

“Staying Emancipated” a sermon based on Exodus 20:1-17 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 7 March 2021

There's been a hot topic in the news over the last couple of weeks. What do we do about gangs? It's not hard to arouse emotions because gangs are easily identified – they wear patches. They often ride bikes. And they often seem scary and for many New Zealanders they are not personally known. The Police Commissioner, Andrew Coster, has been criticised for not doing enough to arrest gang members. The criticism seems to be that as a nation we should not try to build relationships with groups of people who have become disconnected from the wider community, out of sync with the way things work and drawn into unhelpful groupings. Coster seems to be among those who resist simple solutions. He spoke of a whole of community approach and the importance of addressing the root causes of crime. He seemed to ask the question – why do we have gangs. And seemed to suggest that a punitive approach alone would not solve much. He speaks of the old principle of policing with consent, of seeking to build relationships with community groups.

There are people who approach the Ten Commandments with punishment in mind. “Our nation might be better if we could legislate the Commandments”, they might say, “and if we punished those who break them.” It is not surprising then that a survey of New Zealand attitudes a few years ago saw the Ten Commandments as irrelevant to modern society, perhaps because they were too negative and too exclusive. That response is understandable – “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol. You shall not bow down. I am a jealous God ...”

However, in the early years of our nation's history, the Commandments were valued by many. At a conference about land in Auckland in 1860, a Maori speaker expected the Governor of New Zealand to punish Pakeha for breaking the commandments. Maori leaders often quoted the Commandments when they were trying to persuade the Crown to honour the Treaty and when they were resisting Pakeha occupation of Maori land. Maurice Andrew notes that many Maori leaders saw Maori and Pakeha bound together in love by a common, divinely based law.

Bound together in love. Building relationships. That is closer to the spirit of the Commandments.

In what follows I am very grateful to be able to borrow concepts and words from Walter Brueggemann, a scholar of the Hebrew Scriptures. Walter Brueggemann calls

the Ten Commandments Strategies for Staying Emancipated or perhaps rules for staying free. In the story we heard in the book of Exodus, the Ten Commandments were given to Israel by Moses at Mt. Sinai just after the Israelites had left Egyptian slavery. So, says Brueggemann, the Ten Commandments are rules by which Israel was to maintain their recent freedom from Egypt. The Commandments begin with the identification of the God who liberated Israel from Egypt: *I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt...*

The word "Egypt" refers to Pharaoh, and Pharaoh is the abusive, brutalizing king of Egypt who practiced and exploited a concentration of power and wealth. Perhaps deliberately, we do not know Pharaoh's name because Pharaoh keeps turning up in our history time after time. So, Pharaoh is the right name for every brutalizing concentration of wealth and power that acts in violence against vulnerable people. The Exodus is the powerful acknowledgement of that brutalising domain of human history from which we have been emancipated. At the outset, the Ten Commandments named this liberating God: I am the Lord your God. I am the Lord of the Exodus. I am the God who set you free. I am the Lord of new promises. It is an announcement that the world is under new governance. In this understanding, the Commandments are rules for freedom and justice that contrast with the bondage and injustice of Pharaoh. The covenant at Sinai is a warning that if you do not keep these commandments, you will be back in the grip of Pharaoh and his insatiable demands. Back to having to produce on demand. Back in the rat-race of production and consumption. Back in fear and anxiety and alienation. Back in hostility toward the neighbour.

So the Ten Commandments are strategies for staying free once you get away from Pharaoh. This new strategy, first of all, says you have to honour God - that's the first three commandments - to the exclusion of every idol, every god-like claim, anything that tries to define who we are and what we are to do, that imposes on us names or categories that put us in our place and keep us there. So it includes every god-like "ism" such as racism, or sexism, or nationalism, or the worship of material things. The last part of this new strategy, the last Commandments, ask us to take the neighbour with utmost seriousness. So, the last five commandments are about the neighbour and treating neighbours with legitimacy and dignity and respect, especially disadvantaged neighbours - not to violate the neighbour for the sake of greed. Between these two commandments of honouring God and taking the neighbour seriously, at the centre of the Ten Commandments, is Sabbath day. Keep Sabbath: take a break from the rat-race of busyness and exhaustion and do not let Pharaoh define your life. Keep Sabbath and let creation rest; let humankind rest; let activity cease. We had a taste of this in level 4.

Each of these strategies contrast with the way of Pharaoh. Pharaoh wants to keep you subject to his divine authority. He wants to define who you are and what you are to do just as the economic system of our day does. "You are a consumer. You are an economic unit. You are a worker." And Pharaoh believes that there are no real neighbours. And Pharaoh never stops for Sabbath. Moses at Mt. Sinai declares that there are new possibilities for life beyond the pressures of anxiety and fearfulness and greed.

We are presently in the Christian season of Lent. At least in part, Lent is a process of moving our life into new zones of reality. So, there are at least three tasks to perform in Lent. The first task is to recognize the ways in which we have accepted Pharaoh's domain as normal. We have normalised anxiety. We have normalized scarcity. We have normalized exhaustion. We have normalised inequality. And often we have imagined punishment will build a nation. We have normalized a way of living that is in violation of the Ten Commandments. The second work of Lent is to recognize the deep alternative into which Moses and then Jesus invites us. So, when Jesus called his first disciples and said, "Follow me," he invited them to an alternative life that wasn't preoccupied with fear, that wasn't preoccupied with scarcity and that wasn't preoccupied with exhaustion.

So, the first task of Lent is to see Pharaoh clearly and the second task of Lent is to ponder the strategies for freedom that are offered by Moses and then by Jesus. Lent invites us to act with purpose and discipline, the kind that every addict must practice in order to break addictive habits. Lent invites us to put what we ask of people into the context of their relationship with God, with each other, and with creation. The Ten Commandments provide a framework for building relationships that enable a nation to be free. Without such work, we find ourselves back in a system that cannot make us safe and cannot make us happy and cannot make us a nation. The good news is that God intends otherwise for us and has shown us how to get there.

Note: Today's sermon draws on ideas from a sermon the Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann preached at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, USA in 2018. It can be found at [Walter Brueggemann: Strategies for Staying Emancipated | Day 1](#)

KNOX CHURCH, DUNEDIN

*Captivated by the vision of the realm of God,
made known in Jesus, given in grace*



Knox Church

449 George Street

Dunedin

New Zealand

Ph. (03) 477 0229

www.knoxchurch.net

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, minister@knoxchurch.net