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Not Fake News: Who, What, When, Where, Why 1. God, That's Who

Exodus 12:12, 14 NRSV The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you...This day (of Passover) shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.

Deuteronomy 5:6, 6:1-7 NRSV I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery... Now this is the commandment - the statutes and the ordinances - that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children's children may hold the LORD your God in awe all the days of your life, and keep all God's decrees and commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you. Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.

[Play this video: <https://tinyurl.com/CSNY-TCY1>]

It was a turbulent and tumultuous time. There were questions being raised about identity, about vocation, about the direction that the people should go. There were threats both from within from factions fighting among one another and threats from without by those who wished to see the people destroyed. There were some who looked to the past for their direction, wishing to return to a time when there had not been so much tumult and strife. And there were those who looked to the future and who painted a picture of a new way to be even if they could not fully flesh out what such a new way might look like. Wars and threats of war were constant companions. There was conflict about what the most fundamental values of the society should look like and one generation was often at odds with another.

That, of course, is the late 1960s American context in which Crosby Stills Nash

and Young sang their now-iconic song, “Teach Your Children,” but it could also be used to describe the situation and context of our scriptures today and that question, “what shall we teach our children” is indeed one that every people, every society, every family, every church, needs to face head on again and again as situations change, as new possibilities and new fears come forward, as life brings us choices that we cannot avoid. You see, while our two readings for this morning are written in the present tense, most scholars believe that they were actually written after the Hebrew people had completed their long, forty-year exodus from Egypt and had entered the Promised Land. These verses represent, then, a looking back at what happened and they represent the **conclusion** of their struggle about values, about identity, about what, indeed, they should teach their children.

The song says: “You who are on the road must have a code that you can live by.” What shall that code be? What values should it embody? What understanding of God does it include? Looking back at the Hebrew people’s journey along that Exodus road through the mountains and deserts of Sinai, we can see that they made two crucial discoveries about what “code” they would have. The first discovery was this: that there is but One God. Now, **we** don’t easily see the radicalness of that claim, but for the Hebrew people it was a huge and momentous and ultimately life- and hope-giving thing. For in that day and time, three millennia or so ago, “gods” were local, they were tribal, they were wedded to a particular place or people and they only cared about – if they cared at all – about that place or that people. Our translation this morning doesn’t really do justice to the line which it renders “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.” For it is not just that God is the only God of the Hebrew people, but the only God. **Period**. This was the birth of what is called “monotheism” and it is a crucial move in the development of the faith from which we Christians eventually were birthed.

You see, if God is the only God that there is, it means that we can't go shopping for a God more to our liking, more to our tastes. It means that that God created the whole world including a whole bunch of people not like us at all and whom we must figure out how to live together with. It means that while God is always on our side, God is never just on our side alone. It means that this One God is free to manifest in a variety of ways and there is no excuse or justification for us hurting or demonizing or doing violence to those for whom God has appeared in different form. It means that we must be ever so humble in claiming that what we are doing or saying is approved by God.

So, if the first thing for that "code that you can live by," as the song puts it, is the realization by our ancient Hebrew forebears that there is but One God, that yet begs the question "What sort of God?" The second discovery that the Hebrew people made that is reflected in our scriptures this morning is that God is not a God simply of power and might, but a God who is moral and who is always about people being freed from whatever is binding and imprisoning them. For think about it: Would you really want to **worship** a God who, as one commentator claims, sent Hurricane Harvey because the city of Houston elected a lesbian mayor?¹ What would you tell those eight elderly men and women who died in Florida this week because of a lack of air conditioning in their nursing home² in the face of actor Kirk Cameron's saying that God sent Hurricane Irma to teach people humility?³ Do you think the grieving children of those residents would want to worship such a God? Or what about when Billy Graham's daughter, Anne Lotz, said that God had sent the hurricanes, the horrific western wildfires, and even the

¹http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/ann-coulter-hurricane-harvey_us_59a59bc2e4b084581a139315

²<https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/hurricane-irma/five-dead-florida-nursing-home-after-irma-cut-power-mayor-n800931>

³<http://ew.com/tv/2017/09/08/kirk-cameron-hurricanes-wtf/>

recent solar eclipse as a warning to the country for its alleged sins?⁴ Let's grant that there's a lot of sinfulness out there these days, but each of us would say that if someone does something bad you need to punish the perpetrator, not someone else who is innocent of the wrong committed! I just cannot see those eight nursing home residents or that dead toddler who drowned in Houston or the mother who perished saving her baby as ones whom God would decide to use as "warnings" for other people's sins. Can you?

Neither could the Hebrew people. No, if their first insight is that God is the only God, their second insight is that God is to be worshiped not simply because God is powerful, but because God is always and only good, always and only moral, always and only desirous that people be freed from what is trapping and hurting them. The God our Hebrew forebears bequeathed to us is a God who is always about freedom. That's the root of the Passover meal, the meal that in Jesus' hands became the Lord's Supper, a meal therefore that is always rooted in God's desire that people receive justice and that people know freedom. *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery..."*

But this freedom that is at the heart of the Exodus, at the heart of the Passover, at the heart of what we do each Sunday around this Table, is not simply the kind of individualistic whatever-we-want-to-do notion of freedom that we too often associate with the word. That isn't freedom in the Biblical sense; no, that is simply license to do whatever you desire. But, again, that is **not** the sort of freedom that motivated God and its **not** the sort of freedom that God offered to the Hebrew people and offers to us today. On the one hand, God's freedom is always a freedom-**from**. For the Hebrew people, it was freedom from the brutality of slavery under the harsh rule of Pharaoh.

⁴http://www.faithfamilyamerica.com/billy_graham_s_daughter_just_gave_america_serious_news_about_god_s_judgment

For us it can be freedom-from ideas about God that paint God as a capricious monster, slinging about hurricanes and torching forests that make us live our lives more scared than we ever needed to be. Or maybe it's a pattern of relationships that has us imprisoned, things that we do that we don't want to do and don't know how to stop that hurt us and those we are close to. Or maybe it's an addiction to a substance or a toxic person or a way of life that fetters and fails us. Thanks be to God that God indeed seeks our freedom **from** such things.

But there's another meaning of God's freedom and that is freedom-**for**. And to cut to the chase, the freedom-**for** which God gave to the Hebrew people and gives to us is the freedom for **loving**. You see, there is much about our lives that seeks to stunt our ability to love, our freedom to love. Strident voices appeal to our fears about other people and what they might do. Angry voices pervert the love we have for the deepest ideals of our country and twist it into a hatred for those who love their own countries. Cynical voices lure us with the lie that loving others is a fool's game and you only get hurt when you love, for love is really just a zero-sum game where others' good fortune somehow diminishes us.

But the God of the Exodus, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, insists that all of these voices are wrong and that the greatest gift that we have been given is to love our neighbors as ourselves – a teaching that developed and is first cited around the time of the Exodus and which, of course, Jesus Himself reiterated as the essence of what it means to be faithful. In fact, Jewish scholar Richard Friedman says that “there are two religious developments that can be traced... directly to the Exodus: ...monotheism and the ethical ideas of welcoming the stranger and loving our neighbors as we love ourselves.”⁵ We love our neighbors as ourselves because God has freed us when **we** were strangers in our own lives and therefore God demands of us that we too love and

⁵http://billtammeus.typepad.com/my_weblog/2017/09/9-14-17.html

welcome those who are in need of freedom, those who are in need of love, those who may be the most threatened by those who hate them because of the color of their skins, or their orientation, or their religion.

We are freed for love. It's both a powerful notion and a very fragile one at the same time. It's why, as the song says, you must indeed "teach your children well," or as the scripture so soaringly puts it: *"Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise."* In all your words and actions, teach yourselves, and your children, and those around you that you believe in a God of unconditional grace and love, that you know a God who, as Pastor Jonathan so powerfully reminded us last week in his sermon, is always seeking to lead everyone along fruitful paths and to find those patches of life's green grass. We teach these words and we remember them – in the face of a culture that too often would teach hate and suspiciousness – for in the end this "ancient story," as my wife, Rev. Barbara Blaisdell says, "is not just about remembering that God seeks to liberate God's people from slavery and oppression but that **by remembering, we [help] make it possible for God to do it again!**"⁶

And that, my friends, is God's hope and God's dream for each and for all, the dream that we can teach well, that we can love extravagantly, that our children will, as Proverbs says, "rise up and call [us] blessed" for we have helped them know – and they, in turn, will help us to know even better – God's dream of freedom, God's dream of love for each and all, God's dream of a world where everyone is cherished, and fed, and safe. May we indeed, as the song says, cast away the fears that have sometimes

⁶"The Exodus Stories: 2) What Is Faith For," preached at First Christian Church, Tacoma, Washington, September 10, 2017. I am grateful to her for some of the inspiration behind this sermon and especially the discussion of what kind of God would send disasters along with the discussion of the significance of the verb tenses in the Exodus stories.

made our lives hell and know that God's dream of the freedom to love is now in **our** hands, in our hands. [Play this video: <https://tinyurl.com/CSNY-TCY2>]