

October 8, Ordinary 27A (Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20)

## **In an uncertain, murky time, God gives the people a gift: ten laws.**

by [Liz Cooledge Jenkins](#) in the [October 2023](#) issue

Published on October 2, 2023

How do we build something different? Many of us find ourselves asking this question. It has become clear that current structures, systems, mindsets, practices, and theologies are not working, and we want to make a change. But too often we unintentionally rebuild different-looking versions of the same broken systems, the same corrupt hierarchies. We recognize that we need deeper change, but we are not always sure what to do with this recognition.

As Audre Lorde famously wrote, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” How do we bring new tools into play—tools that, in Lorde’s words, “enable us to bring about genuine change”?

I imagine the Israelites wrestled with questions like these as they wandered in the desert. It was a liminal space: no longer in Egypt, but not yet in the promised land. No longer eating the food of Pharaoh, but not yet farming and herding for themselves—and, in the meantime, subsisting on miraculously provided water, quail, and manna. No longer forcefully subjected to Egyptian laws, but not yet having laws of their own. No longer enslaved, but not yet sure exactly what freedom looks like.

In this uncertain, murky time, God gives the people a gift: ten laws. In *Journey to the Common Good*, Walter Brueggemann summarizes the heart of the commandments’ teachings: love and trust YHWH, “rather than Pharaoh’s security system” (commandments 1-3); embrace sabbath rest as “an alternative to aggressive anxiety” (4); recognize that “neighbors, all kinds of neighbors, are to be respected and protected and not exploited” (5-9); and “limit . . . acquisitiveness,” particularly “predatory practices and aggressive policies that make the little ones vulnerable to the ambitions of the big ones” (10). This is how God teaches the community of faith to live together.

The people of Israel had been brutally dehumanized for 400 long years. And so even as God liberates them, God also affirms their humanity and invites them into ways of being that continually affirm one another's humanity. God calls them to rehumanize one another—by trusting God to provide abundantly for all, by respecting one another, by resting, by being content, and by refusing to kill, steal, cheat, or lie.

Many years later, the psalmist will sing, "The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul" (Ps. 19:7). For souls wounded from 400 years of collective trauma and likely wondering what healing might look like, I imagine God's laws feeling like a balm.

These refreshing, communally oriented commandments—this gift of guidance from a God who shows the people over and over again that they are not abandoned—do not decrease the agency of the people of Israel but honor it at every turn. They are not decrees from on high, demanding mindless submission. They are not moralizing standards meant to cause division between those who follow them perfectly and everyone else whom the perfect ones look down on.

They are guidelines for human flourishing—given by a God who says, as a way of preparing the people to receive the commandments, "I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (Exod. 19:4). A God who wants the people to be God's own "treasured possession" (19:5). A God who empowers the recently enslaved desert wanderers to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (19:6).

Today, God's laws not only serve as guidelines for holistic, transformative human flourishing, but they also help us discern how to engage with other sorts of authorities. Desmond Tutu saw this clearly in his anti-apartheid activism. "When a clash occurs between the laws of man and the laws of God," Tutu writes in *God Is Not a Christian*, "then for the Christian there can be no debate or argument about which he must obey." He goes on to urge, "Please let us be mindful of the important distinction between what is legal and what is morally right."

In the Ten Commandments, God prioritizes two key values: honor God and love your neighbor. Do not dishonor God's image in your neighbor. If human-made laws are racist or otherwise unjust, such that they cannot be followed while honoring God's image in every human being, then they contradict God's laws and have no claim over a person of faith. In that sense, God's laws offer a kind of freedom: earthly laws that contradict our higher law do not contain us. We can resist when we need to. We

can struggle together for a better world.

In so doing, we find ourselves building new tools. In an exploitative world, we build generosity. In a competitive world, we build communal-mindedness. In a rushed and impatient world, we build space to rest. In a world where wealth is unjustly distributed, those who have resources refuse to try to gain more and more; instead, they open their hands to share with those who do not have enough. In doing these things, we—like the Israelites learning how to live out their brand-new liberation—become truly free.