

Sermon, March 7, 2021

Good morning! Welcome to stay at home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, MD. I am Pastor Scott Robinson and today we are blessed to welcome even more gifted musicians who I am proud to call part of the family of this congregation—Mike Broderick and Alice Fleischman from the popular musical group Aurora Celtic, and Mike Broderick and Tom Johnson from the popular music group Marsh Mountain Consort. Mike also wears another hat here—he serves as St. Mark's organist when worship is in person. Hopefully before long we will be able to worship in person again. If you would like to help support our ministries and keep our benevolence commitments in the meantime, you can donate through our web site or Facebook page. Now for today's stupid joke.

I may have already told you, but I have given up mixed metaphors for Lent this year. Yep, no more mixed metaphors from me. Suffice it to say...that ship has flown.

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Eternal Lord, your kingdom has broken into our troubled world through the life, death and resurrection of your Son. Help us to hear your Word and obey it, so that we become instruments of your redeeming love. Through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

A reading from Exodus, the twentieth chapter.

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; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work--you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to John, the second chapter.

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!"

His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?"

But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Once again our Lenten first reading is about a covenant. We read the Noah Covenant two weeks ago and last week God's covenant with Abraham. Today it's the Sinai Covenant, with its so-called laws of Moses, including the Ten Commandments.

The commandments only show-up in our readings every few years, and when they do I like to remind Father Chip Lee about the survey United Press International conducted of more than 200 Anglican Priests a few years ago. According to UPI only 68 of the two hundred priests surveyed

could name all Ten Commandments. And the only two they ALL got right were the ones that prohibit adultery and coveting your neighbor's wife.

When I think about the Ten Commandments, I also think about Roy Moore, the Former Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court who was kicked off the bench twice. Moore was back in the news recently. But his main claim to fame came when he refused to remove his 5,000-pound granite Ten Commandments Monument from the Alabama State Supreme Courthouse. Meanwhile, a lawsuit calling for the removal of the Ten Commandments Monument from the Allegany County Courthouse lawn in Cumberland—one of hundreds filed all over the country-- was eventually dropped.

Turns out it is one of a hundred eighty such monuments donated to local governments all across the country in 1956 by various chapters of the Fraternal Order of Eagles and filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille. The Eagles hoped the monuments would discourage Juvenile Delinquency. They went on to donate more than four thousand of those monuments nationally. But in 1956 DeMille hoped they would sell more tickets for his new Ten Commandments Movie starring Charlton Heston.

Moore, along with many Alabamians and some folks in Cumberland insist that courthouses are the perfect places for such monuments. Why? Because they say America's laws are based on the Ten Commandments. Well, you just heard me read them. Are they?

To the best of my knowledge there are no federal, state or local statutes that require Americans to observe the Jewish Sabbath. Or that we honor our parents or have no other gods before you know who.

And even though the United States has the largest prison population in the world, no inmates are serving time for simply coveting their neighbor's anything. I know... there ARE commandments against murder, theft and perjury and we DO have laws against them;

but they have been illegal in virtually every criminal code in human history, including Hammurabi's, which dates to five hundred years before Moses.

And also the lesser-known Sumerian Code of Ur-Nammu five hundred years before that. In fact those earlier legal codes contain quite a few contract, civil, criminal and slavery laws that are nearly identical with the so-called 613 mitzvot that make-up the Laws of Moses. Some scholars go as far as saying if you compare the codes of Hammurabi and Ur-Nammu with the Sinai Covenant, they really don't think the latter is anything special. But d'ya know what? I do.

We call the Old Testament's mitzvot "Commandments" but my old rabbi friend and my seminary Hebrew professor both said "instructions" is a better translation. Both insisted that in Jewish thought these are not the burdensome barking orders of some power-hungry self-absorbed divine despot. The "instructions" of the Sinai Covenant are viewed instead by Jews and Christians alike as a thoughtful and treasured gift from God, meant to show people how to live in peace and harmony with their God and with each other.

Unlike the others, many of the Bible's instructions are good deeds, like visiting sick people and giving money to the church and charity. Others deal with the correct way to live a Jewish life faithfully, like keeping Kosher, offering proper sacrifices and reciting certain prayers on special occasions. The rabbis say those particular instructions were only meant for Jews and really don't apply to other folks.

Some of the instructions constitute ethical and moral obligations like showing hospitality toward strangers and prohibiting adultery and incest; theft, perjury, murder and hurting other people or animals.

Beliefnet is an ecumenical religion and spirituality internet website. I found a list there of the Ten Most Popular Myths about the Ten Commandments. I won't bother you with all of them, but the number

one myth is that it has always been customary to display the Ten Commandments in public places in the United States. As I already told you--no it hasn't.

Myth number five is that Jesus proclaimed the Ten Commandments too. Well, not exactly. In one place he reduced them to six, and in another he said all of the Laws of Moses really boil down to two: Love God and Love your neighbor. But that wouldn't make much of a four-hour movie, would it?

The number two Ten Commandments myth is that the Bible clearly tells the story of how Moses acquired them. But it actually tells four different stories about how he acquired them in four different ways.

Did you know that both Roman Catholics and we Lutherans number the commandments differently from Jews and other Protestants? Ours is based on the way the Deuteronomy list is versified, while others base theirs on the versification of the Exodus list that I just read. Or I should say ONE of the Exodus lists. Because there are actually two, and they are nothing like each other.

Fortunately the rabbis say we shouldn't worry about the numbering, because the so-called TEN aren't really numbered anyway. In fact they say they actually include up to fifteen different commandments. I mean... instructions.

Many Christians these days consider the so-called Ten Commandments as a sort of "Top-Ten." Rabbis on the other hand say all six hundred thirteen divine instructions are equally important. They say the "The Ten" were probably meant to serve as categories into which all the other instructions could be neatly fit.

At one time reciting the Ten Commandments was a regular part of Synagogue Sabbath services. But not anymore. The practice has long since been abandoned because the rabbis worried that focusing too much

on The Ten was leading people to ignore the other six hundred and three.

Truth is, obeying those ten doesn't really seem so hard. I haven't murdered anyone, committed perjury or stolen anything all month (and today is already the seventh.) I always loved and honored my parents. God is still my only God and don't know if you've noticed, but I observe a Sabbath, pretty much every week. But you know, some of those 613 instructions aren't so simple.

Especially within the group that immediately follows today's first lesson. That is the section of Exodus Jews call the Mishpatim—a word that's probably better translated as “rules” rather than “commandments,” or “instructions.”

Rabbi Doctor Stephen Reuben says one of the most powerful yet complex ethical challenges in the entire Bible is found there, in the deceptively simple rule, "You shall not follow a multitude to do evil." Think of how many times in our lives we HAVE gone along with the majority, just because that's what "everyone" was doing. Or saying. Or thinking. Or wearing.

In fact Reuben says the insidious power of peer pressure, to conform, to be accepted, to be liked and to fit-in, is one of the single most destructive forces undermining ethics and morality all over the world and throughout human history.

Sometimes it's as simple as standing by and letting someone disparage another person, or their religion, or race or ethnic group; because we fear rejection that might follow taking a stand defending them.

Our loyalties and priorities in life are so often twisted by our emotional needs for acceptance, that we suppress our own best instincts in a misguided search for approval.

Reuben insists it actually requires the utmost in moral courage to stand up to the crowd -- any crowd. But this is exactly what this part of the

Mishpatim demands of us. "Do not follow a multitude to do evil," it says; followed shortly by the reminder that because God's people were strangers in the land of Egypt, they should always know and appreciate the heart of the stranger.

All we need do is look around us any day of the week to realize that the wisdom and power of this commandment is as relevant and challenging today as it was when it was first written over 3,000 years ago. In fact, Rabbi Dr. Reuben thinks this is maybe even more important in this day and age than the original 10, even though it has never gotten its own monument.

Or its own place in our lectionary. Or in the codes of Hammurabi or Ur-Nammu, or even the courthouse lawn in Cumberland. And that's not the only thing that makes the Sinai Covenant different from the others.

Hammurabi's Code is essentially a long list of consequential law. You know-- if you do THAT then THIS is your punishment. The Sinai covenant, on the other hand, largely consists of moral imperatives. Like "that sort of thing just shouldn't be done, period. It isn't just. It isn't fair. And that's not the sort of behavior God's people should engage in." Hammurabi's and ur-Nammu's codes also lack positive obligations that we have toward others. Meanwhile, the Sinai Covenant is replete with directives about love. Kindness. Mercy. Compassion. Charity.

Hammurabi's Code protected the nobility and land-owners as privileged classes. Meanwhile the class of people "protected and favored" in the Sinai Covenant are widows. Orphans. The poor. Immigrants. The outcast. The marginalized. God's Covenants don't look out for kings and the rich. They look out for the voiceless, faceless people to whom society might otherwise extend no rights or privilege.

Sure. The details are sometimes dated, and more appropriate only in a different time, in a different culture with a different worldview. You know, like not eating rock badgers and stoning disobedient children to

death. But overall, the Sinai Covenant still represents a timeless code of conduct based solely on what is the right thing to do.

And while Jesus may have reduced those Ten Commandments down to only two, the Talmud—the ancient collection of rabbinic writings--reduced them to one: Treat others the way you want them to treat you. Period. The rabbis agreed the rest of the Bible's commandments...or instructions...or rules...are really nothing more than commentary...on that one.

Amen.
