

# SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

Roanoke, Virginia  
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## ***“Hearts of Stone”***

*Part IV of the Lenten Sermon Series, “Into the Wild.”*

*Exodus 20:1-20*

**George C. Anderson**

Millie is in a book club, and every now and then I read what they’re reading. There have been some interesting choices. One of them was *The Things We Carried*, by Tim O’Brian. The book weaves stories of soldiers in Vietnam. It is O’Brian’s attempt to tell the truth about the war even if many, if not most, of his stories are not true. You end up reflecting not only on the truth of war, but the nature of truth itself and the kind of stories that can lead us there.

I’m not necessarily recommending that you read the book, but I mention it today because of the title, *The Things We Carried*.”

An infantry soldier has to pack light, so thought must be given as to what you put in your backpack. There is the required gear of battle and survival—ammunition, canteen, food stuff... but there is also that item or two that might make sense except only to the soldier who packs it: Lee Strunk carries a slingshot, Mitchell Sanders: brass knuckles, and Jimmy Cross: a good luck pebble.

But of course, the soldier also carries other things not in the backpack: love of family, fear, loneliness, guilt... in other words, those things that weigh heavy on the heart.

The passage I am about to read gives us the Ten Commandments that Moses must later carry down the mountain. The commandments, the Law of God, is etched in heavy stone by God’s own finger, we are told. What remains to be seen is if these commandments will be carried in the heart.

Let’s listen to the commandments, and let’s listen for God’s fresh word.

Then God spoke all these words:

<sup>2</sup>I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; <sup>3</sup>you shall have no other gods before me.



<sup>4</sup>You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. <sup>5</sup>You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, <sup>6</sup>but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

<sup>7</sup>You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

<sup>8</sup>Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup>Six days you shall labor and do all your work. <sup>10</sup>But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. <sup>11</sup>For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

<sup>12</sup>Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

<sup>13</sup>You shall not murder.

<sup>14</sup>You shall not commit adultery.

<sup>15</sup>You shall not steal.

<sup>16</sup>You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

<sup>17</sup>You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

<sup>18</sup>When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, <sup>19</sup>and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." <sup>20</sup>Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."

The problem with taking too literal a view with scripture is that often the artistry of storytelling is missed. Last Sunday, I talked about how Exodus often pairs two stories that are a lot alike, but with a critical difference. To see God only as portrayed in Story A is to miss the vision of God that is offered by the whole book of Exodus.

Last week, we looked at two stories of the slaves pursued; in Story A they are saved by a miracle that liberates them physically but not spiritually. In Story B they have to be a part of the miracle and their journey in the wilderness toward true independence takes its first baby step. They realized that while they cannot survive without God, they cannot leave it to God alone.



Our passage this Sunday is part of another Story A. Story B will be part of the material Rev. Thompson will touch on next Sunday, though I don't know how much she will deal with it. But, two times, Moses brings tablets down Mt. Sinai.

The difference between the stories can be highlighted by a question Martha Clay Martin asked me this past Wednesday. I was at Brandon Oaks leading a Bible Study on this passage. She asked me, “Why is all that thunder, lightning and smoke that leaves everyone terrified necessary?” What I hear in that question is: “Does obedience to God require threat? Does moral behavior depend on ‘Or else!’?”

The parent says to the three-year-old, “If you hit, you're going to sit in timeout.” It can work. At that base level you can see that love can carry within it, fear. That is the only way I can make sense of Moses saying, “Do not be afraid... I am putting fear in you.” While I have joined any number of preachers in telling you in the past that “fear of God” includes awe, wonder and respect—which is true—there is in scripture—there is in this Story A—a healthy dose of fear and trembling... a desire not to get on the wrong side of the one who has thunder, lightning and smoke in the things God carries.

Only, is there any possibility of adult intimacy between parent and grown child if their considerate treatment of each other remains defined by fear of consequences? The warden might be effective in describing to prisoners consequences of breaking the Yard rules, including solitary confinement, but is that enough to keep the prisoner from returning once she has left the prison?

In Story A, commandments are given and the people hearing them take proper note of the lightening, thunder, and smoke. So effective is the threat that they beg Moses to speak to them for God. The inverse is surely true: that they want Moses to speak to God for them. Pastors are frequently asked to pray because lay people don't feel comfortable praying in public. This is different. The people ask Moses to do their praying for them because they don't want to be anywhere close to God. They do not want to be incinerated. The point is that while they may be properly terrified into obedience, they are too terrified to be on speaking terms with God... to be vulnerable with God... intimate... certainly too terrified to offer vulnerable and honest confession of sin.

I want to be clear. There is a reason for every human emotion. Fear has its place. You'll never catch me Wingsuit Flying. That was the case *before* I watched Go Pro video of professionals at an event jumping out of a helicopter and soaring down a mountain almost brushing against stone and splitting the difference between rows of trees. My stomach was upside down just from the video footage. It didn't help when I learned that on day one of the event, one of the professionals died.<sup>1</sup>

Fear can motivate us to be safe. As a community, fear of global warming, of crimes and criminals, of transmittable diseases, of economic collapse, of certain guns or certain people with guns, of nuclear weapons, of epidemics—whether of drugs or of viruses—these are things that ought to cause healthy fear. Fear can motivate efforts to do something to keep us and others safe.

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<sup>1</sup> [tps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f56QRCwpBYI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f56QRCwpBYI)



But is it enough? Is it enough to motivate us to live a full and whole life, a life that is healthy, a life that is a vessel for joy and selfless love? What do we become as people when fear is what most motivates us? Doesn't it begin to define us?

Among the peasantry in Martin Luther's day, far too much fear-mongering was used by the church to manipulate behavior; justify hatred, attacks, and wars; and to raise money. Luther brilliantly responded in describing how a fear-based faith can become a graceless experience. "I more fear what is within me than what can come from without," he said. And what he feared was that which kept him from trusting and loving the God of his salvation.

Not to mention that fear often doesn't continue to work. It doesn't with the Hebrews. Just as the most amazing miracle of deliverance through the Red Sea isn't enough to make escaped slaves truly believe in God, the horrifying threat of destruction does not make escaped slaves continue to behave. I hope I am not getting in trouble with Rev. Thompson because I am putting my pinkie across the line dividing us in the back seat and into the material she will be looking at next Sunday, but I'll offer just a bit of a spoiler alert to tell you that it doesn't take long before Moses comes down the mountain to discover his people worshipping a Golden Calf. Fear, evidentially, can have an expiration date.

What the whole book of Exodus is telling us is that the commandments cannot be written simply in stone. For the people to live with greater dignity than slaves, and for God to be greater than the Pharaoh who enslaved them, the commandments will need to be—this is how the prophet Jeremiah puts it—written on the tablets of their hearts. Their hearts of stone need to become stone tablets in which the commandments are etched and taken with them; become a part of the way they think, believe and live.

Exodus contains a lot of laws, rules and guidelines. But Exodus has Story A and Story B about The Ten Commandments because these laws, once you get past their call to worship Yahweh alone and keep the Jewish Sabbath, are pretty universal in nature. Elsewhere in Exodus, you will find culturally specific laws like how the Hebrews are to dress (don't mix fabrics), and how they are to eat (don't order a steak rare and leave shell fish alone), and how they are to worship (sacrifice spotless lambs and doves on these days and in these ways). Most of the Ten Commandments though are basic justice commands that cross cultural lines and apply to any human community that wants to promote freedom while not falling apart because of unboundaried behavior. When lying becomes so persuasive that we cannot recognize the truth, when folks who are able to take what belongs to others and can get away with it, when murder becomes an acceptable means of conflict resolution, communities unravel and cultures decay.

So, the point in having the Ten Commandments given twice is not just to emphasize their importance, but also to show that there are two different ways to honor basic justice for all:

- as slaves scared of being caught and punished by their master,
- or as free, adult children of God who care about justice because God has written justice on their hearts.



Right now, in Story A, the commandments are given with threats. It won't be enough. The threats will not be enough to write these commandments on hearts. There is a long, long way to go before the Hebrews will begin to understand what Jesus means when he sums up the Law by saying,

“We are to love—genuinely love—the Lord our God  
with all of our heart, soul, mind and will,

and we are to love—genuinely love—our neighbors as we have been loved by God and hope  
to be loved by others.”

Rabbi Sacks says that as these people grow into becoming those who bear the commandments in their heart, we witness the birth of the spirit of true democracy. Though it would be centuries before Democracy as a political system is put in place, what is forged in the wilderness is a spirit of a people who are self-governed as much as they are governed. Even though Abraham Lincoln would later be speaking of the birth of this nation, Sacks says his words apply here to a people who, in the wilderness, grow into being independent and just at the same time (at least when they are at their best). They become “a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all people are created equal.” Whether under the rule of a monarch or a legislature, the vision here is

- a people where justice has become part of their character and conscience;
- a people held together by free consent, a moral code and a shared commitment to a common cause;
- a people afraid not of thunder, lightning and smoke, but of letting those they love down:
  - God who loves them,
  - Others whom they love such as the fathers and mothers they honor;
  - And themselves in wanting to be people who can look in the mirror at night without guilt and with the satisfaction of having given a day to God.

When they become that people, they'll finally be ready to inherit the land.

I am going to get a bit parochial here: *Such is the vision of a healthy Presbyterian congregation.* John Calvin envisioned in Geneva, John Knox put into practice in Scotland, and John Witherspoon taught in America a form of government where elders are elected from the people not as rulers, but as representatives. Elected elders are to bear the commandments in their own hearts and evidence their own love of God and others. They are not to be who the people first asked Moses to be, those who do the praying, believing, and serving for the members of the church. Rather, they are to be those who guide us all as a body of Christ... a body that in its own imperfect way, has a heart that beats with love for God and others, and has a heart for what is, in Paul's words, good, and just, and acceptable in God's sight.

Let us turn our attention now to the ordination of elders with the expectation not of what they can do for us to keep God at a distance, but what they can lead us to do in honoring the God we love in our hearts.

