

### Third Sunday in Lent

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; John 2:13-22; I Corinthians 1:18-25

**Exodus 20:1-17** is the classic statement of the Ten Commandments that is given in the scriptures. It is often called the “Decalogue” because, in Hebrew, each command begins with a single summarizing word (thus, in Greek, it is the “deka logoi” – the “Ten Words” or “Decalogue”). As God created order in creation with ten words or commands (Genesis 1:3-29), so God creates order in society with ten commanding words (Exodus 20:1-17).

The Ten Commandments are formulated in scripture as a suzerainty treaty. A suzerainty treaty was the highest form of law in the ancient Near East, agreed upon between a great king or overlord and a nation becoming a vassal state under the protection of that king. What is significant about a suzerainty treaty was that unlike most laws that are conditional in nature, suzerainty law is apodictic. That is, most law is designed to proscribe activity (“If you steal from someone, then this is the punishment you will receive”); it is designed to curtail freedom into socially acceptable channels. Suzerainty law is apodictic, stating what you are not allowed to do (“You shall not steal”), so that it allows for all other activity than that which is forbidden (you can borrow, you can lend, you can trade, you can invest, you can even hoard; but you cannot steal).

The Ten Commandments, like any suzerainty treaty of the ancient Near East, duplicated a prescribed formula, as follows:

- ? **Presentation** that opened the treaty and stated who is the suzerain or overlord: (“I am the Lord your God” 20:2a);
- ? **Action** that the suzerain took that so benefited the weaker state that they gratefully accept suzerainty: (“who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” 20:2b);
- ? **Expectations** that the overlord has for the vassal state as it enters into covenant with the suzerain (ten commandments, beginning with “You shall have no other gods before me” 20:3-17);
- ? **Commitment** to the treaty and to the overlord on the part of the vassal state as they assume complete allegiance to the suzerain king (“You speak to us and we will listen” 20:18-21).

There are ten expectations that Yahweh God has for Israel that are laid out in this treaty. The first four deal with Israel’s relationship with God. The first of those four commandments state that, of all the gods (kings) in the world, Israel’s allegiance will be only with their suzerain king, Yahweh (it assumes other gods). The second commandment is that there are to be no images or idols made of God. Imageless worship will center the people on the covenant; an imaged worship will center the people on liturgics and rituals, not authentic relationship. The third commandment is not to abuse the divine name through false or vain use. The fourth commandment is to sanctify one day of the week (the Sabbath) for rest and enjoyment of Yahweh and of each other, imitating God’s rest after the work of creating the earth in six days (20:3-11).

The second six commandments deal with Israel's social relationships that emerge from their proper relationship with God. The first is that everyone is to honor their parents, whether as children (21:15, 17; Lev. 19:3) or as adults (vs. 12). The second forbids murder, the third adultery, the fourth stealing, the fifth false testimony given in court and lying, and the final commandment coveting anything that belongs to the neighbor (the Hebrew word translated "covet" actually means "to lust after"). Whereas all the other commandments in this second category have to do with external action, this final commandment internalizes the law, focusing it on attitude as well as action. All of these commandments are seen as being necessary to build a truly favorable, rich and functional life together.

The Decalogue was not written to stand alone. It is the synthesis and foundational document of the entire Sinai Covenant that follows it. That covenant is found in Exodus 20:22 through 23:19, and applies this suzerainty treaty between Yahweh and Israel to the political, economic and religious life of Israel. In doing so, it moves from the apodictic laws of the treaty to conditional laws that set regulations upon the people and establish penalties. That covenant, in turn, forms the base for the entire Mosaic Law that is presented in Exodus 20-40 and all of Leviticus and Numbers, and is summarized in Deuteronomy into that document that comes closest to forming a constitution for the state of Israel. The purpose of that Law (Exodus-Deuteronomy) as summarized in the covenant (Exod. 20-23) and symbolized in the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1-17) was to form and maintain the life of Israel as a people and nation that would accurately reflect God's intentions for humanity. In essence, it laid out how Israel's political, economic and religious systems were to function, the call to accountability that the prophets were to issue to those systems and the role of the people in living out in their dealings with one another the very justice, equitable sharing of wealth and vital relationship with God that was to be the primary responsibility of the systems.

**Psalm 19** deals with two ways that God communicates and interacts with us. The first is through creation. The second is through his Word (the Law). First, God reveals himself through creation.

"The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world" (19:1-4).

It is as if the creation has a voice that speaks to us, the Psalmist writes. The created order is so vast and so overwhelming, its very existence speaks to us of a Creator who is powerful enough to create such beauty and ordered enough to create such order (incidentally, astronomers today report that the cosmos is not silent simply because of its vast space; instead, stars produce an immense amount of noise, as each solar flare and explosion erupts with ear-shattering noise).

But God also speaks to us through his written Word – to the Jews, it is the Law through which God speaks. To the Christian, it is the scripture themselves.

“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandments of the Lord are clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether” (19:7-9).

God’s word revives our spirit; God’s teachings make us wise; God’s truths teach us rightly and cause us to rejoice; God’s expectations enlighten and order our lives. Standing in awe before God makes us centered in him and pure. Thus, relationship with God makes us “true and righteous altogether”.

It is out of the keen awareness of the power, majesty and love of God revealed to us both by creation and the Law that we inevitably have two responses.

First is the awareness of our sin. An awareness of God’s power and love makes us immediately aware of how far short of his glory we fall. The response of Isaiah the Prophet to the vision of Yahweh that he had in the Temple was his confession, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (Isa. 6:5). Thus, this psalmist reacts in the very same way.

“But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless and innocent of great transgression” (vss. 12-13).

The Psalmist is made aware of his own sinfulness and his own limitations. Therefore, he confesses his sin – and particularly “hidden faults”, sins of omission as well as commission. But he is also aware of how easily he is tempted to follow others who do not stand in awe before God – the “insolent”. So he further prays that God will protect him from his own tendency to not stand strongly for what he believes.

But the Psalmist’s second response is one of praise. He centers his soul upon the centering of his entire life in God. And he does so in one of the most beautiful benedictions that appears in scripture.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer” (vs. 14).

**John 2:13-22.** The story of Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple occurs in Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-19 and Luke 19:45-48 near the close of Jesus’ ministry and as the act that initiates Holy Week. In their accounts, it is the “final straw” that drives the Jewish religious aristocracy to decide to have Jesus killed.

But in the Gospel of John, the story of the cleansing of the Temple is placed near the beginning of the book, initiating Jesus’ public ministry. It acts as the prophetic inauguration of his

ministry, playing the same role in John that Jesus' sermon in the synagogue plays in Luke.<sup>1</sup> Therefore it (like Luke 4:17-21) is very strategic, summarizing at the beginning of John's gospel the entire focus of Jesus' ministry.

The Jerusalem Temple at Passover would, in essence, encapsulate the centering of all of Israelite life, its systems and its faith, in the Mosaic Law. All Jewish men were required to attend the Temple and submit sacrifices to God three times a year; Passover was the most holy of those festivals. In Passover season, Jerusalem's population would have swelled from its normal 50,000 to over 180,000. The Temple would have been packed with people, each man purchasing his Passover lamb there (or, if he were poor, his dove). There it would have been sacrificed (it couldn't be sacrificed anywhere else), and then he would have carried the sacrificed animal back to his family for the Passover dinner and ritual. The Temple would have been a total chaos of noise, crowds, animals, vendors, moneychangers and priests. It was into this cacophony that Jesus strode.

John tells us that Jesus made a whip of ropes. And then using that whip on people and products alike, he chased the people from the Temple, overturned the money changers' tables, scattered and intermingled their coins all over the Temple floor, and set free the sacrificial animals and birds. In other words, Jesus cleared out the place, as Malachi the prophet predicted 400 years earlier he would do!<sup>2</sup>

There is an intriguing use of the Greek in this story. John states, "Making a whip of cords, Jesus drove all of them out of the temple" (2:15). The word translated "drove" is the Greek word "exebalen" which literally means "exorcise"! Jesus "exorcised" the Temple. Just as he later exorcised demons from possessed people, driving them out of those people and setting the people free from such possession, so Jesus exorcised the Temple, driving out the demons of political power, economic greed and religious domination!

This Temple action on the part of Jesus is an outrageous act of civil disobedience. And it is not very "peaceful", either! Jesus was violent, whipping the people, beating the animals to expedite their escape and spreading destruction wherever he went! Jesus' action protested the exploitation of the poor by the Temple systems, which forced them to go deeply into debt if they were to meet the religious expectations placed before them by priests and Pharisees. But Jesus' action was far more than that. It was a clear and unquestioned attack against the entire Temple sacrificial system – and the "Jews"<sup>3</sup> behind that system who maintained it and used it to

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<sup>1</sup> "Jesus unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'" (Luke 4:17b-21).

<sup>2</sup> "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness." (Malachi 3:1-3)

<sup>3</sup> Throughout the Gospel of John, the Greek word "Judaos" is translated "Jews" in most English translations of the Bible (e.g., see 2:13, 18, 20 in the NRSV). This translation of the Greek is unfortunate because such a translation

dominate the people. We know that this is the case because of Jesus' words during his attack, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace" (2:16). And he did this with such conviction that the disciples recalled his anger with scripture, "Zeal for your house will consume me" (2:17, quoting Ps. 69:10)! Jesus' attack on the Temple is an act of confrontation, violence and resistance that "overthrows" both the Temple hierarchy and the ideology lying behind it!

The Judean aristocracy wants an explanation for such outrageous (and financially costly) behavior. So they demand of Jesus, "What sign can you show us for doing this" (vs. 18)? In other words, they are asking, "By what authority do you do this? Who gives you this right to so disrupt our systems?" Jesus replies, "Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up." They are confused and shocked at his seemingly irrational response. But what Jesus is saying to them is that, with the exorcising of the Jewish Temple, a new "temple" (that is, a new Law and covenant for a new people) is being created by God! And it can't be stopped! You may kill the author of this new Law and covenant, but he will rise again from the dead! You will not be able to stop this revolution by God. For God is beginning to do a new thing. And it will result in the creation of a new people of God, a new covenant, and in its wake, a new political, economic and religious order, society as God intended it to be – the kingdom of God!

Finally, it is important to note in Jesus' exorcising of the Temple that he is not rejecting the Law of Moses. He is rejecting the debasing of the covenant and the Law by the Jewish powers of his day. Jesus was not about rejecting the Ten Commandments! What he so clearly opposed was the use of those commandments and the entire Law by those who operated the religious, political and economic structures of Israel in ways that would make it possible for them to greatly profit while those who were poor became increasingly oppressed and exploited. The gospel of John

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gives the wrong impression of John's likely intentions. To 21<sup>st</sup> century thinking, the word Jew means a person who is descended from the ancient Jewish people or one whose religion is Judaism. In other words, today a Jew is seen as a person who belongs to a specific ethnic group and/or the dominant religion of that ethnic group. The Greek word *Judaos* was not a reference to that ethnic group, its dominant religion, or that nation. It was, instead, a reference to a particular group within the larger Jewish people.

The Jewish people at the time of Christ were divided into three national entities. The nation of Israel consisted of Judea (the area surrounding Jerusalem), which was governed by a procurator of Rome (in this case, Pontius Pilate), Galilee (an area north of Judea), which was ruled by the puppet king, Herod Antipas, and Trans-Jordan (an area east of Galilee) ruled by the tetrarch Philip. The only unifying elements among this politically divided "nation" were its common religious heritage, its religious aristocracy, and the domination of Rome. The continuing reference throughout the gospel of John to the "*Judaos*" was a reference, not to the Jewish people as a whole but to the "Judeans" – that portion of the nation ruled by the Roman procurator and, specifically, the dominating political, economic and religious structure of the *Judaos* – the religious aristocracy of priests, elders, Pharisees and Sadducees.

This differentiation is important because if we translate *Judaos* as "Jews", that implies the gospel writer is referring to the Jewish nation or its people – when, in fact, he is referring to the Jerusalem religious establishment that also held the political and economic reins of that nation. By translating *Judaos* consistently as "Jews", it therefore becomes easy to accuse the Jewish people of being "Christ-killers". But they were not. In fact, by-and-large, in the gospel of John, the ordinary Jewish people are portrayed as supporters of Jesus. They were deceived by their own rulers!

Jesus' enemies were not "the Jews" but "the Judeans" – the political, economic and religious elite of Israel working in collusion with Rome to control the nation for their own political, and economic benefit. The writer of the gospel of John is very careful to make that distinction from the prologue to the very end of that book.

recognizes that this debasing of the covenant had now gone on for so long and had become so deep in the Jewish culture that it was now beyond reform. And therefore, what was needed was the building of an alternate community committed to realizing in their life together and their impact upon the world God's intentions for society once encapsulated in the Ten Commandments. And that, in turn, required a redemptive sacrifice that would free them from the sin of greed, domination and control that "clings so closely", and would enable them to embrace God's new kingdom of justice, shared wealth and relationship with God.

**I Corinthians 1:18-25.** "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God", the Apostle Paul writes (I Cor. 1:18). In the Epistle Lesson for today, Paul compares the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God.

There are two ways that one can respond to the good news of the Gospel, the apostle suggests. One way is to reject it – and the result of such rejection is to be rejected by God. The second way to respond is to embrace the gospel –and the result of such an embrace is that you will continue in "being saved" (Isa. 6:9-10; Luke 2:34; Rom. 9:10-12; II Cor. 2:15-16). Those who are "being saved" are "those who are called" by God (v. 24; Rom. 9:16).

Before everyone, Paul states, there is a choice. It stood before the Israelites when God met with them at Mount Sinai and gave them the Ten Commandments. It stood before the Jewish priests of Jesus' day who held control over the religious, political and economic apparatus that governed Israel. It stood before Jesus' followers and the people. And it stands before us. Which will we choose? Will we choose for a golden calf or for Yahweh, for political domination and economic wealth or for Jesus, for allegiance to Rome's Caesar or allegiance to God's Caesar – Jesus? What will be the priorities of our lives? Choosing those priorities will choose the one (or One) we will serve.

There is, Paul states, the world's wisdom and God's wisdom. There are those who see the gospel of justice, equitability, elimination of poverty and relationship of God as scandal and folly. But there are also those who see it as God's power at work shaping society into God's intentions for it. There are those who are awed by the systems of apparent strength of a Rome or of a Jewish clergy aristocracy. And there are those who recognize that God's power is revealed in our weakness (vss. 20-22). To be among "those who are called" (vs. 24) is to be among the foolish, the weak, the marginalized of the world. But, because "we proclaim Christ crucified" (vs. 23) as a symbol of weakness and defeat, we actually belong to those who will transform the world. For our gospel of cross is also the gospel of resurrection.

"God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness stronger than human strength" (vs. 25). Working both in and through us as the followers of the One who exorcised the Temple and returned the true Israel to God's intentions for society as encapsulated in the Ten Commandments, God has demonstrated that real foolishness belongs – not to those who embrace Christ and His Kingdom, but those who choose to oppose Him (vs. 27).

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