

["Losing Your God"](#)

[Rev. Beth Waltemath](#)

[North Decatur Presbyterian Church](#)

[August 21, 2022, 10:00AM](#)

[\(https://hdpc.org/hdpc-worship/losing-your-other-gods/\)](https://hdpc.org/hdpc-worship/losing-your-other-gods/)

EXODUS 20:1-6: Common English Version

Psalm 84: Translation by Stephen Mitchell (See .pdf of bulletin)

Images: [Illustrative Carved Tablet of 10 Commandments from Catholic Church in Southern Poland in online archive of Vanderbilt Divinity School](#)

[Brooklyn Mythology Series: Image of Religion by Tim Okamura](#) (timokamura.com)

We're back to school and to church. Back to normal – almost, except not really. Which means there are so many places to be again. My inbox is full of “opportunities” to connect, to meet, to learn, and to celebrate, but as my calendar fills up with them, they look the same as they did before the pandemic...like obligations. There are multiple demands on me and my children to suit up and show up. It had me wondering what is really required of me and my kin. Is there a difference between the quantity of things we show up for and the quality of how we show up? What qualifies us as having led a good life — our activities? our actions? our beliefs? or our commitments? In short, is there a difference between a demand or a command, and a commandment?

Exodus 20 proclaims our freedom from slavery while also warning us of our tendency to find new masters.

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of slavery in Egypt” God says here.

“Ok, God, thanks? Now what?” I think.

“You shall have no other gods before me.” God answers.

Damn. Busted?

Might God have made it a little easier ...like given me a To Do list rather than a “Not Do” list?”

Because you know I can crush a good To Do list. I've got notepads all over the house. Dry erase boards for each child to write down their own lists of homework and check off when they practice piano. I have colorful wall calendars in the kitchen, highlighting the family schedule for the next three months. Then there are color-coded ones shared over the Cloud with each of my children through their email.

These days, every thought I have or express to my kids seems to be some kind of demand to “do this now.” “Do this...” and “don't do that.” Without even thinking I find commands flying out of my mouth. With three kids between the ages of 6 and 15, I am in what seems to be a “Commandment Stage” of life. I certainly didn't intend to be here when I became a parent and I don't intend to stay here when I graduate to the grandparent stage.

As a teenager and young adult, I had to ask politely to make my case and never assume I knew the right answer. Now that my parents are grandparents, I notice a levity and delight in their communications with those they wish to love and guide. Even in my most expert parenting moments (if you could call them that), I can't shake the responsibility I have to offer a path that is decent and in order.

As someone who has many of my rules broken over and over again, I have a lot of Compassion for God, the Holy Commander, in today's reading.

The Exodus passage describes the first of the Ten Commandments as essentially a reminder to give up our idols. Now, God uses several verses to issue this edict and describe the consequences should we fail. It seems really harsh! These go on to the third and fourth generation. God spills so much ink on this point because God knows how confused and afraid we are when it comes to putting our lives and trust in something outside ourselves.

When we are confused, we project onto God the fears that terrify us and the hopes that console us. We are afraid of being abandoned so we construct categories of race, gender, religion, and political party in which we are the pure and the righteous with God on our side. And the other is the opposite.

Or we are afraid of pain and suffering so we imagine a God who will spare us or cure us if we are good enough.

Like the Israelites, who had minor household gods, we pursue other idols - especially wealth and the promise to live long and not suffer. Many of you are probably aware of your particular insecurities and obsessions. There's an expression, if you want to know someone's values, look at their electronic bank statement or Venmo or what have you now that we don't have checkbooks anymore. But I'd say this is more true for my schedule. If you want to know what I honor most, check my Google calendar.

As human beings, we have gotten good at distraction but we are even better at delusion. We use the name of God as a cover for the idols of our hearts. And this is the great danger of faith - to confuse our fears and our desires with God's heart and God's will. Idolatry is not only something we do individually; our political ideologies quickly become idolatrous, too. We say "this is God's will," when it's far from clear that is true.

In this passage, God identifies Godself as "the one who liberates." God is essentially telling us not to be duped by the lesser gods that our fears and desires will create. God also encourages us not to indenture ourselves with zealous pursuit of our biased pursuit of the "One True God." The first commandment reminds us that there is nothing in heaven or on earth that is comparable to the creating, liberating power of Divine Love.

The Hebrew word for God was intended to be so sacred that it could not be spoken. The Israelites knew that assigning a sound and an image for God was already trying to confine and control a limitless, liberating Love.

Today's translation of Psalm 84 says it more gently than a commandment. I like that about poetry, it is of a prettier persuasion than legalese.

"How radiant the places you dwell, O Lord, my soul yearns for your presence; my whole body longs for your light... Open my eyes to your love."

What if when we meet uncertainty as we do everyday in a world that is transient and transitioning always before us... what if we did not meet it with fear and force but with compassion and longing and trust?

When I entered seminary, my grandmother who has now passed, began a creative writing class taught by a staff person at Vanderbilt Divinity School. For the next ten years, she wrote me "Dear Beth" letters about the spiritual journey not just of herself but of her father, and mother, going back to her grandmother who was kicked out of her Methodist church in Santa Fe, Tennessee around 1901 for bringing her Black neighbors to church with her. This "excommunication" as we called it, greatly impacted generations of our family's attitudes around the difference between religion and faith.

The larger book project I work on during my summer writing leave is weaving together a memoir using these letters to uncover the legacy of faith between generations.

"Mima," like many of us in churches, had constructed a personal theology based on a few major Bible passages that resonated with her throughout her life. These verses were both inspiring and challenging enough to construct her moral compass and a meaning for her life. Her focus was Matthew 25, which of course, is when Jesus says "when you have fed a hungry person, or clothed the naked, or visited those in prison, you have done so to me." . My grandmother lived her life as a tireless volunteer and fundraiser for mothers and children experiencing poverty and domestic abuse. Her letters are a gift to me as they hand down a legacy of faith – Christian but not always churching, full of doubt and faithfulness – that goes back generations.

This is also the gift of a congregation like this church that is now several generations old. Our storytelling initiative that we are doing as part of our Vital Congregations planning process reminds me how churches are living archives of how real people seek to learn and to live their faith in community and in response to the problems of an ever-changing world. If being a part of recording and passing on faith through the ages is important to you, I suggest you volunteer to interview others or appear yourself. (Contact Ariel Hart [planning@ndpc.org](mailto:planning@ndpc.org))

In addition to being the co-pastor here, I am also a writer, a writing coach, an editor and a reviewer of spiritual memoirs. One of the things I enjoy is helping others write the stories of their lives and how they make meaning in order to leave a legacy for those they love. I do this

because I know how much this legacy meant to me as a granddaughter. When I witnessed first hand the Twin Towers fall on September 11, 2001 as a new seminarian and a resident of Lower Manhattan, Mima's letters that described struggle and resilience by family members through the Great Depression and the bombing at Pearl Harbor in World War II gave me the courage to move forward and serve in the recovery effort at Ground Zero. When my child's life hung in the balance more times than I can count, Mima's reflections on surviving the death of her own son and the numerous losses that have marked our family for generations offered me solace and strength to continue through the tunnel of caregiving not knowing if relief or grief lay on the other end.

I don't need to go on. You all have examples of similar lessons of faith passed down in your histories too.

In other words, my grandmother offered what my theology textbooks could not – a portrait of faithfulness that didn't depend on an ironclad belief system or an indestructible Image of a God whose power and opinions agreed with her own.

Throughout her letters, Mima repeats a certain refrain which, I think, is based on how a life of service inspired by Jesus Christ quelled her longing to understand herself and her God. She says again and again: "to lose yourself is to find yourself."

ASIDE: Hmm...I wonder if Jesus didn't learn this same lesson from his grandmother and if it did not comfort him on the night before his death and assure him on the day of his resurrection?

(Screens show 2nd image of a Black mother and her infant from Brooklyn by Tim Makura)

One of the ways that we must be willing to lose ourselves is to give up the images of God that do us and others harm. For instance, did you know that the Bible does not use the word "Omnipotent" to describe God? That adjective is a few interpretations removed from its root word, "El Shaddai" which is a feminine Hebrew noun meaning "God of the Mountains." This became "Almighty" by commentators, and from there it became "Universally Powerful" or "Omni-Potent."

How many of us has had a crisis of faith wondering why God did not intervene to stop the tragedy or to heal the one who is dying too soon? How much did this pit our compassionate heart against our need for intellectual coherence?

Were we looking for a "universal power coming from on high" when the better understanding of this feminine image of God would have been "Great Nurturer?" (Yes, according to theologian, Catherine Keller, literally, "the Breasted One." I've also heard a rabbi interpret this image as "All Sufficient")

Gregory, the Bishop of Nyssa in the 4th century, spoke of God's power tenderly offered to us in feminine terms:

"The divine power," Bishop Gregory writes, "though exalted far above our nature and inaccessible to all approach, like a tender mother who joins in the inarticulate utterances of her babe, gives to our human nature what it is capable of receiving."

When we build temples to idols, when we build institutions around our fears and desires and forget the God who liberates in love, it affects not just us but all of the generations who follow us. This I think is the real life version of what the doom and gloom predictions of the final verses in this Exodus passage describe.

"I am Jehovah, your God, who liberated you from slavery. Give your heart and soul to no one but me."

Now consider something more scary than eternal damnation? Consider present freedom? What if it were true? "To lose your idols is to find God." Could we stand to step into that place of ultimate surrender? Could we hold our hearts so open and our minds so free?

ASIDE: Could we make space in our calendar for mystery and mercy?

Maybe we shouldn't hear God's voice as an authoritarian Father commanding us to: "Do this," or a shrill mother carping, "Don't do that," but as a tender and committed suitor, whispering "Come closer" and "Take great care."

Beloved Children of God, The Great Nurturer is not shaming us or scolding us but inviting us and the future generations we influence into a closer relationship with the Love that forms, redeems and sustains us.

I like to end my sermons with invoking the Trinity and this interpretation comes from St Augustine: In the name of the Lover, the Beloved, and The Spirit of Love Itself. Amen.

#### Works Cited:

Keller, Catherine. *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process*. Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2008.

Ludlow, Morwenna, [Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and \(Post\)Modern](#). Oxford University Press: Oxford, England, September 20, 2007.

Carved commandments:

<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/diglib-fulldisplay.pl?SID=20220820827929093&code=ACT&RC=55124&Row=1>

Brooklyn Mythology Series by Tim Makura

<https://www.timokamura.com/work/brooklyn-mythology>