

## RECAPTURING REVERENCE

### Fourth in series, Ten Commandments Revisited The Third Commandment

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California  
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"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain," is the third commandment. Popularly, this commandment is translated, "Don't swear." Yes, profanity is an example of what this commandment is prohibiting, but it deals with much more. It is too easy to dismiss this commandment as if it were directed to those people out there who take the Lord's name in vain; and whose numbers are increasing, at least on television and in movies. But, the commandment is also directed to us church folk who are in the covenant, and who are missing a critical dimension in our relationship with God. The commandment is best translated: "Don't take God lightly; treat God with reverence."

There is a difference in cultural use of names. Bernhard Anderson, in Understanding the Old Testament, writes, "We use names to distinguish one thing from another, one person from another. In Hebraic thought, however, it was believed that the name is filled with mysterious power and significance, for the name represents the innermost self or identity of a person." The name is the person. When you know someone's name, in the biblical sense, you immediately know something about the person's real self. This use of names is especially hard on the fellow who was named both for his mother, Eliza, and his father, Ferdinand. He was given the name "Ferdiliza." I am often teased about my initials which spell "din." In my case, the word might have something to do with my inner nature.

At any rate, in the Bible, the name of a person expressed the inner nature. When a person underwent a powerful life-changing experience, the name was often changed, as Jacob as changed to Israel; Saul was changed to Paul.

There was also a coercive element in knowing one's name; for if you knew someone's name, you knew a lot about that person. You had something on the person. To know God's name, then, was a powerful manipulative tool in the hands of the follower. God resisted being named. When Moses asked God at the burning bush incident, "What is your name?" God resisted. Moses pleaded, "I have to tell them who sent me. I must know something about you." God then gave the intriguing reply. My name is "I am who I am." An evasive reply. After the Exile, an earnest Jew would not even name God.

Therefore, this commandment deals not just with the name of God; but with our relationship to God. "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" means "You shall not take God in vain; or treat God in vain."

Now, what does "vain" mean? In our present usage, vain or vanity is a vapor that evaporates, an empty mist, appearance only, having no real substance or worth. The Hebrew word which is translated "vain" additionally meant "to empty or make empty"; and originally it meant "magic." Therefore, the commandment means, "Do not treat God lightly, flippantly, carelessly; do not relate to God as if God will respond to some magic formula"; but "Treat God with reverence." This commandment has to do with reverence. By and large, we moderns have lost reverence. We are missing a critical dimension of experience--wonder, mystery, awe, respect, honor, reverence.

Let's first look at a magical approach to God. Don't attempt to coerce God with magic. God, throw a miracle! Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness. "Jump off this temple; let God save you, then everyone will believe." God will not respond to cheap tactics. By quoting the right formula, saying the right creed, belonging to the right church, God cannot be manipulated into pulling rabbits out of a hat. Don't treat God so irreverently. Let God be God.

Don't expect to understand God, or understand your life, with some simple easy answers. Don't expect to find a Bible verse to fit every situation. Don't expect the almighty Creator of all that is to be completely understood by my or your puny mind!

Aren't we presumptuous to think that we can understand why there was an accident, why someone has cancer, why young persons in their prime had to die, why good people suffer? God cannot be defined by a formula. God cannot be captured by a church's theology. God cannot be contained within our minds, within our framework of understanding. Over the entrance of a university library, appeared this sign: "Due to reorganization, the basement will be on the second floor, one-half of the second floor will be on the first floor, but one-half will remain on the second. We suggest you ask for help." That's the way life is. The pieces do not always fit neatly together with easy answers and solutions.

Embrace the confusion. Embrace the lack of answers, and stand in awe, in reverence before the terror, the majesty, the incomprehensibility of God. And then, believe in faith that God loves you; that your life is basically good. Taking God's name in vain means to treat God lightly, as if we can understand or control the almighty God.

We moderns also like to be mechanical, analytical, logical. We try to understand our natural world through science, and manipulate it to our convenience. We try to understand human behavior and motivation through psychology. By the time we have converted it all to lines on a paper, there is little room left for imagination, mystery and reverence. We often miss the rich resources of the Bible, for we approach it analytically, historically, and scientifically. The Bible should also be approached through poetry, art and music, with a sense of mystery, beauty and wonder, beyond our understanding.

We are privileged to worship God in a sanctuary that is conducive to reverence. We have a tremendous opportunity to experience reverence, but often we get sidetracked by the engineering feat it took to erect this structure. We point out the intriguing use of concrete. We talk about the struggle to stop the leaking roof. Our minds are trained to be preoccupied with the "how." I remember bringing a couple from Minneapolis to show them this sanctuary. I like to bring guests in through the narthex so their first view of the sanctuary is from the back of the center aisle. On this particular occasion, I got sidetracked, and the couple entered the sanctuary before I started my canned speech, before I could point out the windows, the two organs, the engineering marvel. When I approached them, they were standing perfectly still. The man was motionless and the woman had tears streaming down her face. All they could say, in whispered tones, was "Oh..." That is what this building is about; not concrete, or organs, or the unique roof, but "Oh..." This building is dedicated to the glory of God so that God might be worshipped, honored, praised, glorified, and revered. Let's not be so intent on explaining and analyzing that we miss the awe and reverence.

Secondly, the commandment does not only speak of magical formulas, but of shallowness, superficiality, and carelessness. To take God's name in vain means to treat God lightly, carelessly and superficially. The commandment is not prohibiting the expressing of deep emotions. To the contrary, the commandment is a plea to go deep into one's experiences and emotions. Anger is a feeling. We are not to suppress it, but express it and give it to God. Read the Psalms. Standing and shaking a fist toward heaven is a legitimate form of prayer, and a healthy form, for in the facing of deep emotion--anger, sorrow, pain--there is God.

The commandment is a warning about taking God for granted; depriving God of holiness and mystery. We church people tend to handle the sacred so casually, so carelessly, with familiarity, and then tend to miss the experience of reverence. We talk during the prelude, pay no attention to the words of the hymns we are singing, let our minds wander during prayer, plan Sunday dinner during the sermon, and then wonder why we didn't get anything out of the worship service! "Handle with care" is the meaning of this commandment.

Let the worship experience, public worship, prayer groups, private prayer and worship be opportunities to clear the space so God can come into your life. Look at all the clutter. How can God get in? Practicing a spiritual discipline, worshipping, confessing, praying, are means whereby a space is cleared in the midst of the clutter so God can enter. That is reverence--a forgetting, a letting go, a slowing of the mind and body. Luther reminds us that God cannot be pursued directly, for God is too holy, too majestic. Our eyes, our experience could not handle it; we would burn up, so we experience God through what he had made, through the majesty of the ocean, the brilliance of a night sky, the love of a mother for a child, the bread and juice of Holy Communion. Ordinary things can be the means of experiencing reverence for God.

We're talking about food for the soul. This commandment is talking about feeding the soul, not just the mind, but the soul; to hunger and thirst for God; to take God earnestly and seriously, not flippantly or for granted. Not far from Hiroshima, Japan, there is a leper colony. Christians have ministered to these isolated victims of the dread disease. The faith of these lepers is so strong that some of them read their Braille Bibles with the tips of their tongues, when they have had neither eyes to see nor hands with which to feel. When did you last sit down to read your Bible earnestly? How badly do you want to read the Bible? How badly do you want to worship God? How badly do you need God? Enough to read with your tongue? This is reverence.

The first commandment says, "Do not put anything or anyone above God. God is #1." The second commandment says, "Do not make up a god to fit you. Let God be God." The third commandment says, "Do not treat God lightly or carelessly, but with reverence."

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