

## Sermon for March 4, 2018 – God’s Address

Third Sunday of Lent, Year B – Texts: Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-22

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Do our readings strike you as odd? I think they should. I mean they’re familiar, but reading them these last few weeks – they struck me as odd though for different reasons. Our first reading seems, at first, to be an odd passage to read in the middle of Lent. But, keep in mind that the whole of Exodus shows the people how to stay in relationship with God which is for us the whole point of Lent! This version of the Ten Commandments in Exodus was probably written and edited around the time of the exile in Babylon, well after the events in the passage took place. This was true of much of the Torah the first five books of the Old Testament. It’s important to see them in that context because those who did the writing and editing in the time of the Exile were trying to make sense of their circumstances in light of the Exodus, two defining moments in the history of ancient Israel. Both were extremely hard; probably harder than we realize.

With respect to the Exodus, think about it for a moment. The people are journeying through the wilderness, seemingly lost. Food and water are in short supply and nerves are raw. They’ve quarreled and tested God but until now they’ve had no real identity, no real purpose. Here in this place at the foot of God’s holy mountain, this is where they’re finally aware of the intention that God has for them as a people. This is where their lives and their journey become meaningful. This is where God gives them the Law. This is where God **seals** His covenant with His people. The people are first reminded that God’s saved them before, bringing them out of slavery in Egypt and into a relationship with God. The commandments are fundamental in helping us understand who we are with respect to God and how we’re to live in response to God.

Altogether, the first four commandments relate to one’s relationship with God. The remaining six are about one’s relationship with other people. The concept is actually quite simple and Jesus summed them up best when He said “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But God’s grace, as we sometimes need to be reminded, existed before any of these laws were laid down. It’s expected, then, that in response to the salvific nature of God (salvific, meaning leading to salvation), that the people will **want** to respond and stay in relationship with God. You’d think so...right? But such isn’t always the case. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that we see them as rules and, as we all know, “rules were made to be broken.” We think of them as laws as the name given them “Torah” – which means “law” – implies. But I don’t think that simply giving us a set of rules or laws was entirely God’s intention. True, they’re about boundaries but they’re more than just a list of “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not”s. They’re really about teaching and positive instruction. They’re about the way things are or, perhaps, how things are supposed to be. They’re about order, rather than chaos, relationship, rather than separation. They’re about the way in which God draws us into God.

This reading continues the theme of covenant that we’ve talked about these last two weeks. The purpose of the “law” here is to choose life. And that choice is easy to see how it relates to us in our Lenten journey to the cross and Easter. But, in our modern-day society, there are those who’ve tried to make these words “law” in the judicial sense simply by displaying them in courthouses, schools, or other public buildings. But they’re missing the fact that these aren’t laws to obey, as such.

They're the natural way we're called to respond to God's freedom. In fact, these laws, unlike many others, don't sanction a certain type of government or a specific king. Rather than dictating what we should do they depict who we are as people of God. They're less about behavior than they are about identity, something we talked about last week. This is about who God is, who we are relative to one another, and who we are as people of God. This is about how we relate to God, how we relate to each other, and even how we provide sustenance and nourishment for our faith journey. They are like manna and quail in the wilderness and water from the rock providing sustenance and life. Think of them as declarations of freedom to become who we're called to be rather than a set of rules or regulations that force us into becoming what someone else wants us to be. Think about that for a moment. Remember that they're coming from God so they're bigger than any courthouse or classroom and they really cannot be contained. This "declogue" – meaning "ten words" – are yet again the very breath and essence of the God who spoke creation into being. The God who loves us and seeks us out. The God who holds us rather than hold court over us to make sure we follow the rules. The Decalogue is, when all is said and done, God with us. And the season of Lent is **not** about following the rules or being burdened with regulations. It's about experiencing the freedom of this God. It's about this one God, who, alone, promises unconditional, steadfast love, rest and reflection, that we might glorify Him and enjoy Him forever, that we might delight in Creation and enjoy it forever. It's about this one God who knows that we can only understand the love we're given, if we love in return, if we honor the ones from whom we came, if we honor life and love and all of Creation, if we're honest with ourselves and with each other, and if we want the very best for our brothers and sisters. Seeing it this way, helps us to better understand God.

Sounds good...right? Well yeah, until we get to the gospel reading! Okay, so just as we're starting to understand God here comes Jesus who seems a tad bit upset about what's going on in the temple. I don't know about you but this text has always struck me as a bit odd simply because it's often hard to think of Jesus getting angry. Here, as Jesus approaches the temple presumably to pray, there's all this activity blocking His way. So much going on. There are the money-changers who were there because you couldn't buy animals to sacrifice with foreign money which was considered unclean. Were they making a little money on the side? Of course! So, Jesus "turns the tables" on them – literally and figuratively. He does so not because they were necessarily doing anything wrong but because the temple should be pure, free of all that commercialism, all that bargaining, all that consumerism. Remember that in those days the temple was precisely where God lived! It was just as Solomon had intended, the house of God.

In the deepest part of the temple known as the "holy of holies" was where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. And if you've seen "Raiders of the Lost Ark," you know what was contained inside the ark. Yep, the Ten commandments! So, when Jesus referred to the temple as His Father's house, He was speaking literally! But, doesn't our theology tell us that God is everywhere? Don't we believe that God lives within each and every one of us? Do we really believe that...I mean really? Everywhere? Are you sure?

The temple is a metaphor for our souls, the temple where God should indeed be the master. But think about the world, especially in this country. How many people do you know whose lives are reward-driven? How many of us have those little plastic things on our key chains? The ones that give us points that lead to rewards? Rewards like cheaper gas or cash back?

How many of us live believing that we should get what's "due" us? How many of us believe that by working hard and doing the right things we'll be rewarded? How often does that extend to our spiritual lives where we do things because we think we should? Thinking that in doing certain things we'll in some way earn points with God? It's our own way of merchandising, our particular kind of brand loyalty.

Meister Eckhart (13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> century German mystic) said this, "As long as we to get something from God, on some kind of exchange, we are like the merchants. If you want to be rid of the commercial spirit, then by all means do all you can in the way of good works but do so solely for the praise of God." He goes on to say, "Live as if you do not exist then God alone dwells there."

So, where, then, do we encounter God? Where do you expect to meet God? Where do you love God? Where does God live? If we really take all this journey stuff seriously during Lent, in what parts of our life are we aware of God and in what parts do we fall a little short? After all, if we truly believe that God dwells within our souls, if our souls are the temple for God, then why is this even a question? A life of faith is supposed to be just that...a LIFE of faith. This isn't a trade-off. And here's the thing, God's not locked in some sanctuary somewhere and we're not seeking some reward for a job well done. Are we? Okay, maybe we do want to hear "well done, good and faithful servant", but that shouldn't be what motivates us. Our encounter with God in this sanctuary should in essence propel us into the world carrying that encounter with us to others who need it. God dwells with us. The Holiest of Holies is deep within our souls. That's how we connect with God, by growing our relationship with God.

John wrote his gospel somewhere between 110-120 AD. Paul was gone as were Matthew, Mark and Luke. Most importantly the temple was gone. It'd been destroyed by the Romans, 30-40 years earlier, in 70AD. It's never been rebuilt. After the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem in the 7<sup>th</sup> century the Dome of the Rock, the al-Aqsa Mosque was built there, one of three Muslim structures. Needless to say, the Temple Mount has been a point of contention for a very long time and a very fragile "status quo" is in place. But then there's Christianity and we Christians are saying the temple isn't needed what with Jesus saying that the kingdom of God is within us that we are to become God's dwelling place in the world. Man, that Jesus was a troublemaker, wasn't he? I mean, there He goes turning over everything in our lives...again! So, what do we do now? Well, Lent is when we must confront that question.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.