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Title: Braving the Wilderness: Rules to Live By

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Text: [Exodus 19:1-6, 20:1-2](#)

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One of the most exciting rites of passage in most people's lives is getting their Driver's License. It's not AS big a deal as it once was, but it's still something many teenagers look forward to today. Before you get a license and before you even road test, you have to take a test on the "rules of the road." There are a lot of rules you have to know before you can

drive, and you have to prove you know these rules. Have you ever thought about why someone must know the rules to live by on the road before they are allowed to drive? Yes, it for their safety but it is also for everyone else on the road's safety, for our neighbors on the road's safety. At first glance, getting a driver's license is about me, but if you think about it, it's not. Someone getting a license drive and demonstrating they know the rules of the road is not about me, but it is about everyone else. It's about our neighbor.

We are continuing a series called Braving the Wilderness: Living During Uncertain Times. We are looking at what it means to live through an uncertain time like we are in right now through the lens of the Exodus story, from the Israelites journey from captivity to the Promised Land.

The Israelites are three months into their journey after God has liberated them from slavery at the hand of Pharaoh. They have set up camp in the desert in the front of Mount Sinai. Moses goes up the mountain to converse with God and this is what Moses hears: *"You saw what I did to the Egyptians, and how I lifted you up on Eagles wings and brought you to me. So now, if you faithfully obey me and stay true to my covenant, you will be my most precious possession out of all the peoples, since the whole earth belongs to me. You will be a kingdom of priests for me and a holy nation. These are the words you should say to the Israelites."* Exodus 19:4-6 (CEB)

This sounds like extremely good news doesn't it? If you remember from last week, God gives the people a reminder of who God is and what God has done for them through the Passover meal.

Now, here, God is establishing a *relationship* with the people. They have been in the wilderness for three months, journeying to Sinai. It is now time for structure, time for covenants and agreements about how they will interact with God and with one another. Over the last several months, many have found themselves working and schooling from home or other places. And one of the struggles we have heard again and again, is *"I just need some structure in my life."*

It's also why it can be difficult to bring about any systemic change in our society, because we crave structure. We need the familiar ordering of our days, even if that ordering is not life-giving for us or others. It's important for us to know this: Before God does anything with the community, God first establishes relationship with the community.

Before God gives them the decalogue or the ten sayings or what are commonly known as the ten commandments, God establishes a relationship with God's people.

It is only once this relationship is established, God's immense love for the people, does God directly address the people:

"Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord Your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Exodus 20:1-2

God establishes a relationship with us. Then and only then does God make a claim on our behavior, how we are to live in the world.

What comes to mind for you when I mention the Ten Commandments. I asked that question on social media this week.

Charlton Heston for many, it may be Charlton Heston playing Moses in the Ten Commandments movie that ABC still shows every Easter night.

Several mentioned the idea of stone tablets

How-to live-in community together.

Songs you learned as a kid in Sunday School.

Jed Bartlett from the West Wing.

Order from chaos.

Guidance.

Some mentioned how difficult it can be to remember all ten.

For me, I remember many years ago, the big argument in a neighboring county over displaying the Ten Commandments in the county courthouse. My thought at the time was that I wish we were just as eager to follow these sayings of God as we are to display them.

In the wilderness, maybe more than other times, we need these reminders:

As the Israelites were settling into their wilderness journey, God is ready to use this wilderness time. God is ready to use this time to shape them into the people God desires them to be, a priestly and holy nation, what Jesus and the writers of the New Testament would come to refer to as the "Kingdom of God."

These commandments of God fall into two categories.

Two Categories of Commandments.

- The nature of our relationship to God.
- The nature of our relationship to neighbor.

Someone once asked the great baseball manager Tommy Lasorda "what is the most difficult things about managing a baseball team?" His response was this, "the most difficult thing is getting 25 people to all at once play for the name on the front of the jersey rather than the name on the back"

These commandments are not meant to be a best life for me now type of things. They aren't about "me" per se. God doesn't give us these to make us more perfect. Rather this is about our neighbors and our relationship to them. God gives you the law not so you can have your best life or become more spiritual, but so that your neighbor can have their best life.

Wilderness time is typically a time when we might struggle with focusing on others. But here, as the Israelites are settling into the wilderness, God focuses them not on "me" but on "us". What will it take for them to see outside of themselves during this moment?

The spiritual writer Thomas Merton tells about the time he was standing in the center of the shopping district in Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut. It was crowded and he says that I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world.

This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now

that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun. It became for me, the Freedom for discovering the sacred image of God in everyone

I think Thomas Merton was on to something when he mentions the freedom of discovering the sacred image of God in everyone.

We do not keep the commandments for our own benefit. We keep the commandments as a way to love God and to love neighbor. This is our guide in life, a way of life that becomes even more important in the wilderness.

These commandments are what are what lives freed in Christ look like. Now that we are free, the law shows us what a free life looks like

It's why when Jesus is asked which of the commandment is the most important, he answers. *"... and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this, you will love your neighbor as yourself. No other commandment is greater than these."* Mark 12:30a-31

It's why Paul would tell a community of people figuring out what it meant to be Christian community *"You were called to freedom brothers and sisters, only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses but serve each other through love. All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement. Love your neighbor as yourself."* Galatians 5:13-14

In order to brave the wilderness, to live during uncertain times we must
Love God and
Love Neighbor

Will you pray with me?