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Title	⇒	The Vision from Eagles' Wings (10 Commandments Series)
Scripture		Exodus 20: 1-3, 12-17
Minister		The Reverend Matthew Ruttan
Place		Westminster Presbyterian Church, Barrie, ON
Date		December 4 <sup>th</sup> , 2011
Calendar		2 <sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent (Sacrament of Holy Communion)
Note		This text is an approximate rendering; this message was visually animated

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Peace be with you  
**And also with you**



My cousin relayed this story to me. And as with all things you hear second hand you have to take it with a grain of salt. So have some salt.

Judy Wallman, who is a professional genealogy researcher in southern California, was doing some personal work on her own family tree. She discovered that Senator Harry Reid had a great, great uncle named Remus Reid. She was a bit blown away by the fact that he was hanged for horse stealing and train robbery in Montana in 1889. It was of personal interest to the researcher, Ms. Wallman, because she and a pretty famous politician, Senate Majority leader Harry Reid, shared this common ancestor. For those of you who love to do genealogy—and I know there are some of you out there—that's part of the intrigue: you never know what you'll dig up in your own past, good or bad. Genealogy is like digging for treasure but sometimes finding bones.

Ms. Wallman also discovered that there was only one known photograph of this shared common ancestor by the name of Remus Reid. It shows him standing on the gallows in Montana about to hang for his double crimes of horse stealing and train robbery. On the back of the photograph there was an inscription, and here is what it said: "Remus Reid, horse thief, sent to Montana Territorial Prison 1885, escaped 1887, robbed the Montana Flyer six times. Caught by Pinkerton detectives, convicted and hanged in 1889." Full stop. No more description. It's a sad story, yes; but an interesting story nevertheless. And hey, we all need a bit of spice now and again.

So Ms. Wallman thought it would be interesting to contact Senator Harry Reid's office to see if they had any further information on this tragic figure of a shared, common ancestor. She emailed his office. But what she got back was quite a bit different from the information she herself had discovered. Senator Reid's staff sent back this information about the supposed, tragic figure: "Remus Reid was a famous cowboy in the Montana Territory. His business empire grew to include acquisition of valuable equestrian assets and intimate dealings with the Montana railroad. Beginning in 1883, he devoted several years of his life to government service, finally taking leave to resume his dealings with the railroad. In 1887, he was a key player in a vital investigation run by the renowned Pinkerton Detective Agency. In 1889, Remus passed away during an important civic function held in his honor when the platform upon which he was standing collapsed."

Friends, if that isn't the best of spin, I don't know what is!



This morning we have come to commandment #9: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.” It’s often lumped in with a bunch of other things such as not lying or not putting undue and confusing spin on information or spreading half-truths. And we’ll come to those later. But the foundational sense of the command is a bit different. “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour,” it says. Now this may be kind of hard for us to wrap our minds around but for the Hebrews standing at the foot of Mount Sinai and wandering bloody-footed through the wilderness to a new homeland, accusations were proof that could send you to death. Two or three witnesses could send you to death. Part of why I think this may be a bit hard for us to imagine is because today we have C.S.I. We have finger prints. We have D.N.A. swabs. We have police radar guns. We have security cameras. But not so for the Hebrews. Two or three witnesses were the finger prints; two or three witnesses were the D.N.A.; two or three witnesses were the security cameras. I am reminded of the great wisdom in Proverbs 25: 18: “One who bears false witness against a neighbour is like a war club, a sword, or a sharp arrow.” Friends, that isn’t a metaphor.

So what it has to do with—this command to not bear false witness—at least in the foundational sense, is about legally preserving the integrity of your neighbour. It’s about being a *true* witness, especially when your words can often crumble someone’s reputation.

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With that said, I need to say something again about our good friend Senator Harry Reid. Having just come up with what I just told you I wondered to myself, I don’t really know much about this Harry Reid. I wonder how he would respond to these accusations. Were they false? Were they true? So I spent a few minutes with my friend Internet, and discovered a few things about false witness. Turns out, the story is, in fact, not true. Senator Reid has been the subject of these stories for about 11 or 12 years. And the man in the photo about to hang on the gallows, supposedly the infamous horse stealer and train robber Remus Reid? Turns out it’s actually someone named Black Jack, hung in 1901 for something altogether different.

The whole thing has to do with the words we use that either debit or credit someone’s reputation. And even further than legal proceedings, it has to do with gossip, and other less “official” ways of speaking—yet which still have incredible power to destroy. In the 1500’s Martin Luther said that reputation is something quickly stolen, but not quickly returned.

But it’s so easy! And seemingly so harmless. But why do we do it? Spread hurtful words? Why do we gossip? Why can’t we often help ourselves from spreading information about people that not only may be hurtful to their reputation, but which we don’t even really know is true? I once heard someone say that each of us has a God-sized hole within ourselves. And so we try to fill it with things that will make us feel better; and more specifically, things that build us up, making us feel more like God—it’s as if good things to say about people are limited commodities and so by putting others down we feel we may have more of a chance to claim the goodness for ourselves. But that expression: that each of us has a God-sized hole within ourselves—there’s a part B. It’s this: Each of us has a God-sized hole within ourselves *that only God can fill*. False witness just takes up his space.

But like so many other of our commands it gets more complex. When is it okay to lie? And we’re no longer talking just about gossip, but a wider range of serious things. “In 1605, when some people plotted to assassinate James I at the opening of the British parliament by blowing up the parliament building, the plot was discovered, and the two Jesuit priests who had known of the plot because of their work in the confessional, but had remained silent, were executed.”<sup>1</sup> Should they have said something? Or should they have preserved the confidentiality of their confessors?

What about the many people in Europe who hid our Jewish brothers and sisters while fleeing from the Holocaust? What about when the helpers were asked whether they were hiding anyone in their house? Should they have lied? What if a lie could have saved someone’s life? Surely that is okay?

What about the church father Athanasius, who as a very respected man and leader of the early church, told a story where he showed how it could be okay to simply not tell the *whole* truth? Once he was being pursued to the point of the threat of death; fortunately his pursuers didn't know what he looked like. And so when they reached him they asked him, "Where is Athanasius?" He responded "Athanasius is not far away; with a little effort you can find him!" Sneaky.

Or the Mennonite Hans Busscher. He was in a cart when he was being hunted. When asked a similar question by those who were looking for him, he stood up in the cart and asked his fellow travellers if Hans Busscher was sitting among them. Hear that? He asked if he was *sitting* among them after just having stood up. Technically, the answer was "no."<sup>2</sup>



With each situation, the Christian—you and me—needs to ask themselves two things. First, we need to ask ourselves if we are respecting the thrust behind the 9<sup>th</sup> commandment. What the commandment gets at is preserving the integrity of your neighbour—and remember that "neighbour" in the biblical lexicon is a way of speaking about anybody. So the question is: *Do our words preserve the integrity of our neighbour?*

I will admit that sometimes this is a hard area to navigate; but just like so many of the other commands we need to look to the motivations of the heart. Do we seek to build up the reputation of our neighbour? Or do we seek to cut it down, perhaps because of our own inner feelings of hurt and inadequacy—trying to fill a God-sized hole with something that is simply unable—something *not* God.

The second question is this: *Are we doing our best to reflect the Lord who made us?* Remember that the command was given to the Hebrews, newly freed from slavery by this God called Yahweh. As they travelled around the base of dusty mountains and slowly came to understand a new identity based on this pact they now had with this Yahweh God, they would be the ones who would teach the people they ran into about their God. They needed to reflect him. They needed to reflect this God; this God who was yet unknown to the people they would meet. It's like that old expression, 'You might be the only Bible people ever read.' Have you heard that one before? It goes to the point: Are we doing our best to reflect the Lord who made us? And I think this requires our pause for a moment.

Thomas Troeger offers this memory: "I looked at the bust on the end table by the couch, puzzled by the eyes and mouth. Clearly it was a sculpture of our hostess. The smooth forehead, the thin-ridged nose, the high cheek bones, and the hair pulled back in a silken bun captured Andrea's fine, tight features. But the eyes were vacuous and sunk too deep, and the mouth was twisted as if the statue had eaten a lemon. The chiselled homeliness seemed deliberate, because the bust was obviously by a skilled hand. "Andrea did that of herself," said her husband, who looked from the statue to my puzzled face and back. "Yes, I know; she's much prettier than that. But that is how she pictures herself. She's a beauty and doesn't see it." One face, two perceptions... Andrew walks into a room and people eye a stunning woman, but she lifts a chisel and sculpts a sour face. She's a beauty and she doesn't see it."<sup>3</sup>

It cuts to the heart of our second question: Are we doing our best to reflect the Lord who made us? Do we forget that we are made in the image of amazing grace? Do we imagine we're something less, giving ourselves an out, from living fully in the image of who we are intended to be? She's a beauty and she doesn't see it. He's a beauty and he doesn't see it. They're beauties but they don't see it. See it. Act as if it is true, because it is. True witnesses, reflecting a God of grace and beauty.



It's a good commandment on which to end our 10 Commandment series, really. A series by which I have personally grown and discovered some more of the richness of Scripture and our Christian faith. Here is the command on which we end: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour," and those two questions: (1) Do our words preserve the integrity of our neighbour? And (2) Are we doing the best to reflect the Lord who made us?

It connects back to that overarching theme of *moral vision* with which we began. As we started this series in October I recited a poem to you that began like this:

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

It was a poem of seeming contradictions. But there we are. The church, in its most basic definition, is the people of God. The people of Christ. We exist to bless others. And as we do so we are invited to be that one bright day in the middle of the night. But that takes a lot of thought about how to live. Tom Long, an American preacher I admire very much, recently did an informal search of church websites to see what their vision statements were. He found one with a 'What We Believe' tab on the side of the home page. He clicked on it and it took him to another page that said 'Under construction. Come back later.'<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, a bad technological coincidence is often the reality of some churches. But the point remains: We are invited to help with moral vision in an otherwise foggy time; a time of jack-in-the-box-morality; a time when words are devalued... But not for us.

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So the 10 Commandments stand near the centre of our vision. I say "near the centre" and not "at the centre" because Christ is our centre. But when you look at Scripture, and as you hear Jesus talk about living this complex thing called life, and as you hear him talk about the commands, you get the sense that he's walking around with those two stone tablets invisibly under his arms. After all, in his own words, he came not to abolish the law, "but to fulfil." I find comfort in that image of God the Rock. It's part of the reason why we read Psalm 62 this morning: "He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken."

God the Rock. Although winds blow, and although various tests of time will summon a hurricane and challenge the people of God, there are anchors made of rock, and they are not easily moved. I don't think it's a coincidence that the commandments themselves were originally carved on stone tables. Unmovable. No one is going to unearth an 11<sup>th</sup> commandment. Where do you think the expression "written in stone" came from? If Christ used them as bedrock for his own life I think we are wise to follow.

Remember the strong words in the lead up to the commands from God to his own, special people—beleaguered by years of back-crippling slavery; still in awe over their great escape from the wicked Pharaoh; and with mud on their feet from sloshing through the brilliant miracle of a Red Sea parting—Lord Almighty says this. And he says it not only to them way back when, but to us—also often beleaguered by years of uncertainty and sometime doubt; plagued by brokenness and tough ethical questions in a rapidly changing time; with mud on our feet from days and weeks and sometimes years of trying to keep our head above water. To us too he says this:

*You have seen what I did to the Egyptians,  
and how I bore you on eagles' wings  
and brought you to myself...  
you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.*

How's that for vision! How's that for hope!



In the final analysis, no matter which command we focus on, it's about keeping the pact, and grounding ourselves in the One who has planted these words within us. It's about knowing we are his, and that he is the one who bears us on eagles' wings. Because he *was* there, he *is* here, and *will* be there.

Jack Casey was an ambulance driver. When he was a kid, “he had to have some dental surgery under general anesthetic, and he was terrified. One of the nurses said to him, “Don’t worry, I’ll be right here beside you, no matter what happens.” And she was true to her word. When he woke up in recovery, she was right there. Years later Jack was called to the scene of a highway accident. A man was pinned upside down in his pickup truck. The man was terrified and kept crying out that he was afraid of dying. Jack crawled inside the truck to reach him even though gasoline was dripping down on both of them. They were using power tools to cut the metal, so one spark could have meant a catastrophe. Jack nestled next to the man and said, “Look, don’t worry, I’m right here with you, I’m not going anywhere.” Almost exactly the same words he had heard so many years before.”<sup>5</sup>

Because he *was* there, he *is* here, and *will* be there. And so for God. He plants his commands within us so that his words become our words—to bless his world; to shape his future.

*You have seen what I did to the Egyptians,  
and how I bore you on eagles' wings  
and brought you to myself...  
you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation...  
I am the LORD your God.*




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<sup>1</sup> J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*, trans. N.D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1996), 333.

<sup>2</sup> The examples are from: B.M. Lee, *Mendacium officiosum*, 72.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas H. Troeger, *Creating Fresh Images* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1982), 45.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 92.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.