

Zeal for the Life of Blessing

On the Sundays in Lent in Lectionary Year B, our First Testament readings tell the stories of a sequence of covenants God makes with faithful people. On the First Sunday in Lent we heard of the covenant God made with Noah and his descendants and every living thing on earth. On the Second Sunday we heard of the covenant with Abraham and Sarah and the great nations that would be born from them. Today, on the Third Sunday, we hear of the covenant God makes with the People of Israel through the ministry of Moses. Next week, on the Fourth Sunday, we will hear how the people put God to the test, but God did not abandon the covenant. And finally, on the Fifth Sunday, we will hear the promise of a new covenant, a covenant that God will make not written in stone, but written directly in the human heart. Together, these five covenant stories give an overarching view of salvation history, of God's work in the world to redeem the world—work that, from our Christian point of view, is to prepare the way for Jesus.

Today of course we hear of the covenant God made through Moses, especially as that covenant is summed up in the Ten Commandments. And I think it is important that we see the Ten Commandments in relation to the whole covenant. Because we have a tendency to treat the Ten Commandments as if they were a sort of stand-alone-unit, as if all by themselves they made a full statement of God's will for us. Some churches display the Ten Commandments as part of their church decoration and artwork. Some churches have children in Sunday School memorize the Ten Commandments and then quiz them in church. Some places carve the Ten Commandments into stone monuments and display them in courthouses or public parks, prompting legal battles over the separation of church and state. In many ways, we treat the Ten Commandments as if they were a stand-alone statement of God's will for us.

But the Ten Commandments do not stand all by themselves. The Ten Commandments are actually just the preamble or introduction to a much larger body of commandments and ordinances and judgments given by God through Moses to the People of Israel—the Torah. And the Torah is the outward form of the Covenant, the people's relationship with God. And the covenant is one step in the whole series of covenants God makes for the saving of the world. So if we really want to know what the Ten Commandments are all about, we have to see them in the bigger picture of God's whole saving work.

And seen in that light, I think the Commandments are all about naming the way to live a blessed life. If we go all the way back to the beginning of the sequence, back to the covenant with Noah, we see there that God promises never again to destroy the world with a flood. God had called for the flood in order to destroy sin: God saw that the world had grown corrupt and violent, so God used the flood to sweep it all away, to sweep the slate clean and start again. That is a way to deal with sin; but it is a pretty destructive way to deal with sin; and God is a God of creation, not destruction; so God promises never again simply to destroy sin, but instead to work with sin in some more creative fashion, to transform sin into something else.

That "something else" begins with the covenant with Abraham and Sarah. God promised Abraham and Sarah land, descendants, and blessing. But more than that, God promised Abraham and Sarah that from their descendants would come a people of blessing, a family through whom *all* the families of the earth would become blessed. In the covenant with Abraham and Sarah, God promises to deal with sin not by destroying it, but by transforming it through faith and trust and blessing, the same kind of faith and trust and blessing that Sarah and Abraham lived, faith and trust and blessing lived out by a whole people to be shared with *all* the peoples of the earth.

Forming a people of blessing is what the covenant through Moses is all about. The covenant God makes with the People of Israel through Moses' ministry is really very simple: God says to the people "I will be your God, you will be my people." That is the essence of the covenant relationship. But then God goes on, "And because you are my people, I will give you a way to live that shows you are my people, I will give you guidance and leading and living that will show forth my divine love and justice and peace in the way you as a people bring forth earthly love and justice and peace in the concrete actions of your lives." The Torah that God gives to Moses on Mt Sinai is practical instruction for how to live a blessed life, how to be the people of blessing promised in God's covenant with Abraham, as a more creative way of dealing with sin promised in God's covenant with

Noah. The Ten Commandments are the opening statement, the principal theme, the first things of the whole Torah instruction in blessing.

And when we look at the Ten Commandments—or the Ten *Words*, as they're called in Hebrew—when we look at them that way, we see that they are not just rules and regulations to be obeyed, they're not just laws and ordinances imposed upon us from on high—they are core values, they are motivating ideals, they are statements about what is really worthwhile as we strive to live a life of blessing. And I think it is really important to see the Commandments as values rather than just rules and regulations. Because we all know what happens to rules and regulations: rules and regulations make us feel confined and constrained; rules and regulations tend to bring out the rebellious side of us; rules and regulations make us want to push the envelope and see what we can get away with; rules, we say, are meant to be broken, and regulations are only as good as the threat of punishment that backs them up. But core values, motivating ideals, statements about what is really worthwhile—they work differently. They get inside us, they become part of who we are—they aren't just imposed upon us from without, but they inspire us and empower us and energize us from within. Values and ideals and worthwhiles fill us full of zeal, as Jesus as filled with zeal, as we hear in our Gospel lesson today.

Because, you see, *zeal* is the key to John's story of Jesus cleansing the Temple. In the story, Jesus' complaint against the merchants and moneychangers is that they are treating God's house like a marketplace, they are taking something so awesome and wonderful as the place where humans can come close to God, and they're treating it like business-as-usual, everyday stuff, another chance to make some profit. In ancient Israelite religion, offering a sacrifice was like having a meal with God. You'd bring your lamb or your goat or your ox to the Temple, and the priest would kill it, and then butcher it, and then cook half the meat and serve it as a feast, and take the other half of the meat and burn it on the altar to give it up to God. Offering sacrifice was like serving a meal at which God was a guest. Sacrifice wasn't just making supplication to a high and distant far-off God; but sacrifice was an occasion of intimacy, it was close sharing, it was togetherness with a God who would come to you and sit at table with you. It is a pretty awesome and wondrous thing to share that closely with God—but the merchants and the moneychangers had forgotten that. The merchants and the moneychangers had lost touch with the inner reality of awesome togetherness with God. All the merchants and the moneychangers saw anymore was the outward forms, the rules and regulations, the requirement to sacrifice and the way they could profit from selling the animals people would need to meet that requirement. It's because they have no *zeal* that Jesus drives them out—and it is to inspire zeal that Jesus offers his own ministry in the Temple that day, and everyday and everywhere Jesus ministered.

Inspiring zeal—zeal for God's presence, zeal for a life of blessing. That was the purpose of Jesus' cleansing of the Temple. That is the purpose of the Ten Commandments. And that is the purpose of our spiritual disciplines and our practical ministries here in this Lenten season. In Lent we must ask ourselves where are the places that we, like the merchants and moneychangers, have grown complacent, where have we grown accustomed to business-as-usual, where have we failed to recognize the awesome and wondrous presence of God in our midst? Where do we need to be shaken up and re-inspired with some zeal? Where are the places where we need to reaffirm the core values of the life of blessing? Where do we need to be reminded that only God is God, and that no image, no ideology, no idol, no power, no prestige, can ever give us life like God? Where do we need to be reminded that only justice and peace—not covetousness, not murder, not stealing, not falsity—only justice and peace can truly satisfy us and fill us with a sense of well-being in God? Where are the real, down-to-earth, immediate, personal, political, practical places where we need to bring this covenant to life in order to share in the saving work God does in the world?

That is the zeal we are invited to share on this day. That is the law of the Lord that is perfect and revives the soul; that is the commandment of the Lord that is clear and gives light to the eyes. That is the covenant core value that gives us life, and makes us a people of blessing to share with the entire world. That is what we are called to live today. May it be so with us. Amen.