

No Other Gods

Exodus 20:1-23

INTRODUCTION

The good news of the Bible is the good news of a God who loves us. In the Old Testament this is understood in terms of God's love." "Answer me, O Lord," cried out the Psalmist, "for thy steadfast love is good; according to thy abundant mercy, turn to me." In the New Testament God's love is often described as "grace." "By grace you have been saved through faith," said the Apostle Paul, "and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God."

Because God loves us he calls us into a relationship with himself which becomes for us the most important thing in our lives. It is important because it is the source of our "wholeness" of life. God's love alone makes it possible for us to become the "whole" person he created us to be. Through our relationships with God our unique "gifts" are called forth and we learn how to love others in life-enhancing ways.

Since God alone is the source of our life, it is especially destructive to put our trust in other gods. This fact, stated so clearly in the commandment, is repeated countless times in the Bible: "You shall have no other gods besides me."

It is not difficult for us to understand the importance of this commandment. In actual practice, however, we violate it continuously in many ways. We put our trust in many other



*Crossing the Red Sea, by Sadao Watanabe, Tokyo, Japan.
Stencil print, 1979.*

things beside the living God. The Old Testament writers called this "idolatry" and warned us that it leads to the death of the self. When we put our trust in idols we are cutting ourselves off from the only source of life.

All of this may seem irrelevant until we realize that money is the most pervasive idol of the times in which we live. Even those of us who think of ourselves as "religious" love money, think a great deal about money and possessions, and depend on money for our security and self-identity. It is ironic that we place the motto, "In God we trust," on our coins because our trust is actually in the coins and in what they can purchase for us.

Many of us are eager to grow spiritually. We spend a great deal of time learning to pray and studying the Bible. But spiritual disciplines cannot help us very much if we worship our money and cut ourselves off from the God who is the source of our life. For many of us who want to experience God's gift of "life," the first order of business is to come to terms with our attitude toward our money and possessions.

COMMENTARY

The Book of Exodus in the Old Testament is the story of the "exodus" from Egypt, the initiating event in Israel's history. Just as the Christians have one event (the Christ event) which is formative for their faith, so do the Jews. The event which made them into a self-conscious community, the true watershed in their history, is the liberating act of God which set them free from the oppression of Pharaoh. Even today the Jewish people understand their vocation and destiny in the light of this saving event which made them a people and became a part of their undying memory. The modern Passover ritual says, "In every generation it is our duty to imagine that *we ourselves* have come forth out of Egypt."

The exodus took place under the leadership of Moses, "the greatest Israelite before Christ." After a mighty contest with

Pharaoh, during which Egypt's firstborn children were killed, the Hebrews were given their freedom. But Pharaoh changed his mind and sent an army to destroy them at the Red Sea. Then a wondrous thing happened. The waters before the Hebrews dried up, making it possible for them to cross, and just as the Egyptians entered to pursue them, the waters returned, destroying the entire army. The biblical narrative comes to a climax when Miriam, the sister of Moses, takes a tambourine and begins to sing and dance. In joyful and glad amazement, the people join with her in shouting and singing. The couplet recorded in Exodus 15:21 is one of the oldest pieces of poetry in the Bible:

Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea!

This is a rare "eyewitness testimony" to the meaning of the event which occurred thirteen centuries before Christ. It was for Israel a decisive "sign" of God's *gracious presence*. God had acted on behalf of his people, causing them to think of themselves from this time as a "chosen people," chosen for a divine purpose.

Following the great event, the Hebrews plunged into the wilderness and made their way to Mount Sinai. The journey was extremely difficult but it was a valuable time of growth and development as a community. They finally encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai, where God invited them into a *covenant relationship* with himself. The concept of covenant has played a profound role in the history of Judaism and Christianity. The word means "binding agreement." The people who had been delivered through God's act in history are invited into a binding agreement or contract with him. It is to be binding on both sides: "I will be their God and they will be my people." It demands complete engagement of the will, and participation in a common life. By participating in the life of the covenant people, the individual realizes the ultimate purpose for his or her existence.

The conditions under which the covenant remains valid are

described in the *law* or *Torah*. Hebrew law is not simply a collection of ethical rules to guide human behavior. The law is an expression of the conditions under which the covenant (relationship with God) remains in effect. The Hebrew word "Torah," which means instruction, is the instruction concerning God's will for those who are in covenant with him. To keep the law means "life," to break the law means death because we cut ourselves off in this way from the God who is the only source of life.

The Ten Commandments are the best known and most influential examples of the Old Testament law. They appear twice in the Pentateuch—in Exodus 20 and in Deuteronomy 5. The Exodus version is connected with the Sinai covenant while the Deuteronomy version was probably used as part of a "catechism" in the villages and rural areas away from Jerusalem.

The first three commandments provide specific regulations involving our relationship with God, the others describe our relationship with other persons. The first says, "You shall have no other gods besides me." This was originally intended to distinguish Israel from her Near Eastern neighbors who all boasted a host of heavenly deities. "Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?" (Exodus 15:11) Closely related is the second commandment which allowed no images of God (idols), again differentiating Israel from her neighbors, to whom images of the national deity were commonplace.

Modern archaeology confirms that the Israelites were faithful to this commandment because excavation of biblical sites has yielded no images of Yahweh. Similar searches in neighboring countries, however, have unearthed great quantities of idols and other material representations of pagan deities. The Hebrew word for graven image comes from the root meaning "to carve" and originally meant a sculptured object, but it soon became a term for idolatry in general. By New Testament times, idolatry signifies obsession with created things instead of devotion to the Creator. (Cf. Eph. 5:5 and Phil. 3:19)

All of this is valuable to us as a reminder that God alone is the source of power and meaning in our lives. When we trust in

“idols” of any kind, we are cutting ourselves off from this source. We begin to wither and die like branches cut off from the main vine. (John 15)

We do not use sculptured images as idols in modern times, but we do place our trust in many things other than God. Of the many things in our lives which have become idols, money is the most consuming and demanding of all. Our money and possessions are such a powerful source of comfort and security that our temptation to put our trust in them is almost irresistible. We say we believe in God and that we trust him to give us life. But our heart is actually with our material “treasure.” This means that one of the most creative things we can do is confront as honestly and directly as possible our attitude toward our money and make sure that “mammon” has not taken the place of the one true God in our lives. As the Old Testament reminds us, there are “no other gods” who can offer us life in the present and hope for the future.