

Lent 3, Yr. B

March 4, 2018

Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19

My final comments in last week's sermon had to do with our call to be fully human, flourishing children of God. This week's reading from Exodus, setting out the Ten Commandments is a guide to helping us achieve that status. We're looking at the fundamental religious questions: who God is, who we are, where we come from, where we're going, and what our everyday lives look like on that journey. I don't know how many of you have read Dan Brown's latest book, *Origins*. I gave a copy to one of my grandsons, but he already had it, so I got it back and, of course, had to read it. If you have read it, you'll know that it's the usual Brown plot, the Harvard prof and the beautiful woman, racing around, trying to decipher clues and save the world. In this case, the presenting problem is that a tech genius has addressed himself to two questions: where did we come from and where are we going? I won't spoil the book by telling you what his answers are, but I'm thinking they're pretty much the same questions we're looking at this morning. As I was thinking about this, I was reminded, from my RC childhood, of that catechism question – really again, the same question: WHY DID GOD MAKE ME? And many of you will have also memorized the answer somewhere along the line: HE MADE ME TO KNOW, LOVE AND SERVE HIM IN THIS AND TO BE HAPPY WITH HIM IN THE NEXT.

Using that “formula” – let's look at how we come to know, love and serve God.

Knowing first. And here we can look at the psalm. The psalmist starts with the creation. It's said that while we think about the Bible as how we come to know God, that's really the second book – the first is the book of creation. The psalmist is using the whole of creation to point to God – not only its glories but its orderliness – which is one way of looking at law. We've all seen pictures of the Milky Way with a “you are here” arrow pointing to the tiny speck that's the earth. That's instructive enough, but then you read that we live in a universe that's at least a hundred billion light years across and that it's really extraordinary that we're here at all, because if the universe had formed just a tiny bit differently – if gravity had been just a little stronger or a little weaker, or if the expansion of the universe had been a little faster or a little slower, we wouldn't be here at all. The psalmist, without benefit of modern science, is singing about knowing God through the creation. He just says it a bit differently. “The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament declares his handiwork.” I read this past week about an amateur astronomer who witnessed what no scientist had ever seen before, the birth of a supernova. He's been pursuing astronomy for years, saying that he began building telescopes out of tin cans, Play-Doh and magnifying glasses. He's a locksmith by trade – I guess you could say he unlocked a major mystery.

But the psalmist doesn't stop with singing the glories of the creation. He moves on to praise the Torah, which in our translation is called the “law” but which is better translated as the “teaching.” The Torah, he says, is perfect and sure and gives us wisdom. First he helps us to see where we fit in the grand scheme of things and then he reminds us that we have been given the Torah – a guide to knowing, loving and serving God.

Part of that Torah is this Exodus reading about the 10 commandments that we read this morning. We probably learned them by heart somewhere along the way. But when we did, I wonder if we also learned that introductory line, which sets out the context – these commandments are given by a loving God, a God who has delivered the Israelites from slavery. He set them free. So, one good way of looking at the commandments is that they are a set of instructions about how to live in a way that we can preserve that freedom. So, God is saying, here's who I am and here are some instructions about how to live so that you can construct the kind of society and lead the kind of lives that will enable you to become the fully human persons I created you to be. Don't get caught, don't be enslaved by running after false gods; don't behave in a way that destroys community, like lying or stealing or coveting.

But thinking of “thou shalt nots” in terms of freedom may seem counter-intuitive. If you just threw out the question, what does it mean to be free, most people would probably say something about living without constraints, or being able to do whatever you want whenever you want to, or some might talk in terms of political freedom. There's a story about Romania in 1989. They had overthrown and executed their president. In the chaos that followed, one Western reporter spoke with a woman who summed up, in one sentence, not only their current predicament, but the human predicament in general: “We have our freedom,” she said, “but we don't know what to do with it.” Living according to the commandments gives us freedom, too, but it's freedom to love and to serve.

As you know, I just finished the religion and violence Clearing class and, once again, I found myself quoting Thomas Hobbes. His thought was that about the worst thing that could happen to a society was anarchy – when everyone was “free” to do their own thing. It would be, he said, a war of all against all. His famous line is that life in that kind of society would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” Faced with that kind of alternative, he thought that we would all be willing to give up some of our freedom and form a social contract. That's one way of looking at the commandments – they are a way to construct a society that allows the kind of opportunity and tranquility in which every person can not only live but flourish.

However, when we think about flourishing, about each of us living up to our full potential, I'd suggest that the commandments are only the beginning, a kind of minimum requirement. Because the end goal for us is not just ethical behavior, it's love and the kind of life and service that flow from love. It's about trading in our hearts of stone for hearts of flesh, as we'll pray later. It's about moving from human thinking to divine thinking, as we discussed last week. In that regard, you'll remember Jesus moving his listeners beyond the bare commandment by saying, “you've heard it said that you should not kill, but I say to you, don't even be angry with your brother.” And then he moves beyond the commandments, encapsulating them in the two great commandments of love – love God, love the neighbor. And then, even further, love the enemy. So, thinking about the commandments in this way, we're reminded of Paul who talks about the law as a tutor who helps a child across the street. Once the child is mature, the tutor isn't necessary. In a more modern example, we could think of the commandments as training wheels – once we figure out who we are and whose we are and where we're going, we don't need them.

One person put it this way: “The 10 commandments are not ten flaming hoops that we must clear in order to gain heaven. They are ten examples of how to use freedom responsibly; and when they are observed there will be other challenges, because freedom to love is an opportunity that lasts forever.” (Demetrius Dumm, *Flowers in the Desert*)

Two thoughts in conclusion: In preparing for this sermon, I read something about how the commandments have come to feature in our culture wars. That many people are more likely to be able to recite the ingredients of a Big Mac than to recite the commandments. In all the furor about whether they should be posted in courtrooms, one writer, who lives in the rural South, says that many people have them posted on yard signs, but she says she’s also noticed people cutting the grass around the signs on a Sunday. She goes further and says that some of the yard sign owners have even been known to bear false witness against those of their neighbors who don’t appreciate the signs. She suggests that public defense of the commandments is no substitute for living them and that it might be a good idea, if you’re going to post them in your yard, to have them written on both sides as a reminder to follow them yourself.

And the second is that Albert Camus, the existentialist writer, was once asked by a reporter that, if he were asked to write a book about society, if he would accept the challenge. And Camus answered that he would. “The book,” he said, “would be about 100 pages long, the first 99 would be blank, since there was nothing to be said, and at the bottom of the 100th page, I’d write one thing, ‘Man’s only duty is to love.’”

Following the rules is just the beginning, meant for us in our immaturity. Because our destiny is not to be rule-followers, but to be great lovers. To have hearts that grow until they touch the heart of God – where we’ll be home forever.

Amen.