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Weekend of Sunday, March 7, 2021
3rd Sunday in Lent /Lectionary X/Proper X/Year B
First Reading: Exodus 20:1-17
Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25
Gospel Reading: John 2:13-22
Sermon Title: “Mosaic Covenant”

Theme

The third covenant in this year’s Lenten readings is the central one of Israel’s history: the gift of the law to those God freed from slavery. The commandments begin with the statement that because God alone has freed us from the powers that oppressed us, we are to let nothing else claim first place in our lives. When Jesus throws the merchants out of the temple, he is defending the worship of God alone and rejecting the ways commerce and profit-making can become our gods. The Ten Commandments are essential to our baptismal call: centered first in God’s liberating love, we strive to live out justice and mercy in our communities and the world.

Text

Exodus 20:1-17

After escaping from slavery, the Israelites come to Mount Sinai, where God teaches them how to live in community. The Ten Commandments proclaim that God alone is worthy of worship. Flowing from God, the life of the community flourishes when based on honesty, trust, fidelity, and respect for life, family, and property.

¹God spoke all these words:

²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴You 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. ⁵You 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, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all

your work. ¹⁰But 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. ¹¹For 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.

¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³You shall not murder.

¹⁴You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵You shall not steal.

¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷You 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.

John 2:13-22

Jesus attacks the commercialization of religion by driving merchants out of the temple. When challenged, he responds mysteriously, with the first prediction of his own death and resurrection. In the midst of a seemingly stable religious center, Jesus suggests that the center itself has changed.

¹³The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵Making 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. ¹⁶He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²²After 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.

Sermon

Most mainline Christian denominations recognize five major covenants that God made with humankind. And a few of them show up in the readings for Lent and so I have decided to preach a five-week series on those five major covenants. Today is the third in the series and is known as the *Mosaic Covenant*, and it should come as no surprise to you that the covenant was made between God and Moses on behalf of humankind.

Last week, Sharon Zapko pointed out to me that I had mentioned that the rainbow was the symbol of the Noahic Covenant, but I didn't mention the symbol of the Abrahamic Covenant. The symbol of the Abrahamic Covenant is circumcision, but the sermon was getting a little long so I cut that part off.

Today we will be discussing the Mosaic Covenant and the symbol of the Mosaic Covenant is the two stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments, but I want to be clear, the Mosaic Covenant is not limited to the Ten Commandments as you will hear shortly.

Before we get to the Ten Commandments allow me to continue the history lesson that I started two weeks ago because it is important to know that these five covenants are not independent unrelated actions of God, but parts of the ongoing story of God and God's creation, and more specifically, humankind.

Last week I connected Noah to Abraham and then reminded you that Abraham and his wife Sarah conceived and bore a child whom they named Isaac. Isaac grew up and had a son whom he named Jacob. God changed Jacob's name to Israel, and Israel had twelve sons who became the twelve patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel who *eventually* took possession of the land promised to Abraham in the Abrahamic Covenant.

Today I have to back up the cart a bit because Moses was the one who took the Israelites to the Promised Land.

"But wait," you say, "I thought *land* was a part of the Abrahamic Covenant." You are so smart! Let me tell you what happened.

It's a long and complicated story. One of the twelve sons of Israel was Joseph, and Joseph was his father's favorite among the twelve, much like I am the favorite among my mother's five. Well, being the favorite can be a burden and it caused jealousy between Joseph and his brothers. So the brothers took him out on a snipe hunt and planned to kill him, but at the last minute, sold him into slavery to a caravan of Midianites.

The Midianites sold him to an Egyptian officer by the name of Potiphar. Potiphar's wife tried to seduce her slave-boy Joseph, and when he rebuffed her seduction, she cried rape and Joseph ended up in jail. While in jail, Joseph's gift of interpreting dreams came to the attention of Pharaoh. Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream that the land would experience seven years of plenty followed by seven years of drought and if Pharaoh was smart, advised Joseph, he'd stock up during the good years to cover the lean years. What Pharaoh did was put Joseph in charge, and Joseph did what he had advised Pharaoh to do.

Having saved for seven years, Pharaoh's barns were full, and back in Canaan also known as the Promised Land, where Israel and his eleven other sons lived, the drought and famine were devastating. So they went to Egypt because it had plenty and eventually Joseph revealed himself to his brothers who sold him out but famously said,

Genesis 5:20"Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today."

And Joseph, who by then was the hero of Egypt, got permission to relocate his family to Egypt, where for many generations they prospered.

Have you heard that expression, "What have you done for me lately?" Moving to the beginning of the book of Exodus, the author wrote:

⁸Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land."

So the new Egyptian Pharaoh didn't know that Joseph the Israelite had saved all Egypt, he just knew there were a lot of Israelites and his solution to the Israelite problem was to enslave them. So for the next four centuries, the Israelites were the slaves of Egypt.

But even in slavery, the Israelites multiplied to the point that Pharaoh ordered that all the baby boys born to Israelite women be slaughtered at birth. However, one sly mother made a boat out of a basket and floated her son on the Nile to save his life. He was discovered by one of Pharaoh's daughters, who took him home and said to Dad, "I found him in the river. Can I keep him?" And that is how Moses survived the Egyptian infanticide.

Moses grew up as a prince of Egypt, but when he discovered he was actually an Israelite and saw how the Egyptians treated his people, the Israelites, he lost his temper and killed one of the Egyptians. Presuming the gig was up, he fled into the desert, met a nice girl by the name of Zipporah, whose father, Jethro, was a priest, got married, and worked for him shepherding his flock.

Meanwhile back in Egypt,

^{Exodus 2:23} After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. ²⁴ God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. ²⁵ God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

One day when Moses was out tending the flock he encountered a burning bush, out of which God called Moses to be his spokesperson to tell Pharaoh to "Let my people go." That eventually happened but not before God had to wear Pharaoh down as a demonstration of God's power in an event called the Passover. It was the annual celebration of the Passover that drew Jesus and his disciples to Jerusalem in the Gospel Reading.

So the Israelites were finally sent packing and there was the dramatic crossing of the Red Sea and the people were celebrating and singing songs – in the desert, where it is hot and dry, and they got hungry and thirsty. And they began to whine and complain to Moses – because he was the one who convinced them that he speaks for God and their present misery was his fault. Moses took their complaints

before the LORD and the LORD gave them manna from heaven and water from a rock. And when they complained about the manna, God gave them quail.

Finally, we get to the Mosaic Covenant. After things had settled in the camp of the Israelites, the LORD summoned Moses up to the top of Mount Sinai. From down below it looked awesome! Smoke and fire, thunder and lightning, and dark clouds descended on the top of the mount and Moses went up into it and received the Ten Commandments. This was covered in our First Reading. But then God went on for another four chapters (20-23) of rules, laws, behaviors, rights, etc. Some of it is quite funny, but we don't have time for that right now.

Here is the point: the Mosaic Covenant is especially significant because, just before the Israelites were to take possession of the Promised Land, God promised to make Israel ^{Exodus 19:6} "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." The Israelites were to be God's light in and to the dark world around them. They were to be a separate and called out nation, God's *chosen people*, so that everyone around them and the rest of the world, would know that they worshiped God, the covenant-keeping God.

Of all the covenants, the Mosaic Covenant dealt with how the people of God should live and behave as an example to the rest of the world. The fulfillment of the promises and blessings of the covenant was dependent upon their obedience to God. Disobedience annulled the blessings of God, but disobedience *did not* invalidate the unconditional terms of the covenant, because, as I said, God is a *covenant-keeping* God. God will not break a covenant that God made.

And that is why, hundreds of years later, the LORD would give Isaiah a prophetic word reminding the Israelites of their role and purpose:

^{Isaiah 42:6}"I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations."

So the Mosaic Covenant is the continuation of the Abrahamic Covenant in which God gave:

1. The promise of land (the land to the west of the River Jordan)

2. The promise of descendants (the Israelites at this point number "600,000 men")
3. The promise of blessing and redemption

In the Mosaic Covenant, God told Moses to tell the Israelites of their "chosen" status and all that that required, and although God wasn't asking for their acceptance of the terms of the covenant, Moses

Exodus 24:7 took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." ⁸Moses took the blood (of the oxen he had sacrificed) and dashed it on the people, and said, "See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

This is the third covenant God made with humankind. And although they are all different, what God asked in return is the same; all God asked for is for humankind to love God back through obedience.

Now the Israelites had just witnessed God's mighty power demonstrated through

- the plagues,
- the looting of the Egyptians,
- the crossing of the Red Sea,
- providing manna from heaven and water from a rock,
- and the spectacle of Mount Sinai!

How do you think they did? Remember the golden calf? What is wrong with *those people*, we ask?

God is going to have to come up with another, better plan because without it the gate to the Garden of Eden remains closed, and we are lost.

Come back next week, when we will hear about the *Davidic Covenant*.

Prayer

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Merciful God, we are embarrassed that over the thousands of years of human existence, we have not done better than our ancestors at loving you through our obedience. Bless us on our Lenten journey, and draw us back to yourself in spite of ourselves. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.