Lent 3

March 7, 2021

Exodus 201-17

When I was little, we lived on a side street that was fairly quiet. But nearby were 3 busy streets. As a result, my boundaries were pretty small. I had freedom to roam our block and the block across the street, and no further.

We neighborhood kids stuck to our little part of the world, where we could do pretty much anything we wanted, as long as we didn’t annoy the neighbors because we were too loud.

We were imaginative kids, and found plenty to do, which kept those boundaries from feeling like restrictions, at least most of the time. But it also helped that we knew those boundaries kept us safe. Just by watching the traffic, we could see that straying past those boundaries was dangerous. It wasn’t just that we’d get yelled at or grounded. We could easily get hit by a car.

So, we absorbed the lesson that boundaries kept us safe, but gave us room to make our own choices. And we did not always choose well. We tested our boundaries. We were kids. It’s what kids do.

Looking back, I can see that the rules our parents set for us gave us freedom within a set of limits. We knew what kind of behavior was expected of us. We had freedom within those boundaries that allowed us to flourish.

That’s what good boundaries do for us. They allow us freedom to choose while understanding what can happen if we make a bad choice.

There are two basic ways we can look at the Ten Commandments. One is that they are a set of laws that God gave us to restrict our behavior, place limits on what we can do. A set of rules to keep us in line. The other is that they are a set of guidelines that provide a set of expectations for us that allow us to flourish, instructions that are life-giving and intended to help us understand what God is all about.

When we look at the story surrounding the Exodus passage we hear today, I think we get a better idea of how God hopes we’ll understand God’s words to the people.

The people had only been freed from slavery 3 months. They’d been traveling through the wilderness that whole time.

For many, many years, their identity was wrapped up in the fact that they were slaves.

They had to learn how to be free.

Because only when they knew how to be free could they begin to flourish.

So, much like my parents told me which streets I couldn’t cross, God set out to explain to the people what their boundaries were. That was the first step in reshaping their identity into being the people of God.

So, God began with guidance about their relationship with God. Those boundaries included not having other gods.

Then God gave them something they hadn’t experienced as slaves: a day of rest. A day devoted to worshiping God and not having to be productive.

Then God moved on to their relationships with each other. And those boundaries included not stealing, lying, or coveting.

Ultimately, the Commandments encouraged the people to place their trust in God. God would provide for them and they would have enough. And if they trusted that, then they would learn how to take a day of rest. They wouldn’t be tempted to say things that would harm the reputation of others. They wouldn’t be tempted to take other people’s stuff. And they wouldn’t be tempted to physically harm others.

But within those boundaries, they had room to flourish, room to encourage others to flourish.

As we see throughout the rest of the Old Testament, the people went through cycles of being obedient to God and being not so obedient. When they were obedient, the community thrived. When they weren’t…well, that’s when the prophets were called in and the people were reminded of the things God had done for them, warned of the perils of continuing to stray from God’s instructions about how to live as a community.

Boundaries are effective only to the extent that they are enforced.

As kids, we knew that our neighbors helped enforce the boundaries we had. If we were too noisy or did something wrong when we were playing out front, the neighbors would scold us and then call our moms.

When it comes to the instructions that God gave the people, we have a tendency to want to take on the role of the neighbor. We want to tell other people how they are falling short of keeping God’s teachings.

And I think that’s because we have a tendency to see them as restrictions on behavior, a means of curtailing specific behaviors. Don’t do this, don’t do that, don’t do the other thing.

Yet, nowhere does God say, nowhere does Jesus say, that we have the responsibility for judging how well other people keep God’s instructions. Nowhere are we told that it is our responsibility to punish those who don’t keep them the way we think they should.

Rather than encouraging us to judge each other, God tells us to love one another, to encourage one another, to do things to help one another thrive.

God set the boundaries and it’s up to God to enforce them. Thankfully, God’s faithfulness is not contingent upon how well we keep the commandments, and God chooses to forgive us when we fall short.

The Psalmist tells us that the law of the Lord revives our souls, enlightens our eyes. In keeping them there is great reward.

We can choose to see God’s teachings as a burden, as restrictions. But I think God would prefer we see them a gift of instructions for how we can thrive, words that free us, words that encourage fullness of life, words that lead us into a right relationship with God and with each other.

Thanks be to God for the gift of God’s teachings, and the mercy we receive through God’s unending love.