

Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA
The Third Sunday of Lent, Cycle B—March 10, 2012

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Reflections on **Exodus 20: 1-17; 1 Cor: 22-25; John 2:13-25**

I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

Our God is a God of liberation, a God of freedom! That is the framework we are given, the tone that is set for the Ten Commandments, which are the core of our covenant with God. The Commandments are our guidelines for how to live in, and maintain, the freedom that God intends for us.

Is *that* what you think of when you hear the Ten Commandments? Freedom? *How* we remember the commandments is important. There are small-minded, narrowly-focused, legalistic ways of remembering. Perhaps that is all we could take in as children, when we learned them by rote, in the archaic language of “thou shalt not.” Perhaps they were associated with classroom-style rewards and punishments, or with a required examination of conscience so that we could find something to be sorry about and confess to a priest.

But there are also expansive, exploring, searching ways of remembering, ways that keep our hearts and minds open to deeper truths, to broader meanings that emerge as we grow and mature, ways that bring us into an ever closer relationship—a covenant—with a very large God of liberation.

This God asks us why we would ever want any other god, especially a lesser god to worship. Now I think we recognize the temptation of a smaller god, a god more like us. For the people of Canaan that would have been a Baal or Astarte, a god of their own making, a god cut down to human size—an idol. For us, it might be “Mammon”—wealth—or fame, social status, political influence, or economic power. Gods of our own making. Or perhaps a tribal god who favors only us. Us Americans? Us

Catholics? We do recognize the temptation!

But other gods do not hold a candle to the God we gradually come to know. What possible comparison is there? God has no real rivals. It is only our human imagination that talks about God as “jealous.” We should probably say that God is “passionate” instead, passionate enough to care for us to the thousandth generation.

We need to keep reminding ourselves of the marvelous God of liberation, so that we do not demean God. We should not invoke God, especially with false intent, to further our own small purposes (the true meaning of taking God's name in vain). And so we need to take time every sabbath to come together as a community to remind each other, and celebrate, our covenant with this liberating God.

As you probably noticed, I have just gone through the first few commandments, and the remaining ones, about how to treat each other, are pure common sense, necessary to any community that wants to live in freedom.

Two very different images of the Ten Commandments have been inhabiting my mind lately. One is the two stone tablets Moses brought down from the top of Mt. Sinai. The image is succinct and a helpful reminder of the story, but it also has some drawbacks. The tablets are cold and gray. They look old. (I suppose the Roman numerals are supposed to convey this sense—even though in Moses' time neither the Romans nor their numerals had yet been invented!) And they have been politicized at times, used to further too-small, human purposes, as when they are posted in public courthouses to enforce the idea that “we are a Judeo-Christian nation (and non-believers don't belong).”

My other image comes from a classroom, which those of you who have been attending

Word and Life (www.wordandlife.us) have seen every Thursday in the parish hall of Holy Cross Church. High on the walls are twelve large paper cutouts of children in active poses—walking, running, waving, jumping. They are painted in bright colors; one is wearing a T-Rex T-shirt, another has pink and purple leggings. Most of them have names—Diego, Amber, Niko, Matthew—and beside them are simply-worded versions of the Ten Commandments: “Love God first”; “Honor God's name”; “Obey your parents”; “Be pure”; “Do not want your neighbor's spouse.”

This image is not a substitute for the stone tablets, but it complements them well. The image is drawn from real life; it is contemporary; and, most-important, it is people-oriented. We are talking, after all, about a *relationship*—a covenant, not a code.

Yes, the stone tablets have their limitations. This was recognized 2500 years ago. In two weeks we will be hearing the prophet Jeremiah's famous words about a new covenant, a new law, written not on stone but on the hearts of God's people. Jeremiah's community still possessed the stone tablets, which were kept in the Ark of the Covenant, housed in the temple in Jerusalem. But by the end of Jeremiah's life the Babylonians had swept in, and destroyed the temple with all its furnishings. But the Jewish people survived because their covenant with God was written not only on stone, but on their hearts.

We all know that traditions, however noble their inspiration, tend to get rigidified over time. We are stuck with the human limitations of our cultures and social systems, and with habits of thinking that become resistant to change. That is what St. Paul is talking about in the second reading, from his first letter to the Corinthians: *The Jews look for signs, and the Greeks look for wisdom*, that is, they look to their tradition of philosophical reasoning. A Messiah nailed to a cross doesn't fit either set of cultural assumptions. So Paul's message was a “scandal,” a stumbling block, to the Jews, and “*moria*” (from which we get our word “*moron*”), stupidity, to the Greeks. But *to those*

who are called out of this bondage to the past, *Christ is the power and the wisdom of God.*

There will always be a tension between honoring and mining the riches of our traditions and remaining open to something more, something still broader, higher, deeper. We live this tension in our own church of the Beatitudes as we seek to maintain continuity with our own rich Catholic tradition, even as we try to become more inclusive in our worship, and to engage the gifts of a broader range of people than the Roman church allows.

We see similar tensions in our gospel reading today. The basic story of the cleansing of the temple is well-known; it occurs in all four gospels. In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke it plays a pivotal role at the climax of Jesus' life. It occurs towards the end, providing the temple authorities with their final pretext for doing away with this trouble-maker, Jesus. Jesus does not help himself when he quotes the prophet Jeremiah, accusing those in the temple of turning this *house of prayer into a den of thieves.*

But John has a different slant on this story. John is not a straightforward storyteller. He loves to get at deeper meanings behind the surface events, so he uses a lot of symbolic language—and literal-minded people in his gospel always miss the point! Remember Nicodemus, who thinks being “born again” must mean going back into his mother's womb; or the woman at the well, for whom Jesus' promise of “living water” means that she won't have to keep coming back to the well.

There are at least three big differences between John's account and those of the other evangelists. First, the event does not occur at the end of Jesus' life, but towards the beginning of his ministry. We are in chapter 2, right after Jesus changed water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana. You might remember that the evangelist said that miracle was the first of the “signs” Jesus performed, which gives us a hint that we should be looking for another “sign.”

Second, Jesus does not accuse the money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals of being a “den of thieves.” Rather, they have

turned God's house into a “house of selling,” or a “market” in our translation. He is referring not to the prophet Jeremiah, this time, but to the prophet Zechariah, who had declared that there would be no more sellers in the temple on the great day of the Lord of Hosts. So Jesus' words are a declaration that the Lord's day has arrived, and business as usual must stop.

Not surprisingly, the temple authorities don't accept this idea and ask for a “sign.” So the third, and biggest difference is in Jesus' reply: *Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.* Of course, the temple authorities are literal-minded and answer, “We've been working on this temple for 46 years, and you are going to rebuild it in three days!”

Nobody understands what Jesus is getting at, including the disciples: *Only after Jesus was raised from the dead did [they] remember this statement* and understand. But we, the readers and listeners, are meant to make the connection.

The temple—the magnificent, newly refurbished temple—is slated for destruction. And what will replace it? The body of Christ: *The temple he was speaking of was his body.* Isn't it interesting that once again, as with the tablets of the law, stones are to be replaced by flesh. That is something we could ponder for a

long time! John has given us hints of this from the very beginning of the gospel, when he declared that *the Word* [the Word which was God] *became flesh and dwelt among us.* Henceforth, God's dwelling place is not a temple made of stone, however beautiful, but human flesh, the body of Christ.

By the time John's gospel was written, the Christian community had had decades to ponder what those words, “the body of Christ,” meant. Yes, they meant the body of Jesus that was conceived in Mary's womb and grew up to preach liberation to captives and healing for all kinds of suffering; the body that died, was buried, and rose again from the dead, and finally ascended into heaven.

But the church also experienced Christ as still present among them, in the body of believers, in our flesh, in the church. As St. Paul taught so eloquently in the 50s AD, we are the body of Christ, each of us having different functions, but breathing the same spirit and united in the same loving covenant with God. And we continue to celebrate that new and everlasting covenant around this table, every sabbath, where we receive, in the flesh, the body of Christ and the blood of Christ to nourish and sustain us.