



Title	⇒	By Reputation, Of Course
Scripture		Exodus 19: 1-9a, 20: 1- 7
Minister		The Reverend Matthew Ruttan
Place		Westminster Presbyterian Church, Barrie, ON
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Calendar		Pentecost 17 (Thanksgiving Sunday)
Note		This text is an approximate rendering; this message was visually animated

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



When I was in grade eight my teacher gave us a pop quiz. If you remember, pop quizzes are terrifying. You don't know what they're about; or when they'll be. Which makes them kind of like police cruisers parked at the side of the road with their radar gun, tucked in an old abandoned driveway with only an unmarked nose sticking out. Like pop quizzes you feel you've been ambushed; by the time you realize what's going on it's too late. And you're pulled over at the side of the road with no excuse. You've been discovered.

If memory serves correctly I think I breezed through the questions, mostly about grammar and sentence structure. I breezed through them that is, until I got to the last one. Here's what the question asked: "What's the name of the assistant librarian?" Surely my teacher wasn't serious. This question didn't fit the others. I had seen her many times; I knew who she was, I thought. But I just couldn't put a name to her. She was pretty tall, medium build, thin-framed glasses, long blondish-brownish hair. But I couldn't remember her name! Time was up and I handed in my pop quiz, feeling like a bit of an idiot—feeling like many of us do just having raced past a perfectly ambushed police car with a radar gun.

A classmate in front of me in line to hand in our quizzes asked if that last question would count toward our final mark. "Absolutely," my teacher replied. Now I'm trying to recall from memory here but I think I remember the main gist of what he said: "In life you will meet tonnes of people; all important. They deserve your respect and care, even if all you do know their name and say 'hello.'" To this day I've never forgotten that. The assistant librarian's name was Elizabeth, or as she was known to us, Mrs. Hamil. I learned that there's a lot more to a name than knowing what to call someone. It shows respect. Which brings us to today: "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God." Or as the older translations put it: "Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain."



Last week we began a 9-week journey through the 10 Commandments. It is a pilgrimage to gain greater clarity in our moral vision. I stressed that to help us understand these titanic injunctions about moral vision, we were wise to do our best to place ourselves in the shoes (or should I say, sandals, if any) of those ancient Hebrew about 3300 years ago. To help us with this I drew our attention to the Oscar-award winning movie *The Shawshank Redemption*. Like Andy, freshly broken out of prison covered in muck, and wading through the river beneath a downpour of rain, the Hebrews were liberated as a newly freed people: it's what they've been dreaming about as they have laboured, husband beside wife, father beside son, hope cloaked in bitterness. The Hebrew prison was their slavery in Egypt. But the Hebrews were also like an older character in the movie, Brooks, the gentle, old librarian. When he was finally freed, he was lost and really didn't know how to live.

There they were struggling with that disorienting contrast of contradictions—fighting for freedom, but floundering in freedom. And so a pact was made. Just like the “blood brother” pact my friend Chad and I made in public school with blood streaming down our hand-shaking palms, Lord Almighty made a pact with his people. He liberated them; and they, in turn, were to serve him alone. The 10 Commandments were a guide to help them do just that.

While setting this stage, and while introducing the first two commands, I stressed four key points: First, that the entire scenario rests on a basic and fundamental assumption about who God is and what the commandments are all about: that Lord Almighty is a God of liberating freedom. That shaped not only the Hebrew consciousness in the past, but has continued to shape both Jews and Christians for thousands of years even to today. I recently read an account of a father who overheard his ten-year-old daughter speaking with some friends at the end of the driveway about a grade-5 genealogy project they were doing at school. His daughter was overhead saying, “My ancestors from slavery in Egypt.” All her friends looked stunned and thought that was awesome. Suffice it to say, she went to Sunday school! The commandments lovingly flow out of that experience of being free people. They are loving guides from a parent who has engineered his children’s release from prison and who wants them to not only survive but thrive on the outside.

Second, I drew our attention to a little section before the commandments themselves that highlight to us that the Hebrews were chosen by God to be a holy people *for the benefit of other nations*. They are to be set aside in this special role—a role of moral vision—in part to bless others. Something which extends to us today. We exist to bless others. Third, because the commands were written in the second person singular—despite being addressed to a large group of people, a unique and attention-getting device in the commandments—Lord Almighty invites us to respond personally to his moral vision. In short, you can’t do faith by proxy. And lastly, God demands that we be loyal to him before all others. He freed the Hebrews from slavery; and they owed him everything. Today he frees us from sin; and so we owe him everything. With that we arrive at command #3: “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God.”

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My favourite movie is called *A Man for All Seasons*. It chronicles the life of Sir Thomas More, a highly respected lawman, scholar and royal advisor during the tumultuous times of King Henry the 8th of England. In it there is a scene where a young student, Richard Rich, enters Thomas’ house and is introduced to a man named William Roper. Richard and William go to greet each other, and More asks Richard, “Do you know...?” (pointing to William), to which Richard replies, “By reputation, of course.”¹ He has heard of him but has never met him personally. He knows something about it, in a roundabout way, probably because of what others have told him, but he has not himself ever met him until now. He only has second-hand knowledge. Well, the title of this morning’s message on the third commandment is that very phrase: “By reputation, of course.” The reason I selected that title was because the context of this command to not make wrongful use of the Lord’s name, is, I think, connected to this scene in *A Man for All Seasons*. The ancient Hebrews were journeying into a land that did not know their God, called “Yahweh.” And so, how the Hebrews treated this name was very important. How they cradled this most holy name represented *to others* not only how much they revered him, but something about who God actually was. How *they* acted, including the words *they* used, gave God a reputation. They weren’t totally responsible for representing God; but that had a huge part. They reflected him to people who, like Richard Rich, had no prior knowledge of this God. People who had to rely totally on secondary information to learn about him.

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So. What’s in a name?

Names are important—and not just those of assistant librarian’s in public school. They are important because they point to something beyond themselves. Personally I think of the title I was given at my ordination: Reverend. It comes from the Latin *reverendus*, “worthy of being revered” or “respected.” It was a strange thing to be called The Reverend Matthew Ruttan for the first time. I grinned and chuckled. Who, me?

These people must not know me very well, I muttered. My friends tell me I was a very dirty hockey player when I was younger! Plus, I'm sure my parents would have a thing or two to say about days gone by. But the significance of the title Reverend was explained to me by someone much wiser than myself. He said that the minister is called Reverend not because of any special quality he or she has in and of themselves. The minister is called Reverend because of the office they represent. "You," he said to me, "represent the office of Christ. That is why you are called Reverend." In other words, he was telling me that I carry the reputation of Christ; not totally, but in part. Which means, also, that you, as Christians, carriers of Jesus' name, carry the reputation of God. Disrespect the name: disrespect God: misrepresent God, especially to those who don't yet know him.

What was true for the Hebrews as they journeyed en-masse out of prison bondage in Egypt, beyond Mount Sinai in the wilderness, and toward the promised land—that they would carry the name of their God and preserve the holiness and grace of his reputation—is true for us. I would argue that very few people know the God of Scripture, Yahweh, who chooses and liberates the people that became Israel in the Bible, and who was and is perfectly made manifest in Jesus Christ of Nazareth; the God who chooses a broken church as one of his vessels of truth and grace in our world.

So this morning I just want to suggest something that goes beyond simply mis-using the Lord's name, although that is, of course, incredibly important. Mis-using the name—dirtying or, as John Calvin put it, "polluting" the Lord's reputation—is really just a symptom of unbelief. As Jochem Douma argues, "People who have turned their backs on God naturally take up using His name idly."² And why not? It has lost the power and respect connected to its meaning.

The real issue is how we carry ourselves, not just on our lips, but in our lives themselves. And here is a part of what I think is the key. The Hebrew word for "to take up" (from the phrase to *take* the Lord's name in vain), *nasa'*, has the connotation of "to carry" or "to lift up" or "to bear," meaning that we carry the Lord's name in who we are and what we do. We may not all have the title Reverend, but we all equally carry his reputation to a world that often does not know him. And I ask us all this: If you are all they see, who would they think your God is?

When we act in ways contrary to the commandments, we are taking his name in vain. For example, when we steal, we tell the others who don't know this God of ours that he really isn't caring enough to provide for our needs; therefore, in so doing we take his name in vain because his name is baptized into us as Christians. We make his name empty; we misrepresent him. I am reminded of that Bruce Cockburn song:

*What's been done in the name of Jesus
 What's been done in the name of Buddha
 What's been done in the name of Islam
 What's been done in the name of man
 What's been done in the name of liberation
 And in the name of civilization
 And in the name of race
 And in the name of peace!
 Everybody loves to see justice done on somebody else.*

To act without that moral vision, is to take the name of the Lord in vain, even when his actual name doesn't cross our lips.

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An American teacher whom I greatly respect, Tom Long, tells a family story that profoundly shaped his life and which highlights what it means to take up and carry the Lord's name in more ways than one. And it is a story that is especially poignant on a Thanksgiving Sunday such as this. Let me tell it to you in his words:

“On the wall of what my grandmother called the “sitting room” of her antebellum home in South Carolina was a constellation of family portraits—old pictures of my uncles and aunts, my cousins, grandparents and great-grandparents, a genealogy in photographs. In the very middle of the cluster, in the place of honor, was the portrait of someone I did not recognize. It was a sepia-toned, Civil War-era photograph of a striking young man dressed in the uniform of a Union army officer. Needless to say, this was very unusual—the portrait of a Yankee soldier in a place of honor on the wall of a proud South Carolina home. One day, when I was a small child, I asked my grandmother, “Who is that man?”

She said, “I’ll tell you when you’re old enough to understand.”

Years later, just before she died, she saw me in the sitting room one day, all by myself, gazing at the portrait. She came in, sat down beside me, and she finally told me the story. The man was a good man, she said, a minister, a chaplain in the Union Army. In May of 1862, after the smoke had cleared from the battle at Williamsburg, Virginia, this chaplain rode out on the field on his horse to see if there were any wounded troops who had been left behind, and he came across a nineteen-year-old Confederate soldier, lying wounded and terrified in a ditch. The boy had taken a bullet that had practically severed his leg at the knee, and he was slowly bleeding to death. Feeling compassion, even for the enemy, the chaplain lifted the boy out of the ditch, put him on his horse, and took him to the Union medical tent, where a surgeon amputated his leg at the knee, bandaged him up, and stopped the bleeding, saving his life. When the boy was strong enough to travel, this chaplain got together enough money to see that he was sent home to his grateful and relieved parents in South Carolina.

This nineteen-year-old confederate soldier grew up to be a minister himself, a teacher, a college president, and, what is most significant to me, my great-grandfather. The chaplain who rescued him and saved his life was the Rev. Joseph Twitchell... If it has not been for Joseph Twitchell, my great-grandfather would not have lived to see his twentieth birthday, and I would not, of course, have been born... If he had not had the character to go out onto the abandoned field in conflict in Williamsburg, Virginia, and look in forlorn ditches for dying people, even for his enemies, I would not be around to be a great-grandson, a grandson, a son, a father, a husband, a pastor, a Christian theologian, and a lecturer at Yale Divinity School. The more we know of life, the more we know that all we have is gift, all that we are is grace.”³

Like a chaplain crossing enemy lines, carrying a soldier whose life would grow many others for generations to come, we carry the name of the Lord not just on our lips but invisibly on our backs—in who we are. But that image doesn’t totally work because it sounds oppressive, when, in fact, it’s the opposite: it’s liberating, for he is the liberating God. Think of us, rather, carrying his name on our wings. We are the bearers of God’s reputation to a world who needs his moral vision. I think it’s no coincidence that the commandment to carry the Lord’s name with respect in the depths of our souls lands on Thanksgiving Sunday. I once heard the question, Who is a Christian? The person who responded, someone I didn’t know, said this: “Just a regular person who, with invisible wings, carries the name of Christ with love and respect. In short, someone who is thankful.”

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¹ The movie is based on the play by Robert Bolt. The exchange is found on page 37 of: Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons: A Play of Sir Thomas More* (Scarborough: Bellhaven, 1960).

² J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*, trans. N.D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1996), 82-82.

³ As told in: Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), ix-x.