

Exodus 20:1–4, 7-9, 12-20 (NRSV)

Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

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.

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.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

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

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

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.

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, and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." 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."

Don't Be Afraid; God Has Come to Put Fear upon You

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Exodus 20:1–4, 7–9, 12–20

We say the craziest things. We tell anxious boys who are intimidated by the girls to just act naturally. We speak about being alone together with our family for the weekend. We sometimes tell children to appear invisible. The nurse gives you a lousy tasting medicine and says, take a big sip. Two children split a donut, each trying to get the bigger half. If they're on the refrigerator, we tell them to climb down. When they're watching television, we monitor the shows for graphic language. The ads try to sell us on new and improved products. If you're wise, you won't call your neighbor's child, or dog for that matter, pretty ugly. If you're too tense you might try a relaxation exercise. And when the politician is caught in a scandal, his silence often speaks volumes.

Idioms. Sayings. We use them all the time and they are one of the hardest parts of learning a new language. And why is that? Because idioms, the sayings we use very often just don't make sense, or at least they don't seem to make literal sense. Idioms like 'the bigger half' are subtle. It tends to convey that getting the bigger half is getting more than your share. The idiom intentionally combines words in a playful or thought provoking way that we understand if we just stop and think.

But other idioms are less transparent. There is a civil war going on in Syria, but it's hardly civil. It's brutal and decidedly uncivil. The problem here is different. The Latin word *civicus* meant national, and at least 500 years ago internal wars were called *civicus* wars, national wars, civil wars. Over time many English words we use derived from this Latin word: civilization, civilian, civil government (another one that seems a little off these days), and civilized. And though we can figure out where they came from with a little work, meanings have shifted drastically over time. The North and South had a civil war, but we want everyone to be a civil civilian. If you're just learning English this can get pretty confusing. Am I supposed to wage war on my neighbor?

We readers of the Bible face similar hurdles. A more or less literal translation of verse 20 in this morning's passage from Exodus 20 says: "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." "Do not be afraid; for God means to scare you into righteousness." Which one is it? Should I be frightened, or not?

These are not frivolous questions. Much of American Christianity has opted for the second option. In 1748 Jonathan Edwards famously preached that we are sinners in the hands of an angry God, suspended by a thread over the leaping flames of hellfire. He's hardly alone, then or now. My own mother, bless her soul, taught me this frightening form of the faith. If I did not follow the Ten Commandments and a bunch of other of God's decrees, my poor soul was at dire risk. I'm told that as a boy I was mostly willing to take the risk, but there was no question that the message was meant to be frightening. God meant to frighten me into goodness.

This verse 20 that we're talking about comes at the end of the Exodus version of the Ten Commandments. And I think it's fair to say that many readers understand the Bible to say, here are the commandments, do them or else.

Others have found this harsh form of Christianity offensive and have tended to tame the message. Many have said, look, the Ten Commandments are a good recipe for living together peaceably. We can be civil and avoid civil wars, or other forms of brokenness. It's an excellent insight. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not desire your neighbor's house; you shall not desire your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. I think we can all agree that ignoring these commandments is corrosive to our common life together. They are excellent guidelines for human relationships at every level. I have no quibble with that view. I rather like it. It's a more secular, but perhaps not less frightening warning. It holds us perhaps more directly responsible for the trouble we reap. Maybe God doesn't punish us. Maybe we bring about our own sorrow when we don't live by the commandments. There is truth there.

But I'm pretty sure that that's not what God meant, or at least that's not all that God meant. And the difference in what God meant is a pretty big deal.

Both our contemporary Christian and secular reading of the commandments have a purposely frightening subtext. Follow the commandments or else. Follow the commandments, or God will drop you into the fire. Follow the commandments or ruin your life. Sure, the grace of Jesus may redeem you, but there will be hell to pay first.

Whether we hold fast to the part of the verse that reads, God has come to put fear in your heart or take the verse to mean that we are given a fair warning of the natural consequences of our actions, the message is, like my mama said, the wages of sin are high.

But what if we have been misreading the word fear all along? What happens if the verse isn't saying that God wants to scare us into submission? What if the word for fear had changed meaning over time in Hebrew? Think of the English word awe. A very positive word. So is awesome. But what about awful? Awful used to mean full of awe, but now it means terrible.

Well, it turns out that fear is like that in Hebrew. 'Do not be afraid' means just what it says—don't be afraid. 'But fear the Lord' means to tremble in awe at the wonder of the Lord. The Message translation says: Moses spoke to the people: "Don't be afraid. God has come to test you and instill a deep and reverent awe within you so that you won't sin." God has come to instill a deep and reverent awe within you so that you won't sin. And even the word test in this sentence is misleading. The word for test really means to be trained, to learn. "Don't be afraid. God has come to teach you, to form you, to shape you and to instill a deep and reverent awe within you so that you won't sin. Quite a different meaning from, follow these commandments or else. Is standing in front of this awe frightening at all? Sure. But it's the fear Moses felt at the burning bush and that the prophets felt when God appeared to them. It is not the fear that God will abandon us to the flames of hellfire, but the trembling that accompanies standing in the presence of the holy. The memory of this encounter with God was meant to sustain them and support them in the face of the manifold choices and situations they would face in life.

Think of a glorious sunset. Think of the leaves just now turning. Think of the tiny hands of new life, an infant whose face will soon smile and eyes sparkle. Think of the huge crashing waves of a storm's fury. Think of your first love and your most recent love, too. Think of learning to read; words on a page jump to life. Think of the deep green of the summer forest and the stark white of the new fallen snow. These and more things than I can name are God's

creation, God stirring us with awe, even awe and trembling. They are God showing us, teaching us, shaping us—saying, this I have made, is it not awesome? Is it not beautiful, powerful, breathtaking? When Job challenged God’s justice, God in answer showed him creation. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”

This but begins the tour of creation on which God takes Job, a hundred verses and more. God is clearly more than a little frustrated with Job, but God is not so much belittling Job in these verses as God is pointing to the astonishing grandeur and mystery of creation itself and then posing the rhetorical question, “So, don’t you suppose I know what I am doing?” Just so is God’s fearsome appearance in delivering the commandments. God delivers them and effectively says, “These, too, are a portion of the majesty of God, the majesty of all I have created. Do your best to follow them not because I will burn you if you don’t, or because you’ll create your own hell if you don’t. Do your best to follow them for they are a doorway to the splendor of God, indeed, they themselves are marvelously made. In the words of Moses to the people: “Don’t be afraid. God has come to teach you, to form you, to shape you and to instill a deep and reverent awe within you so that you won’t sin.” Amen.