

Third Sunday in Lent
Year B

Exodus 20:1-17

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 1:18-23

John 2: 13-22

When we think about the Ten Commandments, we tend to assign them to an angry and vengeful God. But, is that a fair and accurate reading of the God of Sinai? Is the Hebrew God really angry? I would say no, God has gotten a bad rap. Consider the past history the Israelites had experienced with God. They were promised a fruitful land in which to settle. Then, when famine struck, God provided a means of support through the gifts bestowed on Joseph. When the Egyptians persecuted the Israelites because they had grown strong and plentiful, God sent Moses to lead them out of slavery. None of this sounds like an angry and vengeful God. Even in the wilderness, when the Israelites complained against God, they were given food from heaven. This is the same God who, after all of these incidents, gave Moses the Ten Commandments as a guide to the people. With this as the backdrop, a close look at these guidelines shows us a different God, a God who loved the people and wanted to be sure that they continued to flourish.

We are all aware of the image of the two tablets Moses brought down from the mountain. How the listing of the commandments were arrayed on the tablets has been a point of discussion - were there five on each tablet, or did the first table only have four while the second tablet had six - but that is a distraction from the message contained in these commands. As one commentator suggests, we might consider the first three commands as a group, the last six a second group, with the fourth commandment a hinge between the other groups. Using this arrangement, let's look at what God gave the people of Israel.

The first three commandments discuss the relationship God wants to have with the people. As we have seen in the scripture readings of the past few weeks, this relationship has been based upon covenants between God and the people. That relationship continues here with God telling the people that this is the most important relationship they can have. There is no denial of other gods, just that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be their God. While pronouncing judgment on those who violate this relationship, the people are promised blessings and love from God for a thousand generations if they maintain this relationship. This includes rightly using God's name. When we do things contrary to God's intentions in God's name - be it harming others, denying them justice, or neglecting to treat others as we want to be treated - that is a prime example of using God's name wrongfully.

This leads us into the second set of guidelines - how the Israelites are to interact with those around them - their families and the aliens in their midst. In this group we tend to focus on the negatives, the "Thou shalt not's", but God is not focusing on the negatives, but on how to successfully deal with everyone. Each of these six statements concerns how we should treat others - as Jesus summarized - "love your neighbor as yourself." These are instruction about living in community peacefully and understanding the intrinsic value of all life. Thus, we have a summary of rights and responsibilities by which to live. These commands show us how to get

along with our neighbors while showing them the proper respect and dignity we would also like to enjoy from them.

Finally, we have the hinge between the two sets of guidelines. In the first set, we saw the sovereignty, freedom, and holiness of God. In the second set we discovered an equitable means of living in community with others. The hinge is the assertion of God's time in our lives. The Sabbath is designated as a day of rest, honoring the rest God took after the Creation. This is not a time set aside for sports, or working in the yard, or shopping, or even worship. God knows we all need rest and, therefore, the Sabbath is that time. Not only do people need rest, but the land also needs rest, as any farmer will tell you. As the first three commands establish our relationship with God and the last six establish our relationship with our neighbors, this command regulates our relationship with time, creating a pattern of labor and rest which will allow us to maintain good health - physically and mentally. By resting on the Sabbath, we permit our bodies and minds to de-stress and decompress. That is God's way of reminding us that we need boundaries in our lives, just as we might consider the other commands as boundaries.

The God who showed love to the Israelites by bringing them out of slavery and guiding them toward the Promised Land, also guides us with these ten directives for life in communion with God and our neighbors. There are no negatives here, but positive directions to aid in living peacefully with all. Within this list are promises for us, as well as warnings. Let us look to them anew this Lenten season as guidance for our lives.