



Title	⇒ One Bright Day in the Middle of the Night
Scripture	Exodus 19: 1-9a, 20: 1- 3
Minister	The Reverend Matthew Ruttan
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Note	This text is an approximate rendering; this message was visually animated

Minister: Peace be with you
Congregation: And also with you



*One bright day in the middle of the night
Two dead boys got up to fight*

We all have those memories from when we were young. Sometimes they come to us quite unexpectedly, popping up out of nowhere. Maybe we're driving along the highway, or picking up some blackberries on sale in No Frills, or waiting in the ridiculously long drive-thru line-up at Tim Horton's. But they just pop right back into your mind like bubbles bursting, transporting you back to a time that was.

I had this experience a few weeks ago. As you know, I'm the youngest of three brothers, meaning that I always wanted to be doing what my older brothers were doing. My oldest brother Deric had this neat thing he did: he would go across the two-lane highway, through the wooded trail, the gravel pit, and down to the creek, set up a tent, and stay the night. To a younger brother like me, this seemed like an awesome adventure. And it was.

So one day I asked Mom and Dad if I could join him. I'm sure to his chagrin, they agreed—and off we went, he and me, the tag-a-long. We pitched the tent. I remember so many vivid details from that afternoon and evening. The air was damp because there was so much moss. I remember the hot dogs with those white Wonderbread buns. I remember us heading into the tent when nightfall came because the mosquitoes got as big as baseballs. It was perfect.

But why? Why was it so perfect? Because it was the weekend. Because it was Friday night. Because I was getting to do something I normally didn't get to do. Because I was with my cool older brother. Because Mom and Dad weren't around. Because my brother had sneaked a bunch of sugary snacks and a big bag of Salt 'n' Vinegar chips out the door. Because I was in the shiny green sleeping bag my grandpa got me last Christmas. Because, because, because. For a boy from Macaulay Township it was perfect.

In that little tent, perhaps to kill the time with a pestering little brother, Deric taught me a rhyme—that, to this day, is still etched in my memory. It's bizarre, but bare with me. Here it is:

*One bright day in the middle of the night
Two dead boys got up to fight
Back to back they faced each other
Drew their swords and shot each other
A deaf policeman heard the noise*

*And came and shot the two dead boys
If you don't believe this lie is true
Go ask the blind man he saw it too*¹

Yes, it's a strange poem. But as a younger brother I thought it was the coolest thing I had ever heard. So racked with contradictions: "One bright day *in the middle of the night*"? "Two dead boys *got up to fight*"? As I lay there trying to sleep with the sound of squirrels circling the tent I committed it to memory. Everything in the world was right.

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This morning we begin a 9-week journey through the 10 Commandments, a central foundation for *moral vision* in our world. Historically, they have had an incredible influence on our modern, Western society: Our legal system, among other things, is based in large measure on these ancient commands, given to the Hebrew people about 3300 years ago while gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai, a place that still exists today in modern Egypt.

We start this journey together because the 10 Commandments have long been a bedrock of the Christian faith. They were (and are) central not only to Jewish identity, but to Christian identity, seeing that we share much of the same heritage. Jesus often quotes the 10 Commandments. And the writers of the New Testament refer to them with a centrality we cannot ignore.

But there is another reason we start this journey together. The 10 Commandments are kind of like wedding vows, and here's why. Everyone knows a few of them. "To have and to hold from this day forward; for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer..." and then we get a bit foggy, despite the fact that these vows constitute the bedrock promises of marriage. It's the same with the 10 Commandments. I will often be talking with people who say they try to live in a way that is good or pleasing to God. I say that's great and inquire how they go about doing this. They say they do this by living by the 10 Commandments. I then ask them to list them. I don't do this maliciously, but to gently make a point. Like wedding vows, the response usually comes back naming a few, maybe one or two, perhaps three, and then... silence. I wonder: How can we live by them if we can't even remember them?

It's about moral vision. And so we turn to the 10 Commandments because in them lies a critical key for our future as disciples of Christ as his hands and feet here on earth.

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To really wrap our heads around the magnificence and life-altering consequence of the 10 Commandments we have to imagine what was happening way back then, about 3300 years ago. We think 10 or 50 or 100 years ago was a long time. Here we're talking 3300! So it takes a bit of work to get our minds there. The Hebrew people had just been rescued dramatically from being a slave people.

If you have ever seen the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* you will remember that feeling of incredible liberation and ecstasy as Tim Robbins' character, Andy, burrows his way out of prison and finds freedom on the outside.² When he finally crawls out of the stinking sewage gutter and lands in the open-air river beyond the imposing walls, he is covered in muck; it is the middle of the night, and it is raining. But he is free and totally alive! He raises his arms in the sky in total disbelief and jubilation, his back arching in victory! Imagine that this is the Hebrews—but not just one man, but an entire people.

Now in the same movie we meet Brooks, a lifer in the Shawshank prison. He's been in there most of his life and works within as the gentle, old librarian. The kind of guy that feels like the perfect grandfather. As an old man Brooks is finally granted release. But he is totally lost on the outside world. The bondage of prison has so controlled him and how he understood himself that he no longer knew how to be free. Again, imagine

that this is the Hebrews. In a special way they are the combination of these two characters: They are like both Andy and Brooks. Exhausted and wandering through the river toward a newfound freedom, but lost about how to live freely. There is a *disorienting contrast of contradictions*. And that is a term to which I will return again and again. There is a disorienting contrast of contradictions—fighting for freedom; but floundering in freedom.

So in a cloud of smoke, wandering through the wilderness, with a freedom they are barely able to manage if they are to stay sane, Lord Almighty arranges with Moses for the people to hear commands for living freely. They are a tool to help us, for our benefit, and without which we would be lost. A guiding pact—a loving pact between parent and children, given by a parent who knows best. A parent who has engineered his children’s release from prison and wants them to not only survive but thrive on the outside.

When I was in public school, probably grade two or three, my best friend Chad and I hung out and did a lot of stuff together. As young kids do we had a lot of fun, and even got into some trouble. One day we made a pact. We each cut the palm of our hands with a little knife so that we started to bleed. Then with a small river of red in our palms we shook hands. If any of you have ever done this when you were young it’s called becoming “blood brothers,” a bond that is supposed to make you as close as kin. And I know it goes against every health code and rule we can conjure up in this hyper-paranoid age of ours, but we did it. We made a pact. This is what was sealed on Mount Sinai. Lord Almighty chose the Hebrews to be his people. He liberated them. And they would serve him alone. The 10 Commandments are a guide to help them do just that.

But what do the ancient Hebrews have to do with us?

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In a sense we too are lost and disoriented. Wandering without a map. I think this is generally true of the society in which we live. But also, in many ways, as a church. I don’t mean this church in particular, but the wider church as we find it coast to coast, north to south. Not in all areas (we’re doing well in some); but definitely in others. Things are not like they used to be. We moan. We get anxious about our numbers. We hear about the rise of secularism and other things. We live, as Christians, in that disorienting contrast of contradictions. It’s not the world-is-perfect days of me by the creek reciting poetry with my big brother.

What’s more is this: Our God is supposed to be Almighty, but we don’t always see it; half the time it’s as if he’s invisible. We are supposed to be the people of Christ-like love, but often we are not, and act just as broken as everybody else—lives too frequently motivated by vindiction. The Church is the hands and feet of Christ in the world; but the church has sometimes let us down. Those of us who’ve been around the church a while will know this to be true. The righteous are supposed to be blessed; but we see malice and greed often profiting above all else. It is a disorienting contrast of contradictions. In other words, it seems to make no sense. Kind of like “One bright day in the middle of the night.”

So this morning I’d like to offer a simple focussing point for the moral vision of God’s people in this 9-week journey. It serves as a kind of series introduction and addresses the first two commandments—in total three points that, I believe, are key to the heart of the church if, in fact, we are to have a heart that pumps for discipleship in a rapidly changing world.

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First, and as we begin, I draw our attention to a little line just before the commandments themselves; and it happens so fast that we almost miss it. Lord Almighty is speaking to Moses and is preparing him for what is to come. He says that the whole earth belongs to him, and that he has freed and chosen the Hebrews as “a priestly kingdom and holy nation.” Why? They exist *for the benefit of the other nations*. They are a holy people *for others*. That’s what those who are set apart like this do: they help mediate the divine for others. And it extends to the church today. William Temple is quoted as saying that the church is the only organization

that exists primarily for the benefit of its non-members.³ Sure, we hope to benefit each other. But we exist *for* others. Lord Almighty doesn't choose people so they can stay insular and feeling good about themselves. He doesn't choose them to exclude others. He chooses them to as a way to include others. He chose the ancient Hebrews, as he chooses the church today—as he chooses *our* church today—to fight against that disorienting contrast of contradictions and to be none other than “one bright day in the middle of the night.” We exist for, and to bless, others—even when it's hard to see.

Second, when we read the ancient Hebrew original of this passage, we find that the commandments are addressed to “you” in the singular, *lecha* (to you). The English language is kind of muddy because we say “you” whether we mean one person or fifty people. In the Hebrew of the 10 Commandments, Lord Almighty is addressing the whole group but speaking specifically to each person in the singular, meaning that those who hear are hearing not only as a group, but specifically as individuals. This is not the norm in how the Lord speaks to his people; and so this little literary features jumps out at us as if to say something special is happening. As I was thinking about this part of what I consider its meaning is that no one else can live our faith for us. These invitations to free and faithful living are for you... and you... and you... and me. We can't get around it. He's speaking directly to each one of us. We are called to be in a direct, personal relationship with him.

Lastly, we land on those very first injunctions of the 10 Commandments. Here is what Lord Almighty says, “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.” In this first command, Lord Almighty is reminding us that we are free and alive because *of him*. We were in Shawshank and now we are not! He is our triple-S God: He is our Saviour. He is our Strength. He is our Song.

The entire 10 Commandments are rooted in the fact that we will only ever be *truly* free when we are in a relationship with him. As I've said before, and based on the work of German theologian Rudolf Bultmann, there's a lot of people out going around and doing whatever pops into their minds without concern for consequence, thinking they are living the truly free life. But the reality is that they are slaves to the motivation of the moment. They are tossed around by the wind. True freedom is to know the God who defines himself by freeing people from things like bondage in Egypt, and today, from something so corrupting in our souls: sin. True freedom is deciding to respond to that gift of freedom by living within him.

From there Lord Almighty goes on to say, “you shall have no other gods before me” and “you shall not make for yourself an idol.” And friends, this is as important now as it was then. Usually we skip over this line because we know we don't do anything weird like bow down to strange carved statues as if they were gods. Well, “We may not physically kneel before the statue of Aphrodite, but many young women today are driven into depression and eating disorders by an obsessive concern over their body image. [We worship youth—just turn on your television for five minutes to see the truth of that one.] We may not actually burn incense to Artemis, but when money and career are raised to cosmic proportions, we perform a kind of child sacrifice, neglecting family and community to achieve a higher place in business and gain more wealth and prestige.”⁴ In the church, we sometimes worship numbers or being big. But the first and second commands to have no other gods besides *the only* God, speaks immediately to us today because it reminds us to be loyal. That is at the essence of the biblical idea to love, to be loyal. That is #1. If we let him slip down the priority list, there are a hundred other things just itching to get to the top of that mountain. Rest assured that if we are not being loyal to him, we are a snuffed out candle in a storm. We haven't got a chance.

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“There is a true story of man who had a great passion for flying. His name was Larry Walters. He was a truck driver who had a lifelong dream to fly. When he graduated from high school he joined the Air Force in the hopes of becoming a pilot. Unfortunately, his poor eyesight disqualified him. When he finally left the service he had to be content with watching others fly the fighter jets.

Then one day he had an idea. Just because he couldn't fly a plane didn't mean he couldn't fly. He went down to the local army and navy surplus store and bought a tank of helium and forty-five weather balloons. Back in his yard, he used straps to attach the balloons to his lawn chair. He anchored the chair to the bumper of his jeep and inflated the balloons with helium. Then he packed some sandwiches and drinks and loaded a BB gun, figuring he could shoot a few balloons at a time to come back down gradually to earth.

With all his preparations complete, he sat in his lawn chair and cut the anchoring cord. His plan was to sit back, and lazily ascend into the sky. But it didn't quite work out that way. As soon as he cut the cord, he shot up as if fired from a canon. And he didn't go only a few hundred feet as he expected. He climbed and climbed until he finally levelled off at eleven thousand feet. At that height he could hardly risk deflating any of the balloons, so he stayed up there for fourteen hours, totally at a loss as to how to get down.

Eventually he drifted over the approach corridor for Los Angeles International Airport. A Pan Am pilot radioed the tower about passing a guy in a lawn chair at eleven thousand feet with a gun in his lap!

Because LA is right on the coast and the winds change off of the ocean, Larry began to drift out to sea. At that point, the Navy dispatched a helicopter to rescue him, but they had a hard time getting near him. The draft from the propeller kept pushing him further and further away. Eventually they were able to get over top of him and drop a rescue line.

As soon as he hit the ground he was arrested. As he was being led away in handcuffs, a television reporter called out, "Mr. Walters, why'd you do it?" Larry, stopped, eyed the man, then replied nonchalantly, "A man can't just sit around. You have to have a vision for life."⁵

In one respect, it is ridiculous, and even dangerous. And make no mistake about it, I wouldn't recommend anyone try this for themselves! But Larry does have a point, in the wider sense of things. You can't just sit around. You have to have a vision for life. This is the prospect of this series on the 10 Commandments: *Moral vision*, without which we are floating around almost aimlessly, and dangerously.

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Friends, we are the broken-out-of-prison-people—the Shawshank people—who are free because of a God who rescues us and loves us, and who wants us to not only survive but thrive on the outside. We exist for and to bless others. We are called to be in a direct, personal relationship with him. (You can't do faith by proxy.) And we are called to be loyal to him above all else.

I told this story to you last year, but it's worth reiterating at the start of this critical series on the 10 Commandments and our moral vision as a people. Several years ago, a Roman Catholic chapel in southern Ontario burned down. All that remained was a charred crucifix with hands and feet missing. In time a new and impressive chapel was built, and this crucifix was placed on the altar. Many visitors asked, "Why have you placed that scorched crucifix with no hands and feet on your new altar?" The answer was, "To remind us that we are Christ's hands and Christ's feet."⁶

We are to be—you are to be—the hands and feet of Christ in a world that needs his moral vision like never before. In other words, we are called by the living God to be

“one bright day in the middle of the night.”

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¹ I couldn't track this poem's origin. But an internet search suggests it is English. There are many versions and variations in content.

² *The Shawshank Redemption* was released in 1994 by Castlerock Entertainment, starring Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman.

³ I forget the exact reference and am recalling this by memory.

⁴ Quoted from: Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* (New York: Dutton, 2009), xii.

⁵ This story was recalled by the Rev. Dale Woods while delivering a message titled "Stewards of Vision" at a *Stewards by Design* conference held in Niagara Falls, ON, in May, 2010.

⁶ *Eldership in Today's Church* (The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1993), 8-9.