

**SERMON**  
**St. John's Episcopal Church, Roanoke, VA**  
**The Rev. Alexander H. Webb II ("Sandy")**  
**Associate to the Rector**  
**March 11, 2012**

**The Third Sunday in Lent (Year B)**  
**Revised Common Lectionary**  
**Exodus 20:1-17**  
**John 2:13-22**

**"The Marks of a Chosen People"**

I speak to you in the name of the Lord our God, before whom we shall have no other gods. Amen.

It has been three or four thousand years since God proffered the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai. In those three or four thousand years, I suspect that thirty or forty thousand Jewish and Christian preachers have written fifty or sixty thousand sermons on the topic. In some we bang our fists on the pulpit while in others we wave our fingers in the air:

An example: "My brothers and my sisters in Christ, these are the Ten Commandments, not the Ten Suggestions."

Or this, "My brothers and my sisters in Christ, when we walk by faith, there is nothing that a Christian cannot do; except that is, covet, murder, steal, or commit adultery."

Indeed, the Ten Commandments have been well preached and are well known, even to those who want nothing to do with the faiths that those commandments undergird. However, in my view, the only preacher who has been able to hit the nail right on the head is Jesus Christ, who preached both in word and action.

The Ten Commandments are presented at least three times in the Old Testament, but the Gospels include no record of Jesus repeating them *per se*.<sup>1</sup> Instead, Christ spoke about the spirit of the law, calling his disciples to deeper and deeper levels of devotion.

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It can sometimes be hard to read the record of the Israelites' time in the wilderness, because large portions of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are devoted to listing the things that the Israelites are not allowed to do. In total, God issues no less than 613 laws and regulations, of which the Ten Commandments are among the first. But, the wilderness chronicle is much more than that.

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<sup>1</sup> Kyle McCarter (*HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, 2000; pp. 137, 143) suggests that the Decalogue predates the transcription of the Torah, and that each of the four major source traditions drew from that common source: Exodus 34 is the "J" account, Exodus 20 is the "E" account, and Deuteronomy 5 is the "D" account. If McCarter is correct, Leviticus 19 may be the "P" account.

Consider the scenario: Less than three months into their forty-year sojourn, God calls Moses to ascend Mount Sinai. On the mountain, the Lord says to Moses, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”<sup>2</sup>

Only a few verses before today’s recitation of the Ten Commandments, and only three months into the wilderness time, God makes his love for the Israelites abundantly clear. They did not choose him, but he chose them, and he loves them more than they can possibly know.

One of my Old Testament professors challenges us to regard the wilderness chronicle as God’s honeymoon with Israel. God and the Israelites have entered a covenant relationship, and they go away by themselves for a while. They learn about each other, and they learn how to live with each other.

During their wilderness honeymoon, God talks with the Israelites about how he wants them to live. Some have come to regard God’s prohibitions as an inviolable moral guidebook, but I prefer to regard them as the characteristics that will set the people of God apart from everyone else.

It is as though God is saying, you are my chosen people, and you will be distinguished from everyone else by the way you act, by the way you eat, and by the way you worship. Others will know that you are my chosen people because you will honor your parents, you will keep the Sabbath, and you will not make idols. Others will know that you are my chosen people because you will not murder, or steal, or lie. Others will know that you are my chosen people because you will obey my commandments.

The Israelites have done and will do again all of the things that God prohibits in the wilderness. In fact, at the same time that God was giving Moses the commandments on Mount Sinai, his brother Aaron was down in the valley smelting metal to make the golden calf.<sup>3</sup>

The Commandments are not capricious. God calls his chosen people to greater devotion so that the world will be able to see that they are his own possession, his beloved children.

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As the centuries passed, the Jewish people became quite good at obeying God’s law. They studied the commandments so closely that they knew virtually every stroke and letter in the Hebrew text. They knew exactly what the commandments said, and they knew exactly what the commandments did not say.

An example: The Jewish people knew that they had to sacrifice animals in the temple.<sup>4</sup> But, there was no law that said you had to raise your own sacrificial animal. So, for reasons of convenience, merchants sold animals in the temple, turning a profit for themselves.

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 19:4-6 (NRSV)

<sup>3</sup> Cf., Exodus 32

<sup>4</sup> Cf., Leviticus 1, Leviticus 3

Another example: The Jewish people knew that it was forbidden to use Roman coins in the temple. But, there was no law against money changing. So, for reasons of convenience, merchants exchanged one currency for another, and keeping a commission for themselves.

The law was not being broken, but something was very wrong. The law had begun to feel arbitrary; it had become a checklist of things to be avoided rather than a tool for quickening faith. Opportunists were cashing-in on God's expectations, and the poor were being exploited. The earthly gods of selfishness and greed had taken up residence in the Lord's own house.

Enter now, Jesus of Nazareth: Zeal for God's house consumes him.<sup>5</sup> Jesus makes a whip out of cords, drives out the moneychangers, and expels from the temple all those who had corrupted the dwelling place of God.

The law, Christ's words and actions declare, is not an arbitrary guideline to be first mastered and then manipulated. The law is intended to draw God's people deeper into relationship with him.

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The First Commandment is this: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me."

Most of us can keep ourselves from bowing down before gods like Zeus, Poseidon, or Dionysus, but there are other gods. Among the earthly and temporal gods, selfishness and greed reign supreme, and their allure can be almost irresistible.

In this season of Lent, as we plumb the depths of what it means to live the life of faith, we have an opportunity to consider what earthly and temporal gods we have allowed ourselves to worship. We have an opportunity to consider what other gods have taken up residence in the temples of our hearts, creating separation between us and our maker. Most importantly, this Lent, we have the opportunity to reorder our priorities and make things right.

The Lord said to Moses, and the Lord says to us: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation...I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me."

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf., Psalm 69:9