"If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37-39)

Brothers and Sisters, God gives his new covenant people his own Spirit. He not only dwells in our midst, he dwells within us, making us holy and that life of the Spirit, that living water, spills from his people out to the nations as the waters of Eden flowed out to bring life to the world. In Jesus our vocation has been restored. We are once again the bearers of God's image, the people who manifest his presence and his kingdom.

Come to the Lord's Table this morning and be reminded of our union with Jesus. By his blood he has washed us clean. By the Spirit he has filled us with the life of God. He has transferred us from the rebellious family of Adam and made us, once again, the people of God. We bear his image. We mediate his presence and his kingdom. Come to the Table and be reminded. Then go out into the world carrying the fruit of the Spirit and proclaiming the royal summons that Jesus is Lord.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, thank you for your word, given that we might know you. Steep us in your word, we pray, and give us a right understanding of it that our worship might always honour you. Guard us from error. Guard us from idolatry. Guard us from ever questioning your goodness and wisdom and thinking that we can manipulate you or put you in our debt. And, remind us too, of who we are in Jesus: your people, into whom you have poured living water, that it might flow from us to the world as we bear your image. Through our Lord Jesus we pray. Amen.