

3 Lent, Year B Exodus 20:1-17
Christ and Grace March 4, 2018
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Well... how about that Gospel for the new priest's first sermon in a new congregation? Whew! How *do* you preach a sermon to people you are meeting for the first time? Especially when the lectionary choices are the Ten Commandments and Jesus turning over tables in the temple! I've been here just 4 days now, but I haven't noticed anyone breaking any commandments, and I don't see anything going on here that has me wanting to crack a whip or turn this place upside down. What might God have us hear in our texts this week? We who are beginning a new chapter together in the story of Christ and Grace Episcopal Church in Petersburg, VA?

Just to set your minds at ease, the first commandment for new clergy is "Thou shalt not turn over any tables in thy new parish!" And since that's the case, we are going to leave Jesus in the Temple for now, and tackle that passage another time, because today I think our Exodus passage can be of great help to us as we begin our new ministry together.

When you think of the Ten Commandments, what comes to your mind first? Moses on a fiery mountain? Giant stone tablets, or an angry God? Maybe it's those commandments you've broken a few times in the past? Or, perhaps you see the commandments as rules to be followed in order to get to heaven?

We all know what rules are because they have been a part of our daily life since the day we were born. In fact, parents usually begin making rules for their children even *before* they are born. I am reminded of this as I watch my son and daughter-in-love await the birth of their first child. They are reading all the books, researching all the best ways to raise a child, and are already deciding what the rules and expectations will be. (and I am not about to let them in on the secret that children sometimes don't follow rules any better than adults!)

Even though we don't always like following the rules, we know that rules, good rules, are there for a reason, whether it's for our individual safety, for the good of the family or organization, or for a society to function well. Say please and thank you. Eat all of your dinner before you eat dessert. Look both ways before you cross the street. Do not drink and drive. Drive 25 mph in a school zone, and 55 mph on 95 through Colonial Heights. We have group norms to ensure that meetings run smoothly, and neighborhood covenants to help neighbors respect one another.

And what about rules in church? In Lent the color of the hangings is purple, we do not have flowers, and we never say alleluia. There must be a Gospel reading if there is Holy Communion, and we never throw away consecrated bread and wine. So when we think about the Ten Commandments we might only think about them from a restrictive point of view. Thou shalt not do this or that.

But consider that our God is so much more than a rule enforcer. Consider that God wants what is good and life-giving for us. Consider that God wants to be in relationship with us.

That is exactly where the Israelites found themselves after they escaped their slavery in Egypt, and made it out of their forty-year wilderness challenge. Suddenly they had more freedom than they knew what to do with. Suddenly the possibilities before them were infinite. Suddenly they were in a moment of decision. And in that moment, God had a gift for them.

The commandments came to the people of Israel as a gift to help them structure their common life, and to shape their individual lives to be in relationship with the God who had saved them and with whom they were in covenant. Listen again to the first words of our reading: Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. This is a God who has saved them, who gives them freedom, who gives them new life! So the words from God, the ten words, or Decalogue, need not be read as threats from an angry God, or as moral mandates that, if broken, mean certain exclusion. The commandments are a covenant, a promise, to keep us in relationship with God and one another. It's paradoxical that to be bound in covenant with God is to be set free to live abundant life as God's people. This is what the Apostle Paul means when he asks the Corinthians, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"¹

There is a children's curriculum called Godly Play that calls the Ten Commandments The Ten Best Ways. It teaches that because God loved the people so much, God showed them the ten best ways to live. The ten best ways are explained to the children like this: don't serve other gods, make no idols to worship, be serious when you say my name, keep the Sabbath holy, honor your mother and father, don't kill, don't break your marriage, don't steal, don't lie, don't even want what others have. These are hard. God didn't give us ten easy things to do, God gave us the best ways to live. They are hard, perhaps even impossible but we're supposed to try. And they mark the best way, like stones show the path.²

Another time, we will explore the depths of each of these ten best ways, but as we begin our ministry together, can we be intentional about seeing these ten best ways as stones on our path? Keeping these best ways as a community will strengthen us and bless us. They will equip us to follow Jesus on the way as we do the kingdom work of God.

Hearing this story of the people of Israel, the story about how God loved them so much that he brought them out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, can we hear echoes of our own stories as we recall those times we have strayed from the path of the ten best ways? Can we believe that God knows, loves, and forgives us - and desires to free us from whatever it is that enslaves us, so that we can become the children of God we are created to be?

In this moment, God has a gift for us. God has brought us together to continue the story of Christ and Grace Episcopal Church. It might be hard at times. God probably will not give *us* easy things to do. But God has given us the ten best ways to live, and if we make the decision to stay on that path and keep trying, our relationship with God and with one another will strengthen and grow. And the possibilities before us are infinite!
Amen.

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:20b

² From a video, "Ten Best Ways, Godly Play" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkjXX2xjTkg>