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The fifth commandment, as recorded in Deuteronomy 5:16, reads, "Honor your father and your mother; that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you, in the land which the Lord your God gives you." Because I have just returned from a three-week trip to the Holy Land, I am struck by the phrase, "in the land." It is an unforgettable experience to be "in the land" of the Bible. Weeks ago when I selected the title for this sermon, we were in the season of Lent singing, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" We were there where they crucified our Lord. We stood deep beneath the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, down in the sub-basement where the Armenian Church is excavating. We reached out and touched the rock of Golgotha, on the top of which Jesus was crucified. We were there at the site of the tomb from which Jesus was resurrected. We were there in Galilee where Jesus trod up and down the roads in a relatively confined geographical area doing his ministry. We were there on the Mt. of the Beatitudes where Jesus taught. We sat on the hill and read aloud the Sermon on the Mount. We were there on the shores of the Sea of Galilee where the resurrected Christ met his disciples, prepared breakfast for them and challenged Peter to feed his sheep. We were there and celebrated Holy Communion on the shores of Galilee. We were there in Sinai on the top of the mountain, we actually climbed the mountain and stood where Moses received the Ten Commandments. We were there in Egypt where our western culture began. We were there!

I could go on and on and no doubt will in many sermons to come, for it was truly an unforgettable experience. Our trip was especially enriched by the comments and lectures by Dr. Robert Hamerton-Kelly, of Stanford University, who teaches a Bible class in the Wesley Room every Wednesday evening. Bob's knowledge of the area, his biblical expertise, and his ability to make theology come alive made the trip an emotional, inspiring, unbelievable experience.

Let me share with you today one of the many discoveries and insights of the trip. God made a covenant with the Hebrews, through Moses, that it might go well with them in the land. I've read, studied, and preached the Bible for many years, and never understood or realized the significance of the land. What a difference it makes to be in the land, to see the sites, to visualize what it might have been like. Visiting Jordan, Israel and Egypt today gives you a sense of what it might have been like, for there have been very few changes over the years. Time seemed to be suspended as I found myself transported into biblical times. The rural areas especially have not changed significantly. Then suddenly we would come upon soldiers--checking bags, standing on walls, guarding, watching. With an intake of breath, we realized that this is 1987. But even the presence of the military is not new to that area, as there have been wars, terrorists, destruction, and violence in that land for over 4,000 years.

Sometimes we are tempted to read the Bible in the context of our day, or in the context of our history, or with some idyllic scene in mind. To see the land in which it all happened was a thrilling discovery as I realized how the land affects customs, traditions, culture and religion. For example, we westerners have usually been amused to see pictures of Arabs in their long, flowing robes, and prejudiced about the Muslim women who wear veils. Brothers and sisters, it is hot in Egypt! The silly people are those who walk around in pants! When we toured our first pyramid in Memphis, some of our women put scarves over their noses to keep the sand out! When I saw that, veils

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suddenly made sense. Customs and traditions usually have an origin in common sense. Those of us without veils over our faces, or a long robe we could pull up over our noses, coughed, sneezed and choked with sand. Who is strange? The European colonists were unable to adapt to the conditions of the land. They dressed in ridiculous shirts, ties, and suits and thought they were superior!

I was unprepared for the size of the statues, temples, tombs and pyramids in Egypt. The temple in Karnac, the statues of the temples in Abu Simbal, the sphinx are of incredible size, and now I know why. In the vastness of the desert with all that space, sand and stone, only buildings and statues of tremendous size can be seen. If you erect a life-size statue, it will be covered with sand in a short period of time. In order to make an impression on that desert, in order to demonstrate the ability of humans to conquer their environment, in order to defy death, gigantic statues and pyramids were erected. I wonder if the passage in Genesis about giants is remembering tales of these Egyptian wonders.

Bob Hamerton-Kelly pointed out that the ancient Egyptian religion was place-oriented. They worshipped gods in space, in a place. On the walls of the tombs you can see magnificent paintings and carvings in bas relief, up to 4,500 years old. Some of them represent the gods in animal form. These animal representations gave them a sense of security. In a land where the sand is always moving, in a land dependent on the unpredictable nature of the Nile River which would flood, it was necessary for their psyche to find security in their gods, in their religion. They looked to animals to represent that sense of security, as animals seem changeless. Jackals, snakes, cows, beetles always look the same. The ancient Egyptians wanted their religion and their society to be rigid, changeless, and predictable. The unmoveable, timeless pyramids are a testimony to a desire for stability, foundations, and security.

The contrast with Sinai is amazing. Moses led the Hebrews out of slavery where they were forced to work on the pyramids, into the Sinai wilderness where they moved about for forty years until they were physically, emotionally and spiritually ready to conquer the promised land. When you see the land--the stark, austere, rocky, mountainous land--you appreciate how biblical religion took an about-face from Egyptian religion. There in the wilderness, God revealed to them that he is not so much a God of space as he is a God of time, a God of history, a God of action not inaction. There in the wilderness, they could not stay in one place like the Egyptians. If they did, they would die. We watched tribes of Beduins, whose way of life has not changed in 4,000 years, move about the wilderness. They were herding goats to vegetation I couldn't see. I could only see rocks, but here and there, in the cracks, the goats would find something to eat.

The Hebrews in the wilderness moved about, looking for food, looking for water. God led them by the pillar of fire at night and the cloud in daylight. Isn't it significant that the mountain on which Moses received the commandments did not become a holy mountain to the Jews, holy in the sense of making pilgrimages. Moses did not leave God on top of the mountain. Moses put the tablets of stone in a small box, called an ark, and carried the ark around with them. There was no representation of God in the ark, but the ark symbolized the presence of God, going before them, preparing the way.

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As we gazed at the intricate, delicate, artistic carvings on the walls of the Egyptian tombs, I wondered if the prohibition against graven images--the second of the Ten Commandments--was in reaction to the Egyptian temples and tombs. Incidentally, the dry heat of the Egyptian desert has preserved the art work so that we see it in its original condition; even the colors, somewhat faded, are original. There has been no restoration. The artistry of 4,000 years ago is unbelievable, but can't you see the escaped slaves saying, "No more carving for me. If I have to work on another tomb..." I wonder if the memory of the Egyptian temples accounts for the Hebrew resistance to building a temple. King David was advised not to build a temple, for God could not be contained in a building. It was Solomon who overcame the resistance and built the temple.

At any rate, back to the theme, there in the wilderness, the Hebrews discovered that God was not in a place, not in an immovable pyramid to stand against time, but that God was in time, that God was in the future, that God was ahead of them calling them to follow. The lure of the promised land motivated them. They must have heard tales in their childhood of the land in which Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had lived. Those memories pulled them forward, which is the best role of memory. Memories should pull you forward into the future, not pull you backward into the past. When Moses stood in present-day Jordan on the top of Mt. Nebo and looked over into the land of milk and honey, what he must have felt!

Not only did they discover in the wilderness the God of action who called them forward, but there in the wilderness, in that land, they stripped religion of its non-essentials. The Egyptians had some 3,000 gods to worry about. The drawings and carvings on the tomb walls show that the ancient Egyptians believed there were 12 gates in the afterlife, each having a secret code which the deceased must learn in this life, in order to get through. They believed in a complicated procedure for confession and judgment, judged on their past deeds. When the Hebrews lived in the wilderness--the austere, stark wilderness--they stripped religion to its core.

Through their escape from slavery in the exodus from Egypt, they discovered the God of salvation. God claimed them and saved them. God led them. God is in history. God is action. There in the wilderness--the austere, stark wilderness, stripped of nonessentials--God made a covenant with them. They learned that their response to the covenant which God made with them was to worship the one God, give the God who saved them--the God of the covenant--their worship. They promised not to make graven images. They promised not to put any other god, any other object of worship, ahead of the God who saved them. They promised to keep the sabbath, to take one day out of seven for rest as a sabbath to God.

And they promised to live a life of responsible service to their fellows. To belong to God, to respond to God's covenant, means to respect your parents, to give family a highest priority. To live responsibly means not to kill, or steal, or commit adultery, or covet, or lie. There in the wilderness they stripped religion to its bare core which Jesus summarized as "Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself."

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Thanks to the journey of our spiritual/spirited ancestors, we realize God is ahead of us, calling us forward into the future. We, too, are on a journey to the promised land, except we have already received the land. We live in a land of milk, honey, and material comfort. So our call is not to go to another land, but to bring the promises--the vision of God--to fulfillment in the land in which we now dwell.

When we read further in the Old Testament, we find them settled in the land, but instead of continuing to follow God's leading, they became content and complacent. They settled comfortably into their environment and their environment engulfed them. Then the prophets attempted to show them the way. God finally came himself in the person of Jesus whose message was simply, "Follow me." Jesus' message, unlike God's in the wilderness period, was not, "Follow me into the promised land," but, "Follow me into the Kingdom of God, into the fulfillment of God's promises."

That is our challenge today. Christ is ahead of you, calling you, nudging you, "Follow me into the future. Follow me and help bring to fulfillment a land of justice and peace, a land of mercy and hope for all people." Don't be ancient Egyptians and worship a God of space and security by building pyramids. There is very little in our society worth "pyramidizing." We live in a materialistic, disposable society that is death-prone. Let's get on to the kingdom of God, the promised land.

Follow Christ by worshipping and serving God. Put God first in your life. You have been blessed so that you may do God's work. Honor your mother today by linking what you have received and what you pass on to others, so that it may go well with you in the land which the Lord gives.

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DOUGLAS MORRIS  
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

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