

The Gift

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

March 7, 2021

3rd Sunday in Lent – Year B

Exodus 20:1-17



During the time I lived in Alabama, a state justice made a name for himself across the country by posting the Ten Commandments on the wall in his courtroom. The last year I lived there he was named chief justice, and as soon as he took his hand off the Bible after being sworn in, he ordered that the Ten Commandments be chiseled into a 2.5-ton granite monument and moved into the Supreme Court building in Montgomery. That's 500 pounds per commandment.

I'm not going to try and get inside Judge Moore's heart – or the hearts of the many people in our nation who clamor for the commandments to be posted in public spaces - school buildings, courthouses, parks. I suspect they believe as I do, that these commandments are a gift worth sharing.

The commandments describe a life that works, a gift from God, a mark of God's grace and love, a natural fulfillment of God's promises. God makes promises to Noah after the flood and marks it with the rainbow; God makes promises to old childless Abraham and Sarah and marks it with a child; God makes a promise to Moses and the wilderness-wandering children of Israel and marks it with this gift of the Law.

As Tom Long says, "Promise without law is like a tent without tent poles. It is amorphous. It will not hold up. It looks one way to one person and another way to the next, with no way to tell which way is right. The promise has a very particular shape to it, and being heirs of it does not mean anything goes. God knows there are ways of life that work and ways of life that do not work, and the whole point of the promise is to give the people a way of life that works."

But here's the thing – almost from the beginning we've been trying to figure out the two – promise and law – fit together. You know how it goes – I will love you if... We don't set out to do it that way, but it seems like that's the way the world works – conditionally. If you do what I want you to do, I will spend time with you; if you behave in appropriate ways I will be proud of you. We put conditions on our love.

So naturally we think the commandments should come first. If you keep my commandments, I will keep my covenant with you. That's the reason Judge Moore said he wanted a larger-than-life slab in the state capitol with the commandments emblazoned on it. He believed that if the nation did not return to God, return to the commandments, then God would punish us.

Some of you may remember several years ago there was an earthquake in Haiti. We had already sent a work team there to build a clean water system. Now the earthquake had taken a country at the brink and delivered a body blow. We sent another team down to help. One of our team members said they had been in a conversation with a friend about the trip and the friend said they thought Haiti was being punished by God for practicing voodoo. You may also remember another disaster we worked on back in 2005, Hurricane Katrina. I lost track of the number of people who said with a knowing look that maybe God had finally had enough of the debauchery of New Orleans.

You see how it works. Commandment first, then promise. But I wonder if that's not badly wrong. Moses is a murderer you know – yet down the mountain he comes holding a tablet that says, “Thou shalt not murder.” And when Moses gets down the mountain, what does he find? Aaron and the people are dancing a jig around a golden calf they are worshipping as God, a big violation of rule number one. God was ready, according to the story, right then and there to be done with this whole people, to do away with them on the spot. Do you remember, though, what Moses did? He went back up the mountain, and he told God to remember the promise, the promise made to Abraham and Sarah, to Isaac and Jacob, the promise that preceded the law. And God remembered, sending Moses back down with another set of tablets and a renewal of the promise.

That's why in worship, we don't read the law and then say the confession of sin. We confess our sins, and then we read the law. We remember the baptismal promises of mercy and forgiveness, and then we hear again that wondrous gift of God – a pathway of living that is truly living. God announces a love and mercy without conditions – there is no “I will love you if” – there is only deep, transformative, life-giving love from the very heart of God.

This is where it begins and ends, in grace. And if we don't get that, then we will never get the commandments. They are not things you must do or else. They are God's gracious path for abundant life.

It is a life worth living that remembers the gifts of God and loves God with heart, soul, mind, and strength and does not bow and scrape before the idols of money or power or fame. It is a life worth living that recognizes the holiness of God's name and is careful

about using that name to endorse the projects of our egos. It is a life worth living that sees we are so much more than the work we do, that steps off the projects of this or that Pharaoh asking for us to make more bricks, that recognizes that because God (God!) took Sabbath, we can as well.

And it is a life worth living that honors parents, even if that honoring means speaking truth and practicing forgiveness. It is a life worth living to value life in such a way that we never take it; that values marriage as love's workshop, a place of deep mystery and hard, holy, faithful work; that respects what belongs to another; that fosters truth-telling, especially when lies are all around; that is content enough with what you have that you need not long for that which another has.

These rules are not the conditions of the promise; they are part of the promise. And when you fall short or stray from this gracious path, God does not forsake you, but bears mercy for you, gently placing you back on the path.

I suspect there are people already out there saying this pandemic is God's punishment for this or that violation of the commandments. I prefer, though, to think of these commandments not as a test we have failed, but rather a pathway. We are going to need in days to come a way of being together that loves God and loves neighbor and structures a life worthy of the name. They are a path that is a gift for the living of these days.

Properly understood, these commandments are life itself, suitable for a two-and-a-half-ton-slab, or, better yet, your heart. Amen.