June 7, 2020 Text: Deuteronomy 8:1-10 “Keeping God’s Commandments”

Okay. I tried to cheat. It didn’t work.

When I looked at today’s study text, I humbly to myself: “Maybe that word ‘commandment’ should literally be translated ‘suggestion’ or ‘advice.’” Surely, it is not so demanding as a “commandment.” I was wrong. I did a little digging in a Hebrew-English dictionary and the word is clear. It means “commandment.” There is no wiggle room.

The Book of Deuteronomy might be considered part of God’s last revelation to the Israelites before they move into the Promised Land. There is a lot in it about remembering that forty-year journey across the wilderness (Deuteronomy 8:2-4). There is a lot in it about how God will provide for God’s people in the days to come (Deuteronomy 8:7). But in it all there is the steady theme of “Do what God tells you to do.”

Commandments. Does that include all that messy stuff about loving other people? Does that include that silly notion that we are not to put other values ahead of God’s values? What about this thing of not being jealous or the instruction to honor life?

As I reviewed this week’s text, I noticed the absence of any suggestion that it is easy to follow all of God’s commandments. Instead I see words like “diligently” (Deuteronomy 8:1) and “testing you” (Deuteronomy 8:2) and “disciplines” (Deuteronomy 8:5).


It’s the bottom of the ninth inning. The bases are loaded. There are two outs. The Cardinals are behind by one run. Kolton Wong is at bat. Wow! I love a good baseball game!

Or, the clock at Cameron Indoor Stadium is slipping toward 0:00. All 9,141 people are on their feet. The freshman point guard dribbles across mid-court. He throws up a mighty heave and we all hold our breaths to see if it goes in. Wow! I love a good basketball game.

Or, the cold winter winds cut into even the heaviest coat. From the concession tent my Sunday School class operates, I can not see the field, but I can see the scene on the end zone video screen. The field goal is good! We win! We win! Wow! I love a good football game.

So, here we have it: Eliah going head to head with the four-hundred fifty prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:22). Mount Carmel did not give either team a home field advantage. The folks in the stands didn’t seem to want to cheer for either team (1 Kings 18:21). It was showdown time; no ties in this game...one team had to win (1 Kings 18:21). Wow! I love a good game!

I recognize that I don’t mind proclaiming God’s power when I am in the midst of the Church community. But, when I am face-to-face with values contrary to God’s will or when I am surrounded by people who could care less about spiritual matters or when God’s commandment that I love my enemies is put to the test...ah, then I may join the crowd on the sidelines (1 Kings 18:21). “The people gave no answer” (CEB).

But thanks be to God for the ones who will step forward to show the powers of the world that in truth they have no power. But thanks be to God for the ones who hold to conviction even when those around them are silent about the whole matter. But thanks be to God for the example set by Eliah.

The witness of Eliah brought alive again the dormant faith of the people of Israel (1 Kings 18:39). In our Christian journey, we look at an empty tomb and know that life is stronger than death (John 11:25); we know that the fire that descended at Mount Carmel still came as a power to the followers of Jesus at Pentecost (Acts 2:3). Maybe indeed this Old Testament story is a story in the present tense!

What Someone Else Has Said:

Charles Wesley (Journal of Charles Wesley, Vol. 1, Baker) described overcoming the enemy: “Our prayers for the oppressors also began to be answered; for the fiercest of them came in this evening to the room, and behaved with great decency.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come, Holy Fire...”


Ever so often, my shadow side comes up with a not-so-nice idea. Do you have someone in your class who is super-confident about his or her knowledge of the Bible? You might ask that person to read this week’s study text sight unseen or you could ask them cold-turkey to tell the significance of the names Shaphan, Ahikam, Micaiah, Achbor, Tikvah, and Asahiah. Sorry. I couldn’t resist. It’s probably best not to try this idea.

But this text is full of those difficult names. All of these people (and others) are involved with the discovery of the ancient scroll that contained the commandments of God. Don’t miss the fact that in this heavily patriarchal society, a woman—Huldah—is trusted to speak an interpretative word (2 Kings 22:14-20).

It was not a word that folks would want to hear. She tells them that God is super-angry because they have abandoned their commitment to follow God (2 Kings 22:17), but there is a word of assurance to those who repent (2 Kings 22:19).

King Josiah humbled himself (2 Kings 22:11, 19) and made the sign of great grief by ripping his clothes. The Old Testament word translated “humbled” is kina. Literally, that means “to bend the knee.” Imagine that scene: the palace entourage was accustomed to seeing all sorts of people come in to see the king and these visitors would bow before his majesty. Now they see something quite different. The mighty king is himself bending the knee, bowing before the authority and presence of God.

How do I show my repentance when I am confronted with the ways I have failed to follow God’s values and purposes? How do I respond when someone points out how I have been ignoring God’s intents and commandments? What “scroll” has gotten so well hidden that I no longer am even aware of what God would have me do? Who is a prophet I trust to tell me the truth about these matters?

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What Someone Else Has Said:

Kenneth J. Collins (John Wesley: A Theological Journey, Abingdon Press) wrote: “These same three elements (avoid evil, do good, and employ the means of grace) were explored by Wesley elsewhere, not as the heart of the proper Christian faith, but as the very rudiments of repentance—in other words, not as the power of religion, but, once again, simply, as its form....The disciplinary function of the class meet-