

SERMONS ON EXODUS: XXII
THE COVENANT WORDS: II. NO GRAVEN IMAGES
(Exodus 20:4-6)

Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth; thou shalt not bow down to them, nor worship them.

On those occasions when we hear the Ten Commandments read to us, or consider them in an exercise of self-examination, and come to this second one, I think that many of us may breathe a little easier for here is one, at least in its literal sense, that poses no problem for us. We neither make nor bow down to graven images, nor is there any temptation to do so. Whatever we may be, whatever shortcomings we may have, we are not idolaters.

I think it one of our main tasks as we work our way through the Ten Commandments to unlearn them, to approach them without preconceived notions of their meaning and to try to hear them afresh, to hear them as they were heard by the Israelites of old, which is why we have approached them carefully in the total context of the Book of Exodus and why we are speaking of them not as the Ten Commandments, but as the Covenant Words, for that is how they are presented: as the Words that God spoke as he entered into solemn covenant with his people. The importance of the background cannot be over-emphasized; it is reiterated at the beginning of the First Word, "I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." He is the God who saw their suffering, who heard their cries, who delivered them from Pharaoh's power and in great love brought them to himself as on eagle's wings. Nor can we be too oft reminded of the immediate context. After three days of solemn preparation and the giving of a solemn vow that they would hear and do all that God says, Yahweh descends upon the mountain in a dark cloud, while the thunder roars and the lightning strikes and the mountain bursts into flame, out of which fire, as earlier at the burning bush, God speaks. The dark cloud was a reminder of God's incomprehensibility; the fire of his utter

holiness—and yet the holy and incomprehensible God addressed them intimately as *their* God, for he had chosen them as his peculiar people and brought them to himself.

In the First Word God says that they are to have no other gods before him. It is of the essence of such a covenant that it binds the two parties of the covenant together in an exclusive relationship. God has chosen this people out of all the peoples on earth. This people must now acknowledge that this God, who rescued them with power and love, is alone, among all else that would lay claim to divinity, God, their God. Here already at the head of the Ten Words is the essence of their ancient creed, the *Shema Yisrael*: “Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:4-5). As Martin Buber observes, out of this First Word “gush forth all the remaining ones in a stream that is not to be staid.”¹

The Second Word follows clearly on the heels of the First, “Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image.” This commandment is obviously a warning to the people that they should have nothing to do with the idols they saw in Egypt, “the theriomorphic figures, (that is, those who were partly fashioned in a form of cattle or beast), and even more so the obscene representations of fertility gods.”² It is an implicit warning against such idols, but that is not its real thrust. The people had already been warned against false gods in the First Word. They are to have no other gods; and therefore they are to ‘have’ the one true God (in Luther’s sense), that is, they are to love, worship and serve the one God, Yahweh their deliverer. The warning against graven images has to do with how they are to ‘have’ God, with how they are to understand him and how they are to worship him. It is in relationship with him, the God who appeared to them in a dark cloud, whom they saw not but whose voice they heard, the God of whom they were given no visual picture, ... it is of this God that images are forbidden, all images whether from heaven, or earth, or the water that is under the earth. Leanne Van Dyk put it well when she said,

[This] makes it clear that an inventory of all created reality does not reveal an alternative or rival for God’s sovereign being. God’s mystery and reality are discontinuous with everything else. God is God. Created

¹Moses: *The Revelation and The Covenant*, p. 135.

² U. Cassuto, *A Commentary of the Book of Exodus*, p. 242.

reality is not God. Therefore, to assign ultimate worth to anything that God created replaces God's rightful place as Creator and is idolatrous.³

There is, as Søren Kierkegaard put it, "an infinite qualitative difference between God and man." God is the Creator; everything else is created and absolutely dependent upon the Creator. God is also the Redeemer; everything else needs to be redeemed. This points to God's utter and absolute otherness. That this warning is primarily against images of God and not idols representing foreign gods is rather underscored by its notorious violation with the making of the Golden Calf, which was not an idol of a strange god but was preposterously touted as the God who brought them out of Egypt.

This commandment concerns our understanding of God, of his transcendence of all earthly and human images and conceptions. It does not forbid, as the Church catholic has carefully noted, the use of crosses or statues or icons that may serve as means to direct our thoughts to divine things. It does forbid our regarding the means as the end, our regarding the crucifix as having magical powers or esteeming the sign of the cross as some sort of talisman. Rabbi Goldman points us in the right direction when he says,

The preceding verse [the First Commandment] forbade having or recognizing the gods of the heathens, be it individually or collectively as being gods, as being in any way associated with the Lord God who brought Israel out of Egypt. The present verse [the Second Commandment] seeks to preserve God's mystery and holiness, to lead men inside holiness, beyond the sensuous and perceptible It forbids the making of gods, that is, any plastic reproduction intended for worship, of anything existing anywhere in the wide world.⁴

Such an impact did this commandment make upon the Jewish people that, as often noted (though some disagree), while many of them have excelled in other arts, music and literature, few have achieved prominence in the graphic arts, painting and sculpture.

Martin Buber relates an early morning conversation with an acquaintance in whose home he was staying while delivering some lectures. The gentleman asked him to read aloud the Preface of a book he had written, the galley proofs of which Buber was then editing. Buber was happy to oblige and writes of his colleague's response,

He listened in a friendly manner but clearly astonished, indeed with growing amazement. When I was through, he spoke hesitatingly, then,

³ *The Ten Commandments for Jews, Christians, and Others*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, U.K.:William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007) pp. 40-41

⁴ Solomon Goldman, *The Ten Commandments*, ed. Maurice Samuel, pp. 136-137

carried away by the importance of his subject, evermore passionately. “How can you bring yourself to say ‘God’ time after time? How can you expect that your readers will take the word in the sense in which you wish it to be taken? What you mean by the name of God is something above all human grasp and comprehension but in speaking about it you have lowered it to human conceptualization. What word of human speech is so misused, so defiled, so desecrated as this! All the innocent blood which has been shed for it has robbed it of its radiance. All the injustice that it has been used to cover has effaced its features. When I hear the highest called ‘God,’ it sometimes seems almost blasphemous.”⁵

Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed the same discomfort around people who batted about the name of God with such familiarity and ease. Paul Tillich spoke of ‘God above God,’ meaning the ineffable God, to use Heschel’s term, who is above and beyond all our imperfect conceptions of him.

Gören Larsson rightly observed, and

It is possible to make spiritual images of God that harden into inner idols of a sort: preconceived ideas which prevent us from opening ourselves toward the countenance that God turns toward us. It can be humanly created dogma, traditions, and authorities that are put in front of and above God’s true face. Frequently, such idols are manufactured by a series of words from the Scriptures, and claim to sum up God’s very character, salvation plan, and etc. This idolatry does not allow the whole spectrum of the Bible to shine forth with all its riddles and mysteries. What is difficult to understand and to reduce to one common denominator is censored, together with everything that does not fit into one’s preconceived image of God.⁶

God is the God who transcends all of our ideas of him, and when we absolutize our ideas, and regard the lines of our theology as fully encasing his truth, then we have set them above him, and that is what this Second Word would forbid. Yes, Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition inspired by the Holy Spirit are vehicles of God’s revelation, but the thrice holy God who spoke from the dark cloud and flames of fire is greater than them all. The infinite can never be fully comprehended in the finite, the eternal in the temporal.

That this is a most severe matter ought to be apparent from the remainder of this commandment: “For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the

⁵ Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1952) p.7.

⁶ *Blindfold for Freedom; The Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, pp. 143-144.

fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

These words pose a great difficulty for some. Is God a jealous God? Yes—that is what it says, but what does it mean? Note first that the Word of the ineffable God has to find expression in human language, in words that men can understand. That is why we never take anthropomorphic language used with respect to God literally. God has no arm, nor physical heart, nor is he angry with a human anger or jealous with a human jealousy. And yet this human language does point us to *something like* our human jealousy. Some say the Hebrew word is better translated ‘zealous.’ Either way it is a description of the passionate love that God has for his people. He loves them/us with a total and burning love and wants them/us to be totally and passionately his. That is what this covenant is all about. It is like a divine/human marriage.

Those that hate God, who have no place for him or his love or his covenant, will suffer the loss of that love. They exclude themselves from his covenant and bear the consequences for generations, such as the social nature of sin. But, and this is the point, on them that love God and show their love by keeping his commandments, God showers his steadfast love for all the generations to come (think of Abraham) and to thousands and thousands. The reference to the third and fourth generations may picture an intergenerational household which is how the people then lived, father and son and grandson and great-grandson and all the extended family. Whatever remaining difficulties we may have with this, Rabbi Goldman notes that the ratio of God’s love to his jealousy is one thousand to four!

It is in the context of God’s indescribable covenant love that we are to understand this Second Word. God, blessed be he, loves us passionately and loves us totally. How can we not respond with an answering love and do what he commands, for he is only beckoning us to that highest good and most blessed life for which we were made.

