

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 3RD SUNDAY OF LENT (B)
Exodus 20: 1-17 Psalm 19 I Cor. 1: 22-25 John 2: 13-25
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The first reading stirs up images of "that old time religion." Here they are, the Ten Commandments, the yardstick of our religious behavior. Some people equate knowing the Ten Commandments with knowing religion and practicing the commandments with being "a religious person." They also want to make sure their children learn the Ten Commandments by heart, somehow deducing that if their children knew them they would "know their religion." They even base good religious education programs on how much their children learn about the rules and regulations of religious observance. This notion of religion, using the knowledge and observance of the Commandments as a yardstick, is a very restricted sense of what the Jewish community knew about their religion and God. It is also a narrow view of what it means to be a Christian, for it excludes Christ and the transformed life we receive from him that makes us willing and able to perform our religious practices as expressions of the new life we have through Christ.

I think it is important to establish the right sequence here: our faith doesn't merely consist in having and knowing commandments and then following them--- with a reward for good behavior to follow. What we have first is the God of the Covenant, the God who graciously comes to us, not primarily to impose rules, but to offer love. I want guidelines on how to practice my faith only after I have fallen in love with the God these guidelines will help me serve. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God is the first to act, not in response to some deal humans have struck with God to get rewards for their good deeds. Rather, the story of the Bible is the story of God's moving first. We do not have to attract God's attention; make an offer that God can't resist. God alone has established the covenantal relationship with us. We may be unworthy, even spiritually dead, but God does the exceptional and loves us and moves to rescue us.

God has made promises to stay faithful to us, to always take us back when we have sinned. So, when the reading begins, "I, the Lord, am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the place of slavery," the devout Jew knew who was speaking---the Gift Giver, the One who freed the people, the God of the Covenant. Based on this first reality, the Commandments are given as a gift to people who

want to know guidelines for responding to such a gracious God.

The Commandments indicate how God's People are to behave. Their lives are to show they are God's children and so they resemble their parent in the holiness of their lives. God had gotten their attention by the loving acts God had done in their midst and thus they know the God they willingly obey and serve.

These Commandments are meant to be another way God sets us free. How do they set us free, these simple laws? They release us from the fear of being on the outs with God and always having to appease an angry God, as the pagans had to do towards their gods. The relationship is already established, following these Laws is a way of expressing our faith in the relationship God has first established with us. This relationship is not fickle on God's part. We live in the freedom of knowing God will not back down on this relationship and will always be with us to help us live these commands and, when necessary, deliver us again from our sin.

Here's a suggestion from, *AT HOME WITH THE WORD*, 1997 (Chicago, Liturgy Training Publications). "Although it sometimes seems easy to proclaim faith in the one God, how easy it can also be to have golden calves that we worship and protect. Examine the values in your life. Which ones are part of your faith in a good and loving God? Which ones interfere with placing total trust in God? Perhaps your "idol" is a nice house or car or simply a comfortable life; perhaps it is some investment. Sometimes it is blind trust in human institutions, in a church or country or community group, even to the point of refusing to see the grave errors committed by those institutions. Maybe your golden calf is a job or a professional reputation preserved at all costs. Examine your heart. God has spoken. There are to be no other gods before our God. (Page 55)

A few extra thoughts about the first reading. Notice the intense love images used to describe God, ---"I ama jealous God." There is passion in this God and how God feels about us. Notice to the extent of God's mercy,..."down to the thousandth generation..." Love far outweighs God's wrath. This is an inclusive love, for even "the alien who lives with you," benefits from the People's relationship with God. This God does not exclude anyone from mercy and the benefits of relationship with God. The preacher has room here to reflect on our attitudes to "the alien" among us--whether they be from another land, or people with another style of life or way of doing things---"alien" to our ways.

The Gospel---- Each gospel has the story of the cleansing of the Temple. The synoptics place this account towards the end of Jesus' ministry, and it precipitates Jesus' arrest and death. But in John, this event is early in Jesus' ministry and boldly announces who Jesus is and how God is working through him. In the synoptic Jesus complains the merchants are making his Father's house a den of thieves. In John, the complaint is not about any corruption that might be part of the exchange of pagan coins for valid temple coinage or the selling of animals for legitimate sacrifice; but about the activities themselves. Jesus criticizes the very acts of selling and buying in the temple precincts. But such business was needed to maintain the activities in the temple, so he is attacking the essence of what it means to worship God. He is attacking the very system.

The authorities want a sign, and he promises the sign that will validate what he is doing and saying is the sign of his death and resurrection. His life and death will bear witness to the authority given him by God; so, he does have the authority to challenge their worship. God is present to him, he is the "place" on earth where God dwells. Where is God? Not in the rituals and practices in the temple, but God (according to the beginning of John's Gospel) is found, touched, heard and felt in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. This passage challenges our worship, shakes us out of our comfortable notions of religion and our tame images of God. Our faith is about much more than knowing and keeping ten commandments or any set or rules and observances. We will need our own renewal of spirit this Lent so that we can rise on Easter to a renewed sense of God in our lives and a new flame in our worship of that God. That's something to pray for this Lent and hunger for at Easter.

We, as disciples of Jesus and possessing his Spirit, have become the new dwelling places on earth of God. Do we see each other as the dwelling places of God, especially the poor, and the least among us? What kind of temple do others see when they view our communities, parishes, times and places of worship? The Jewish people longed for God to come to the temple and cleanse it, purify its worship and renew the people worshiping there. That is what God has done in Jesus, built a new temple and placed in its midst an acceptable sacrifice.

PREACHING AND JUSTICE----A REFLECTION ON EXODUS 20: 1-17
By Mary Mc Nulty O.P. (Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters)

The Commandments: By-laws for the Covenant. The covenant that God offers has been slowly unfolding during these Sundays of Lent.

Today's unfolding is the presentation of the Commandments, the manner of living that the people will do if they choose to enter into the Covenant with God. For Israel, the Commandments are not merely a list of do's and don'ts with accompanying rewards and punishments; but a manner of living that witnesses an interior relationship that the people had with Person God. The Commandments serve as a foundation on which God and Israel live together to build a holy and just society. Each one has surface value, but as the relationship deepens so does the power of the commandment.

Not only shall you not kill but you shall reverence life.

Not only shall you not steal, but you shall seek the right use of created things.

Not only shall you not covet your neighbor's spouse and property, but you shall nurture honest and respectful relationships.

Not only shall you not bear false witness, but you shall speak out the truth with courage.

Dishonoring God's name is a terrible thing because it dishonors God's covenant--the right relationship with God. In history we see that this leads to alienation, violence and death even through generations.

Honoring God's name means honoring that right relationship sought by God and leads to peace and justice for all.

The right relationship with God in covenant emanates from us as individuals to spouse, children, animals and persons whom we serve and who serve, even to the aliens among us.

In Jesus' day, the people had forgotten the covenant and were using sacred things--The Temple--for personal gain. They dishonor God's name and relationship. He dramatically calls them back. His zeal is such that they begin to honor HIS NAME because it comes as close to God as they know.

Lent is a time on the mountain for us to examine our participation in the Covenant. Are we in right relationship with God and one another? What are we doing that builds up a holy and just society? What might we be doing that adds to bringing down the Temple? Do we have faith that whatever, God will restore?

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Barbara Brown Taylor, WHEN GOD IS SILENT. Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1998. 129 Pages.

This is a collection of three talks Taylor gave at the 1997 Lyman Beecher Lectures in preaching at the Yale Divinity School. It is about the world's hunger for the Word of God and yet the seeming strange silence of God. In this silence, how can we listen to and then proclaim the Word? She is a nationally known preacher and writer on preaching. I have to admit to a bias here; she is one of my favorites. Her gift with language and the ability of expressing the quandary of faith in God while surrounded with so many seeming contradictions, remind me of Annie Dillard, another favorite. You don't have to be a preacher to appreciate this book, treat yourself to some fine Lenten reading.

QUOTABLE

Perhaps there is no proof a famine exists except for the fact that people are hungry. In the land of plenty, the source of that hunger can be difficult to diagnose. It is often not until we have tried to ease it with everything else we know that we discover by process of elimination our hunger for God. Our problem is not too few rations, but too many. The proof that we are in the midst of a famine of the Word are the suffocating piles of our own dead words that rise up surround us on every side. It is because they do not nourish us that we require so many of them. It takes thousands of words, coming at us every moment, to distract us from the terrible silence within.

----WHEN GOD IS SILENT, page 29.

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching",

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