

Exodus 20:1-17

And God spoke all these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations, of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the

Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

“Idols and Lies . . .”

After putting the rumbling, smoking, fiery fear of God into the wilderness wanderers a voice introduced the earth shaking Ultimate Power. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of slavery. I am YHWH who sets my heart on you, loves you, and chooses you to be a blessing for me. I claim you as my own. I will make you into a society that practices *Yahweh's justice instead of pharaoh's injustice. I will establish among you neighborly well being instead of coercion, fear and exploitation.* (Theology of the Old Testament, Brueggemann, p. 184) From this day forward my gift to you is my ten commandments for you to obey so that you will not return to your pre-Exodus bondage.

God started with three rules on how to love God with all of one's heart, soul, mind and strength. God commanded,

You shall have no other gods before me. . . You shall not make for yourself an idol . . . You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God (Ex. 20:2-7). Combined, the three functioned to de-stabilize any competing power that claimed to deliver and to set God's people free. The first three commands established the uniqueness of God's Freedom. . . *YHWH has no utilitarian value and cannot be recruited or used for any social or human agenda* (The Theology of the Old Testament, Brueggemann, p. 184) *YHWH will not be captured, contained, assigned or managed by anyone or anything for any purpose.* (Israelite Religion, p. 211-12). In **Israel's Praise**, Brueggemann proposed that these first three commands shaped Israel's distinctive worship--- which was *praise, not only toward God, but also against the gods.* (Reaching Out without Dumbing Down by Marva Dawn p 41) As a practicing Jew, it was Jesus' obedience to these first three commands that empowered him to be in the world but not of it.

Of the three, **You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. . . Ex. 20:4-5a** claimed my attention because idolatry flourishes in our culture and infects our church worship. We no longer forge a golden calf and bow down to worship it but we do make an idol of the Bible (Bible thumping--proof texting), we worship the god of efficiency

(be out in an hour or less), we devote ourselves to the god of “the way we’ve always done it before”, and we bow down before the god of numbers and success. We idolize eloquent preachers and compassionate pastors, our foremother and forefathers of the faith, the pillars of the church, Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa and the saints of the church. We come to church for earthly reasons. A rhyme from The World’s Collection of Best Jokes captures this idea well: *Some go to church to take a walk; Some go there to laugh and talk; some go there to meet a friend; some go there their time to spend; some go there to meet a lover; some go there a fault to cover; some go there for speculation; some go there for observation; some go there to doze and nod; the wise go there to worship God* (p. 234). In our culture we were not surprised when a Texas Mom hired people to murder some of the competition so that her daughter could get on a high school cheerleading team. Just as we were not surprised at the report that a football player dropped dead of dehydration and heat exhaustion during a summer 98 degree/95 percent humidity obligatory pre-season school practice. We are hooked on the idols in our time, not because we are any worse sinners than the people who met with God at the foot of Mt. Sinai, but because we, as human beings are as Kathleen Norris suggests---*remarkable and incurable idol makers* (from *Amazing Grace* by Kathleen Norris, p. 92).

If it is true that we are remarkable and incurable idol makers and if it is also true that the commands of God can

help us cure the incurable, then the first Lenten study task of this text is to learn more about the Biblical understanding of idolatry and idol making. According to the Harper's Bible Dictionary (p. 416-417) *an idol is an image or statue of a deity fashioned to be an object of worship. Hebrew words for statue used for the worship of other gods held the contemptuous connotations of powerless ones, pellets of dung, and or shameful things.* The prohibition against making idols pertained both to images of YHWH and to idolatrous representation of other gods. (from Reverberations of Faith, Brueggemann., p. 106) Both prohibitions arose from what Israel learned in their exile in Babylonia and immersion in a culture that worshiped many gods. In that culture, people carved out idols of their deity. The statues were objects that permitted people to directly relate with their god. They may have bathed, clothed and fed them. They worshiped, honored and devoted themselves in service to their personal gods. They did all these things so that their god would give them what they wanted, wished for and/or needed. Their gods existed to serve them on their terms. To illustrate this point Pastor Jerry Day, Jr. told the joke about *a little boy who wanted a new bike. So he prayed, "God, I'd really like this bike, and I've been perfect this last year."* Realizing that what he said wasn't right, he changed it to, *"God, I've been good most of the time."* Again, he knew that wasn't true, so he said, *"God, I wanted to be good."* Finally, he went to the living room, got a statue of Mary, hid it under his bed, and said, *"God if you ever want to see you mother again . . . "*

What the Torah writers of the Mt. Sinai covenant text realized was that devotion to a deity for the sole purpose of getting one's needs met led to a devaluing of others, absence of compassionate care, and selfishness. This situation reminded them of the powers of bondage that enslaved them in Egypt. Their recognition of these powers prompted them to think about the uniqueness of their worship of Yahweh back in the Temple of Jerusalem. It was very different than the way in which the people worshiped their gods in Babylon. There were no statues of YHWH or other gods. Therefore, *the Temple in Jerusalem was the center of worship where God "placed Yahweh's name (no images) and met the people . . .* In the worship practices of Israel YHWH could not be made into an image because it was thought that such a practice would limit YHWH's freedom and diminish YHWH's sovereignty in the Divine/human covenantal relationship. It was thought that if people made statues of YHWH then they would try to manipulate YHWH for Divine support of their wishes, wants, desires and self determined needs. In exile, Israel realized the importance of the second command of the prohibition to do so. In our day, Maxie Dunnam captured that spiritual wisdom of their realization with these words: *Praying that God will substitute our wish for Divine plan is not only presumptuous it is dumb* (from *Unless We Pray* by Maxie Dunnam).

In exile in a foreign land, even though Israel learned the importance of obeying the second command it didn't keep them from worshipping cultural idols unawares. That's

because of the incurable human need to believe in the power of the idol's lie. In our day, for that same reason we continue in an idolatry of money, fame, power. Non-scriptural graffiti frames our situation well. *There are no new sins---the old ones just get more publicity.* We idolize our family, our work, our achievements, our possessions, our---our, our, ours and in doing so, effectively hide the power of and devotion to our ego's needs. There is a new internet blogger site, PostSecrets.bloggerspot.com that may be revealing the depth and breath of our idolatries. The site was created a year ago by Frank Warren and for the last six months has ranked in the top five blog sites. USA Today (Wed. March 15, 2006) reported that *It started out as an art project in which he handed blank postcards to strangers in Metro stations, inviting them to decorate the card and share a long-hidden secret, something never shared before. Soon hundreds of cards were pouring into his mailbox.* After the art exhibit he created the blogsite PostSecrets to handle the postcards that continued to flood in. The site currently ranks in the top five as Mr. Warren continues to receive thousands of hidden personal secrets that people need to get off their chests. Psycho-analyst Gail Saltz, says that *The success of the site suggests that everybody has secrets: its part of being a human being,* " . . . What are some of the hidden secrets? *One was a picture of a golf course with the words pasted over it: I have never played a round without cheating.* From a Biblical perspective of idolatry, I wonder, does this person secretly worship the idol of success, or the idol of being number One, or the idol

of power, or the idol of perfection, or . . . ? And, if s/he spends an excessive amount of time in devoted service to any of these idols has it turned into a self serving idolatry that cuts across and into that soul's freedom to serve the purposes of God? Or what about the idol that the TV Soprano star just crafted in the form of a book about how to be a Man's Man? As people of faith, aren't we suppose to become God's men and men for God?

We are all remarkable and incurable idol makers. But the good news of the gospel is that as we become aware of our devotion and service to lesser gods the Lord God who brought Israel out of bondage in Moses' time and gifted them with the second command, can and will deliver us from bondage to our own needs, wants and desires--- through Christ's deep love for us. The third verse of the hymn, **Jesus Calls Us**, *(by Cecil F. Alexander, 1823-1895)* speaks to the Christian understanding and affirmation of the Lord's power to deliver us from this bondage and to free us up for loving service.

*Jesus calls us from the worship
Of the vain world's golden store
From each idol that would keep us
Saying, "Christian, love me more."*