“Rules and Regulations”

Deuteronomy 5:1-21; 6:4-6

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This morning we jump ahead a bit in the text. Last week, Beth covered the story of Moses and burning bush in Exodus 1 and 3.We now skip quite a bit. It would take years to work our way through the entire Bible if we tried to cover every story, so the narrative lectionary picks a few of the more important stories.

Here is what we skipped in the rest of Exodus, and Leviticus:

After the encounter with God at the burning bush, Moses goes back to Egypt to rescue his people from slavery.

Those who wanted him dead were long gone at this point.

Pharaoh refuses to let them go, so God sends the 10 plagues.

Finally after the firstborn children were taken from the Egyptians, the Israelites were freed.

They made their Exodus out of Egypt.

They cross the Red Sea in a miraculous event.

They wandered through the desert where God provided for their needs.

The Israelites arrived at Mt. Sinai where Moses was given the 10 commandments.

More laws were given, which fill most of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

If you’re like me and tried to read the Bible from cover to cover at some point, you may have stumbled through these books or given up at this point. I confess I’ve started and stopped a few times, when reaching the rather dry contents of these books.

40 years pass since the commandments were given and our text for today brings us to the point where Moses is about to die and the people are about to enter the promised land after wandering through the wilderness.

In this story, the people of God are reminded to the law given to them all those years ago, in hopes that they might actually start to follow it now that Moses won’t be with them anymore.

So we pick the story up in Deuteronomy 5:

5:1 Moses convened all Israel, and said to them: Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently. 2 The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. 3 Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. 4 The Lord spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire. 5 (At that time I was standing between the Lord and you to declare to you the words of the Lord; for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain.) And he said: 6 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 7 you shall have no other gods before me. 8 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 9 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, 10 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. 11 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. 12 Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 14 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. 15 Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day. 16 Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. 17 You shall not murder. 18 Neither shall you commit adultery. 19 Neither shall you steal. 20 Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbor. 21 Neither shall you covet your neighbor's wife. Neither shall you desire your neighbor's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.  
  
6:4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. 6 Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. 7 Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. 8 Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, 9 and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

It seems the days of hoping in the car, turning the ignition and putting our hands on the wheel are coming to an end.

The age of the self-driving car is upon us.

This may sound a little too sci-fi.

More fit for a Jetsons episode than reality.

But from the sound of it, self-driving cars might be on the market within the next few years.

For the past few months, Google has been test driving their self-driving car around Austin.

There are 14 of these futuristic vehicles cruising around the neighborhoods.

I see one of them almost daily as I walk through my neighborhood with the dog and the baby stroller.

It is a retrofitted Lexus, which would look like an ordinary car if it weren’t for the cameras and instruments attached to the top, sides and rear.

This is no ordinary car.

Google has fine-tuned the technology that allows these cars to drive on their own.

With the help of a computer, that is.

The passenger, no longer a driver in control, tells the car where he or she wants to go.

The car calculates the route and gets the passenger there using the best route.

All without any help from the person inside.

These cars have been tested in California for 6 years, logging thousands and thousands of miles.

Google swears these cars are safe and are the ideal mode of transportation for the future.

The company claims they are safer than a human operated car.

And yet, most people are hesitant to embrace the idea.

If given the opportunity to take a ride in the self-driving car, most people turn away.

The thought of a robot driving them around is just too scary.

Polls show that most people wouldn’t buy a self-driving car once they are available.

They list fears around safety as the number one reason.

Another reason is that many folks just like having the freedom that comes with controlling their own vehicle.

Driving can be fun and many people wouldn’t want to give up the pleasure of a cruise down the highway.

It seems there is a general negative attitude toward the self-driving car, at least at this point in time.

There is fear about putting our lives in the hands of a robot.

There is anxiety around losing freedom and control.

Our culture’s attitude toward self-driving robot cars is similar to the Israelites’ attitude toward the law.

The people of God were afraid to submit their lives to a list of rules.

There was anxiety around losing freedom and control.

Before the Ten Commandments were given to Moses on that mountaintop, humanity lived in chaos.

With no rules and regulations on how they were to behave, anarchy ensued.

Brothers killed each other, men handed their wives over to other men.

God’s name was disrespected.

Idolatry of other gods was rampant.

Having fallen to sin, people didn’t know how to behave.

They didn’t understand what it meant to respect life and honor God.

So after a while, God saw the need to set some boundaries.

There had to be some rules in place to keep the people in line.

The days of anarchy needed to end.

Moses, whom you heard about last week, was given two tablets containing this new law.

They outlined God’s expectations.

They were never meant to cover every possible behavior and attitude.

But they are surprisingly comprehensive.

The first few address how to act toward God.

Don’t worship other gods, don’t create idols, honor the Lord’s name, keep a Sabbath.

The rest concern how to act toward other people.

Honor your parents, don’t kill, don’t commit adultery, don’t steal, don’t lie and don’t envy.

Those are certainly oversimplified descriptions, but to get to heart of each commandment, we’d need a 10 week sermon series to cover them all.

Well, once this list was given, a slew of other laws were doled out.

There are chapters upon chapters filled with them in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

Rules regarding property, and unclean foods, and burnt offerings.

The people of God found themselves quite restricted by these laws.

You could say they were a bit overwhelmed with all of it.

So before Moses is even down the mountain, they do the exact opposite of what God asks.

They create an idol to worship, and throw a big sinful party.

This reckless behavior would continue for decades.

Our text for this morning is actually the second time the Ten Commandments are listed in the Bible.

The first is back in Exodus when they were originally given to Moses.

Now here in Deuteronomy, it has been 40 years since that time.

The people have gone through waves of obedience and disobedience.

Moses would try to keep them in line, remind them of the law, and the people of God would rebel and refuse to follow it.

It seems they did not like the idea of being restricted by the law.

It was too big of a shift for them from the life they knew before.

God found ways to continue to remind the people of the law.

It would be retold several times throughout history.

With Joshua and Josiah and the prophets.

The law would continue to be relevant throughout time and remains so for us today.

Now, as followers of Christ, we know grace trumps the law.

We aren’t bound by the law, because Jesus intervenes for us.

We are given grace through Jesus’ life and death.

But the law is still important.

There is still a need for this list of ways to live, in order to keep us in line.

Without it, we’d fall back to the ways were before, when anything was acceptable.

When we live by the law, it is a lot like taking a ride in a self-driving car.

With the Google car, a passenger has to give up control.

They have to sacrifice the freedom to operate the machine and let the car do the driving.

They have to trust that the computer will deliver them safely to their destination.

Doing so might actually improve their quality of life.

If you think about it, having a computer driven car will free up a lot of time.

People will be able to read or do the crossword, or do work while commuting home.

And those commutes would actually be shorter because traffic jams would be a thing of the past.

The computer is much better at merging onto the highway than we are, so traffic will flow smoothly.

It will also eliminate the thousands of fatal car crashes that happen every year.

Currently about 33,000 people die in the U.S. from auto accidents.

The Google car has a perfect driving record after 6 years of testing, only getting involved with a few fender-benders caused by other people running into them.

The self-driving car will eliminate human error, so there will be no more cars swerving into your lane because the driver is texting while driving.

No more drunk driving.

No more tragedies on the road.

I have to say that I have been impressed each time I encounter one of the Google cars on the road in Austin.

Never once have I seen it swerve over the bike lane, as many cars tend to do.

Never once have I seen it cut someone off.

And, each time it comes to a stop sign, it makes a full and complete stop, yielding to whichever car has the right away.

That is a rare sight to see in Austin!

If our culture can get past its fear and anxiety around self-driving cars, the roads would be a lot safer.

And life would actually be a lot better

Same goes for the law.

If we can get past our fear and anxiety around the law God has given us, life would actually be a lot better.

The murder rate would plummet to nothing.

Robberies and white collar crime would cease.

Relationships would be more secure without the threat of adultery.

There would be no more lies told to one another.

The world would become a much more pleasant place.

So we ought not to look at the commandments as restrictive rules and regulations which limit our lives.

They aren’t meant to be a punishment.

These rules and regulations actually bring us freedom.

They put boundaries on our lives and shows how to live rightly

The result is a society that is able to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength.

And we’ll have the ability to truly love our neighbors as ourselves.

We need these guidelines for how to act toward God and toward each other.

If we look at it this way, the law is actually a gift.

We’d find ourselves with a moral compass for how to live with each other better.

How to love each other more.

And we find ourselves with a stronger spiritual connection to God through our obedience to the law.

If we can just learn to trust the law, we’d find joy in living according to the law.

We might even find the grace of God woven through it.

We’d find God at the center of the law, celebrating our obedience and cheering us on.