

Rock or river

Exodus 20:1-17; John 2: 13-22; Psalm 19

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Sometimes you have to be a rock...and sometimes you have to be a river. You pretty well know when you get it wrong.

But first, to our scripture. Let's put a few things in context. This was the FIRST edition of the Ten Commandments. The tribes left Egypt and had been travelling in the desert for about 3 months. Now Moses had the hardest CEO job on record. He had to convince a disparate group of people to follow him to an unspecified 'promised land' guaranteed by an unseen divine being. These people had nothing in common. They left because they thought they had nothing to lose¹. They came from different ethnic groups; had different traditions and day I say it, even gods. His job was not only to lead them but to meld them into one nation under one God.

After travelling for some time, according to Exodus², it was clear that the people needed some structure and instruction. The divine's first attempt to change their behaviour was to put the fear of God into them. A bit of shock and awe might do the trick: perhaps, a display of 'power and might'. If you ask me, He erred on the side of 'rock' and scared the life out of them. Here's what happened...

¹⁰ And the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes ¹¹ and be ready by the third day, because on that day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. (Editor's note: pay attention to the use of that on the 3rd day. God will descend – does that sound familiar?) ...¹² Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, 'Be careful that you do not approach the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain is to be put to death. ¹³ They are to be stoned or shot with arrows; not a hand is to be laid on them. No person or animal shall be permitted to live.' Only when the ram's horn sounds a long blast may they approach the mountain."

¹⁶ On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp **trembled**. ¹⁷ Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain^[b] trembled violently. ¹⁹ As

¹ Although later in the story, they regretted leaving their homes in Egypt and doubted the whole endeavour

² Exodus 19

the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

The people were terrified, and Aaron flatly refused to go up the mountain with Moses. God realised they needed more than that so he called Moses up again and gave him the first edition of the 10 commandments. They were written in stone – literally.

What most people don't notice is that the rest of this Exodus chapter gives very specific instructions on idols and altars. It tells us how to build and altar, what it can be used for and out of what materials.³ The chapter after that tells us how to treat our Hebrew slaves (and their wives and children⁴) and what punishment for assault or injury should be applied. Surprisingly, we're not taught any of these in Sunday school. Perhaps because they were not written in stone.

Makes you think, doesn't it? Some laws are written in stone...and some are not.

The 2nd edition of the Ten Commandments was issued not much later on another occasions when Moses had spent an inordinate amount of time up on the mountain talking to God. When he finally came down again and saw how quickly the people reverted to inventing their own gods, he had a hissy fit and smashed the tablets⁵.

¹⁹ When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. ²⁰ And he took the calf the people had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it.

Boy, was he mad! Anger is not a sin – it's human and it clearly can be divine as well. Righteous anger often leads us to fight for justice.

So what got up Jesus' nose and what does this have to do with us?

I remember when I was working for the Attorney General how upset lawyers would get when I referred to the "industry". NOT and industry, they demanded – a profession!

A profession is defined as both a paid occupation, especially one that involves prolonged training and a formal qualification and a declaration of a belief. You see they thought they had a higher calling but at the same time wanted to be both

³ Acacia wood was preferable. Did you know that if you build an altar out of stone, it must be natural and not hewn? Now I don't know what to make of all the carved marble altars I saw in Europe.

⁴ Exodus 21 – pretty cruel stuff

⁵ Exodus 32

exempt from industrial relation laws AND able to advertise to attract clients as any small business might.

Back to Jesus in the temple -

... in his time, the Temple had become an industry...and there were many blood suckers hanging off of it. The priests would only accept donations in temple currency which meant that money changers sprang up in the courtyards. Only certain foods were allowed to be left as offerings so there were livestock and vegetable traders at hand. You had to dress in particular ways which meant haberdasheries could charge what they liked. Imagine making a pilgrimage, days of travelling even across countries, to be confronted by all these necessities. Who made up these laws? Were they written in stone?

“Jesus comes overturning not only the money changers’ tables in the Temple but all our carefully constructed systems of merit, identity, status and conditional belonging.”⁶

Between the people and God was a cash register – that sorted the worthy from the unworthy, sure enough and that made him mad. Righteous mad. Where was Jesus meek and mild?

He was not that sort of Messiah.

Jesus didn’t come to be worshipped but to serve. He was incarnate to bring people closer to God. You could smell him. Touch him. This was not the thunderous voice hidden behind a cloud but a man to walk the earth, laugh and cry with his people. He came to introduce them to a living God. He did not come to be filled with adoration but to bring love. It did not mean he was denied righteous anger.

As we trod our Lenten path, isn’t it fair to feel that righteous anger. Whether you believe Jesus HAD to be sacrificed for our sins or just plain murdered, it still gives rise to indignation. It doesn’t feel right. He died and we focus on that until resurrection. But “resurrection is not a reversal of suffering or an avoidance of death...rather resurrection is the mystery that victory, completion and joy are to be found in life’s worst.”⁷.

Just like the rainbow at the end of the flood – there is life. “From the torn skies and threatening clouds comes rainbows and doves...Mark beckons us in our Lenten faith – to trust in rainbows even when we are covered in ash.”⁸

⁶⁶ Rev Sue, Companions on the way, <https://www.companionsontheway.com/> 28 Feb. 24

⁷ Rev Sue Companions on the way 21 Feb 24

⁸ Diana Butler Bass from the Cottage Feb 18, 2024

It's OK to be mad at Easter. "Paul says the Christian is always carrying in the body the death of Jesus. Some people carry the death of Jesus ON their bodies, wearing the means of his execution around their necks.⁹" I wear a cross as a protest – not as a collusion.

It's OK to question what is set in stone ...and what is not.

Our Wandering hearts have tread many paths and many roles and in each we have had our moments to speak out or stay silent. We have to learn to flow like a river or we will founder on a rock. There are times to bend and flow and times to take a stand. We should choose carefully when to be a rock and when a river...and even when we get it wrong, and break the tablet, we get a 2nd chance. Amen

⁹ Molly Baskette 2024 Lent devotional