

As a young girl my home life was chaotic. I was one of 4 daughters raised in the projects by a single mother. However, my circumstances did gift me with a scholarship to the local Catholic grammar school. I remember everything at school feeling very decent and in order: the peter pan collared blouses, knee socks, the sound of scraping chairs as we stood to recite prayer or a collective Good Morning Sister Rosetta. The liturgies of life at Mother Cabrini were predictable and comforting.

Our approach to God, there, was also very decent and in order. There was no bantering about who God is, about what is or isn't a sin, or about who is or isn't a Christian. The answers were quite straightforward and could be found in our religion workbooks. From that table of contents, I received the ten commandments as a tidy "to do" list. I remember thinking some of them were silly of God to even include. Obviously, the first and second go without saying...of course there is only ONE God and I certainly was not going to worship an idol statue.

That knee socked girl would have read about the Israelites asking Samuel for a king, hand over mouth horrified, "what a bunch of commandment breakers". I, now, stand before you and say... tricky situation. I doubt they realized what their hearts were really asking for. For the Israelites...for us sitting here this morning...unpacking these two commandments opens a curious can of worms.

Samuel was old, and his sons not judge material. The Israelites were suffering from pressure and regular attack by their pagan neighbors. They wanted security...land to live on, food to eat, and ore to mine for tools. All their neighbors had kings which came with the benefit of civil administration and a standing army. The Israelites were simply asking for what their neighbors had...they just wanted a few assurances... so they asked.....and God answered telling Samuel, they have rejected me as their king, forsaken me. They are serving other gods—always have been. Give them what they want but warn them of the consequences.

Quite an answer to a seemingly reasonable request. Their request would direct Israel's future—our future. Samuel would be the last judge. We remember the stories of other judges like Deborah and Samson. Those called out by God to guide, to hold law. The book of judges, which spans about 350 years, shows a very predictable and sad cycle—the people would fall into persistently sinful lives, there would be great suffering and oppression, they would then cry out to God for mercy, God would raise them up a judge, the judge would rule and the people would experience peace...then they would forget and fall into great sin starting the cycle all over again. They are asking for a new plan, a king.

God said, give them what they want. God transcended the rejection, the disobedience, the Israelites short-sightedness—again. How? God is faithful, is steadfast in love above all else. God could have said, no way, you are ungrateful covenant breakers, spoiled. I have already given you everything! God could have used power and authority to rule, to override their ignorance after all...it would be for their own good. Instead God remained true to who God is. Real power is humility not coercion, not manipulation, not fear. God loves us so much that God risks allowing us to choose...even if it means we repeatedly get it wrong. How do we love?

There were three men—a writer, a professor, and their guide—traversing through a mysterious off-limits land area called the zone. The zone had experienced an unnamed devastation ceasing all life there. This forbidden land, now, boasted of lore, of death, and of miracles. Not all who entered returned and those that returned were

forever changed. The 3 men accept the risk, for what lies inside its borders—the room. The room will gift them with their heart's desire. In the room their dreams will come true—they will get exactly what they want.

The men, blinded by desire, trekked carelessly and neared death many times but it was the raw torment of truth that dealt the final blows.

The writer began desiring inspiration and genius. Soon, he realizes that great writing is actually born of torment and insecurity, if he leaves the room an inspired genius his writing will not be great. Later, he breaks. "I hate writing. It has robbed me of my soul. I began writing to change people's lives, instead I have been changed into their image of me."

The professor mourns, "the dreams we think we are dreaming are an illusion." He dreamt of finding the room's scientific identity. Instead, was confronted with his deepest desire, what really fueled his determination was revenge on another—a colleague who had an affair with his wife and was always one professional step ahead of him.

The men were successful in reaching the room, but none would cross the threshold. Their journey revealed truth, truth about buried desires, about what they loved. They were afraid to cross, afraid to receive exactly what they wanted. Now while the room comes from the imaginative musings of a Russian filmmaker<sup>1</sup>, it exposes a profound threshold. A threshold the Israelites were standing before. A threshold over which we all hover.

What did the Israelites want? They said protection, security, a king like their neighbors had. But what did their neighbors have? Their neighbors had kings with power over their pagan gods. The Israelites were really asking for a king who would get God to do what they wanted God to do. They were asking to put another alongside of Yahweh. They were choosing to worship that which cannot save—a lifeless idol over a life-giving God. Their request revealed what they loved...power, control, and their own wisdom. And yet, God so loved saying, "listen to their voice and set a king over them but first, warn them" and Samuel does.

Instead of care, the king will take your sons and daughters and shackle them for his own gain. Instead of assurance, the king will take a 10<sup>th</sup> of everything you have now and everything you will have in the future. Instead of battle relief, the king will take of person and resource for his armies and his weapons. Samuel ends with this, "you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day".

Idol worship demands all that we love, all that we produce, and all our freedom. It fractures our very relationship with God. Friends, before we get too far down the road of tutting tutting the Israelites' seeming foolishness, I wonder...

What do we desire? Truly deeply desire? What drives our life, our words, our actions? What are the secret conversations we have with ourselves?

Now as a Christian, I might say my deepest desire is to be like Jesus. And my head may very well believe that is true but where is my heart? If I look at my check book what have I spent my money on? This reflects what I

---

<sup>1</sup> Andrei Tarkovsky, Director. *Stalker*, Film. 1979.

love...what I worship. If I look at my calendar, how have I spent my time? This reflects what I love...what I worship. If I look within, what thoughts feelings have been taking up space? Am I living out liturgies of love or the liturgies of my neighbors? I confess to struggling with this tension every day.

Liturgies seems like a really churchy word and it certainly is. However, liturgies are any practices and rituals that mold us and become deeply embedded into our being. Take driving or playing an instrument. The routine and ritual of the act is so deeply embedded, from years of practice, that we no longer think about the motions. But liturgies aren't just something we do, they do something to us as well.

Enough time spent with particular social media, news outlets, or tv personalities begin to mold and shape our version of reality. Enough time spent around a certain person or group of people begins to mold and shape our own character. Enough time spent seeking the American dream or the neighborhood dream or the political party dream or the family dream begins to mold and shape our vision of paradise.

The Israelites had stopped living for the paradise promised and provided by God. They began living for a different end goal. The liturgies of their neighbors skewed them toward a false end, an end without life without freedom.

Liturgies can also be life giving and heart forming. A hand reaching across the pillow for its lifelong mate, a gentle sway of a new parent, a swell of emotion when hearing that melody, a soft murmuring of the Lord's prayer although names and memories have long been forgotten, a lemonade stand by two 10-year olds who heard a message here about starving children. It is what we do together, here in the Body of Christ. It is here that we are formed by God's presence. It is here that we form each other. It is here that we are molded to go out in love.

This life with-God liturgy is not an easy journey and we will often choose wrong, falling short....just like the Israelites did. They chose another and God warned, that this time, their pleas would go unanswered.

But in the fullness of time, God did indeed answer! There was a baby born, humble and low, and that baby was God.

So we do not lose heart, even though our outer nature may wither and warp under the pressure of earthly desires. Our inner nature will be renewed day by day as we are formed in the unrelenting lavish love of our Creator.