

**THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT**  
**March 7, 2021**

Text: Exodus 20:1-17  
Theme: The Decalogue

Grace and peace to you from God our Father  
and the Lord Jesus Christ – Amen

On the First Sunday in Lent we heard how God placed his bow in the clouds as a sign of his everlasting covenant to never again destroy the earth through the waters of a flood. On the Second Sunday in Lent we heard God give Abraham an everlasting promise that he would be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. Now we see how these two covenant relationships between God and Israel develop. God led the people through the Red Sea. God sustained them with manna and quail in the wilderness. God now brings them to Mt. Sinai so they can receive what we call the Ten Commandments.

The Ten Commandments came to the people of Israel as a gift from God to help them structure their life together. God had already shown them a deep and passionate love. Within that context they can now hear these ten words (the correct translation in the Hebrew) in the same light. To be bound in a covenant relationship with God was to be set free to live as the people of God. His gift of the law was a means of protecting the community as they were no longer enslaved in Egypt. It was to open a path for their lives to flourish.

In Matthew 19 there is a story about a rich young man who asked Jesus what he needed to do to have eternal life. Jesus told him to keep the commandments. The young man said he kept all of them. Was there something else that he was lacking?

We know better. In our Confirmation class we teach that it is impossible to keep these laws perfectly. These laws in Scripture are put there to curb our sinful behavior. Through the law God shows us our sins and then we see our need for Christ. These laws make us ready to hear the gospel.

But I wish we could recapture the original intent of the law – as a gift from God that arises out of his deep and passionate love for us.

The commandments are meant to outline for us the basic expectations God has for human behavior. They are to protect us from running out of bounds and falling into patterns of living that destroy us. We are invited today to think about the commandments as the means to provide us with encouragement and to have a healthy love of God and neighbor.

For us, the Ten Commandments suffer from familiarity. We know them so well that we hardly know them at all. We forget their incredible value. But that value is echoed in the words of our psalmist when he says – the law of the Lord is perfect for it revives the soul. The decrees of the Lord are sure as they make wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right as they make the heart rejoice. The commandments of the Lord are clear for they enlighten our eyes.

When the psalmist looked up into the heavens and saw the stars at night and the sun during the day his heart overflowed with praise for God. He knew that only God could have done something so wonderful. And then when he opened up the Scriptures and read the law of the Lord he had the same wonderful sensation. Only God could have done something so wonderful. The psalmist and other prophets understood what many others have not, that the law was created for us out of love. God gave us laws to bless us and not to frustrate us. The walls that we have erected around the law were never intended to prevent our having lives of pleasure but rather to prevent us self-inflicted pain and destruction.

There is an internal logic to these ten words that I too find compelling and beautiful. The way we focus on God (as outlined in the first three commandments) shapes the way we focus on our neighbor (the other seven commandments). Our faithful worship of God leads to our love of neighbor. Our praise of God shapes how we live out our social responsibilities. Good theology breeds good ethics.

When God commands us not to trust or believe in other gods it means we will not let our love of power or money wiggle their way into our lives. We will not let such things be used to exploit others. When we keep the Sabbath it is our reminder that all of creation is a gift and we have a responsibility to be wise stewards. Honoring our fathers and mothers remind us that we are not self-made but we stand on the

shoulders of others. Instead of bearing false witness against others we are to build up the community with words of encouragement because we all bear the image of God. Instead of taking the name of the Lord in vain we praise God with our words of thanksgiving.

As we read Exodus 20 through the lens of our Christian faith, we see how the Ten Commandments are brought to their fullness. In the Jewish community the Ten Commandments are read in the synagogue three times a year. Once is during the reading of Exodus around late January-February. The second time is when Deuteronomy is read in August-September. The third reading takes place during the festival of Shavuot which occurs in May.

So every four months out of the year the Jewish community listens to all of the Ten Commandments as they are read aloud in services. In some traditions the worshipers will rise when they are read to highlight their special significance. Some rabbis have opposed this custom since one may come to think that these ten are more important than the other 603 commandments found in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. But I love the idea of giving these ten words a proper place in our liturgy. Or perhaps our families with children and/or individuals could read them at the start of the New Year, at Easter, and then as the children start the first day of a new school year. Maybe we can pull out our Small Catechisms on the Saturday morning before Easter (when we carry the cross through McLean) and read these commandments and their meanings instead of doing the Stations of the Cross.

I think we are on the right track with our growing enthusiasm over the laws of God. Remember that Jesus insisted that he came to fulfill the law and not to destroy it. And the way he did it was to add new and spiritual ways to apply them to our lives. Those who thought the commandments against murder and adultery referred only to physical acts must have been startled when Jesus enlarged the definitions to include anger and lust. But just as Jesus made the definitions broader and more inclusive, he also showed more emphatically that the law was meant to make life richer and more fulfilling.

Saint Paul will add that no one on their own can fulfill the demands of the law but that was a good thing. In revealing our shortcomings, the law prepares us to accept grace. If we had no standard by which to

measure our thoughts and conducts, we would have no idea what we ought to do, and therefore no idea of our need for redemption. Even though these declarations come to us in negative forms it opens for us the possibility of a positive life. It is in the *no* that we hear the true and full potential of the *yes* God offers us through Jesus Christ.

Lent is our time of year to center our attention on repenting of our sins and asking God to make us right with him. It is not a time for us to simply say that eight out of the big ten laws are now checked off and we will do our very best to get a perfect score before Easter. As the Ten Commandments were given to the people of Israel as a gift to shape their love of God and one another, the journey of Lent comes as a gift to shape our lives. It is an opportunity to confess the ways that we have squandered the gifts of God but to also confess our desire to renew the vibrancy of our faith. Amen