

Just God

Exodus 20:1-3

Cradock Presbyterian Church

September 16, 2012

Why is it that lots of folks think that walking under a ladder is gonna cause something bad to happen? Somewhere, somebody had something fall on them from a ladder they were walking under! Maybe a few somebodies; and so it came to be a “fact” that you brought bad luck on yourself if you walked under a ladder. Obviously, how do you *make sure* your luck stays good? *You don’t walk under ladders!*

How is it that we got to believing that when a black cat crossed your path, something dastardly was going to happen? I think somebody who didn’t like cats, or maybe just black cats, started this one. What about opening your umbrella indoors? I never understood that one! Maybe it was about poking somebody in the eye. If they got mad enough, your luck sure would change! And *why* did anybody ever think breaking a mirror would give you 7 years bad luck? Why not 3 years? Or 10? Judging from what I see looking back at me when *I* look into a mirror, I don’t see how breaking a mirror could be a bad thing at all!

What’s the word for these? *Superstitions*. Believing in something that isn’t real. But it might be! And if you don’t believe in it, and it looks like you should have – well?

In some way, this has to do with control. All you have to do is believe in these superstitions. Then your luck will be good. Just do that, and throw some salt over your shoulder for good luck (there’s another one I don’t understand!), and you’ve got it made.

If you go back to the ancient world, where Israel was, your superstitious life might cause you to create *gods*, with a little “g”. The array of gods in some of those cultures

was dizzying. There were gods for fertility, of both crops and people; there were gods for war; gods for protection; gods for imparting wisdom. There came to be gods for weather, gods for night and day, gods for appealing to for a good hunt, so you'd have food. Pretty much, any area where you might need help, they came up with a god to appeal to. Must be a god up there to take care of it!

Interesting thing is, if *you* made that god, essentially, and determined how you could influence that god to do what you wanted, guess who really had control? Or felt like they did? Yep – human beings. And I suppose that felt all right – but what happened when cultures clashed over which gods did what? Or which god of war was most powerful? That meant war, between tribes or nations. Or, heaven forbid! (pardon the pun) – things didn't work out with a god like they were supposed to. That meant human beings were back in that uncertain area again. Out of control. And you know how you feel when you're like that? Afraid.

But here's the biggest thing: none of those gods was BIG. None of them was really very much separated from the human beings who created them. When you really needed them, could you *really* be sure that those gods would come through?

So those ancient folks went through all of that work of maintaining a bunch of gods for, basically, *nothing*. They had no assurance; they never saw any real *proof* that their gods even existed. There wasn't any, just like there isn't any proof that avoiding ladders, black cats, indoor umbrellas, or cracked mirrors makes a bit of difference. Life was *very* uncertain, because there wasn't really any control. That meant there was plenty of fear.

But the real God wasn't willing to let his people live in fear! When the Lord God made up his mind to claim Israel as his people, he knew how to move things beyond superstition. Even better, God knew how to make their lives *good*.

It all began with the Exodus event itself. God showed himself in a *lot* of ways in that process: with the plagues, and the things Moses did before Pharaoh. He showed them with the Passover, which even convinced Pharaoh. Most of all, he showed them with what he did at the Red Sea as they began their Exodus. Then God even went before them in visible form, as a pillar of fire to guide them along. There wasn't any doubt about the power and transcendence of *this* God! There wasn't any doubt about who was in control, either.

But it was going to take more than being freed from slavery to make life good for Israel. They were still enslaved to their old, superstitious ways of thinking. They *still* wanted to make up their own little "g" gods! Just look at the event we're studying, the giving of the 10 Commandments. Moses hadn't even come down from the mountain yet, and the people had gotten Aaron to make a golden calf and call it a god. It was going to take God staking out a claim to be the the only God, and establishing something new, to give Israel the life God had in mind for his people.

So God laid it out to Moses, while all Israel stood at the bottom of the mountain and trembled in fear. You can read it for yourself, in chapters 19 and 20 of Exodus. God made sure the people heard his voice as thunder; the lightning and the thunder and the smoke and the fire scared the [stuff] out of the people. God got their attention, all right! Now, *listen* to what he says as he begins. "I am the LORD your God, who

brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,” he began. He reminded the people of his power, and especially of his being able to do for them what no little “g” god could do. And then he laid it on them: “You shall have no other Gods before me.”

In that statement, God had just changed their life and made it better than they could ever have imagined. Gone are the uncertainties about which god to pray to, for what. THIS God is the one you approach for *everything*. The worries about the ultimate power of any little “g” god are banished by the power of this one God, who is in control of everything, even nature. God has now given their life a distinct order, a clear order, in which to live. The commandments that follow this first one make it even easier to live; because they do, they constitute a guarantee of the life God has in mind for Israel.

It is this same certainty, this same clarity of life, which is God’s gift to us, you and me, today. You and I can live a fantastic life today because God has staked his claim. We don’t have to worry about order; God has established the order. We don’t have to worry about fear, either. We owe everything to God. We *should* show our allegiance to this one God, because God has certainly shown favor to us. If we do, then life is *good*. It’s that simple.

But you know, we *do* slip back into the old ways sometimes. Just like those ancient people, we want to be in control ourselves. We come up with hard beliefs, “principles,” that function like little “g” gods. That’s right, we create our own “gods.” We worship or serve these “gods,” and then we end up disappointed. Things like the American insistence on being self-reliant. Or like the insistence that your own hard work

and saving will make your life good. Or that all *you* have to do is treat others well, and everything will work out. We make those kinds of things, functionally, into “gods.” These little “gods” let us down; we invented them, so they don’t have any more power than we do. That’s not a surprise! – they’re centered on us. When it becomes clear that our little “g” gods can’t save us, we’re back to the one condition we don’t want to live in: fear. And in today’s world, with all the threats to us that those Israelites didn’t have, the fear is just multiplied.

That’s why this first commandment is such a gift. God gives his name again in it: “I will be who I choose to be” is the best rendering of it. God says, “I am that God, who will be who I choose to be, who took you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. What does that tell you, Israel? Because I am that God, *you will never have any other Gods, not while I’m around, because you don’t need them.*” There’s a subtlety in the Hebrew behind the term “before me.” It has the sense of “to my face;” it also has the the sense of “in my presence.” It’s NOT about *priority*, like the English translation “before me” leads you to think, as if you can have God first AND THEN have other Gods. As long as God is around, you can’t have any other Gods, because he won’t tolerate that! But more important, it’s a statement of fact: God is saying, “You simply won’t have them. For you, they don’t exist.”

Do you see how life got easier? How it got less complicated, less fearful? You don’t have to worry anymore about which little “god” to pray to, and did you get it right? You know where to turn now, and you have the proof in the whole history that began in

Egypt and that's playing out in your very midst, in the person of Jesus Christ and in the work of the Holy Spirit..

It is this First Commandment that brings us one step closer to the wonderful life God has in mind for us, for you and for me. We want to turn to those rules we just talked about almost superstitiously, as if they will save us. We cling to the idea of our self-sufficiency, just like those ancient people who kept on creating gods. We try to organize our lives by these ideals. How are we doing with that? The jobless figures, the stories of the high rates of foreclosures and bankruptcies tells us all we need to know. The breakup of homes, the high suicide rate in some areas of the country and some fields of work, fill in the blanks. The 'gods' we create for ourselves can't save us. If that's the way you live your life, you can't help but be filled with fear!

But by giving us this commandment, God has given us something to build our lives around that is absolute. We don't need to worry ourselves sick because we sense we're not powerful enough; we've got God. We don't have to scramble around trying to figure out who or what in the world or in the heavens can save us – we've got God. We don't have to think too hard, or go to great lengths, or become monks, in order to know that we're not alone! Right before our eyes, right in our hearts, we know – we've got God. He's the ONLY God, and the only one we'll ever need. And because he is, our lives are much less complicated than the poor people who don't know this commandment, and who don't know our God.

So if you can heed this commandment, and cast aside everything that you might make into a "god," everything that you might superstitiously cling to, every ideal or way

of life that we've made holy, you and I – if you follow this commandment and claim for yourself this God and no other – well, you're just one step closer to the life God has in mind for you.