

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

If you were in here in church last Sunday, you'll understand maybe, it was our blessing of the animals, and you'll understand why maybe I woke up in a cold sweat on Tuesday night. I had this terrible dream. I got up to preach and I looked out to the congregation and there were only dogs sitting in the pews. I turned around, the choir were huge hounds in robes howling. It was awful. So it's very nice to see your lovely faces looking back at me today.

At this time of year, the readings from our lectionary, that govern appointed lessons for the day, they don't particularly connect, but as I was preparing my sermon this week and thinking about the passages, they all seem to be speaking to one another, so I want to explore this morning how it is that they might fit together. My starting point will be the reading from Exodus because you'll know if you've been here in previous weeks with dogs and other friends along the way, that we are going through the book of Exodus and the story of Moses. It's there that we find the reading for Exodus today, which is the Bible's first account of the giving of the ten commandments.

I want to look at this familiar reading in three different contexts. First, in the context of the Exodus story where it comes in that narrative. Then I want to look at the ten commandments in the broader context of the whole biblical story and then finally, to look at what the ten commandments might mean for us in our context today. If you've been here the last few weeks, you'll have a sense of where the giving of these commandments come in the story of the Exodus, in Moses' story. Moses has led the people out of slavery. They've crossed the parted Red Sea. They've entered into the wilderness, not the promised land. They're not going to be there for decades, but they're wandering around in the wilderness of Sinai and if you remember, God's providing the manna for them to eat.

It's in the wilderness in these decades before they enter the promised land that God is shaping his people's identity. He's developing a relationship with them. He's in the process of making himself known to his people. In the chapter before the one we get in today's reading, we read this, and I'll just read a couple of verses because it will explain the reference to fire and smoke and everything. God comes to them on the mountain in great drama and he says this is why he's doing it.

"Then Moses went up to God, the Lord called to him from the mountain saying, Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you obey My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be my treasured possessions out of all the peoples.'"

That's the context in which the ten commandments are given to Moses. God is seeking to establish a covenant, an agreement with his people. That word covenant, it comes throughout the Bible and it's an important word. The giving of the ten commandments is to be seen in this context of God seeking to enter a covenant relationship with his people. In this sense, God is laying out the ground rules. He's saying I've saved you from Egypt, but I'm going to be your God. You will be my people and this is how we should live together.

See how the ten commandments begin. They don't start with a statement about the human condition. Instead, they begin with a statement about God, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. These are not the commandments of an unknown God, not a remote impersonal God, but a God who's been at work in the lives and history of his people, working for their good. God has brought them this far. He's reminding them that he's on their side. These are the rules for them to live by if they're to go forward happily together. He doesn't begin by scaring them or threatening them. He says remember me. I've brought you out of Egypt. Now listen to these instructions. The ten commandments aren't given as the arbitrary rules of a remote, capricious, killjoy God. They come out of God's relationship with his people. They're not so much divine orders as the maker's instructions.

So much for the immediate context of the commandments in Exodus. Let's take a broader view. Where do the ten commandments fit in the whole biblical story? St. Paul himself raises this as an important question in the reading we heard as the epistle where St. Paul talks about his status as a member of the people of Israel. He starts off by saying I've got impeccable credentials, circumcised on the 8th day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews, as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

That last phrase is interesting, righteousness under the

law, blameless. In other words, he's saying I've always kept the law. All my life, I've worked hard to keep the commandments, observe all the laws that follow. You can't fault me. I've done it all, but it's worthless he says. He goes on to draw a contrast between the righteousness that comes from the law and the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ Jesus. Righteousness is a word which means right relationship. Paul's saying it wasn't following the law that saved me, however perfectly I kept it. It wasn't that that brought me into a right relationship with God. It was faith in Jesus Christ.

What we see as we read through the Bible is that the covenant God established on Mount Sinai and the giving of the ten commandments was not God's last word. It was a stage in God's relationship with his people because the people of Israel weren't able to keep their side of the bargain and they became estranged from God. The story's told vividly in that parable, the one I eventually got around to reading properly, the parable of the tenants in the vineyards. We might say that God in this story is like the land owner who planted a vineyard, and what we've read in Exodus, the establishing of the covenant on Mount Sinai, that's the equivalent in the parable of the land owner building a fence, digging a wine press, building a watch tower. It was God setting out the ground rules, making a foundation, but it didn't work out as the land owner hoped. The slaves who get sent to collect the produce can be seen as representing the profits. God sent his profits to remind the people of Israel of the covenant that God had made with them.

Their simple message was remember, remember the God who brought you out of Egypt. Don't forget him, but they did. Eventually, the land owner sends his son and that's the story told in the New Testament, God establishes a new covenant with his people through his son, Jesus Christ. He reveals himself again to bring his people into right relationship with him. In the book of Hebrews, Jesus is spoken of as the mediator of a new covenant and the writer talks about this as a better covenant than the one made on Mount Sinai. It's better because all God's people are invited to be part of this covenant and our communion service picks this theme up. You'll listen for the words, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood," echoing the words of Jesus from the last supper.

This covenant is different in many ways to the old covenant. For instance, Jesus has done what we could never do and fulfilled all the demands of the law. Righteousness, our being in right relationship with God

is not dependent on us keeping the law, rather as St. Paul discovered, it's about how we respond to Jesus Christ. We are put right with God through faith in Jesus. We're saved by grace. We don't have to do anything to earn God's salvation. Our salvation doesn't come as a reward for observing the ten commandments. Our salvation comes as God's gift to us.

Finally, what does this all mean for us? What's the importance and the relevance of the ten commandments for us today? Does the fact we have a new covenant mean the ten commandments no longer apply to us? By no means, St. Paul says. We're not saved, we're not put into right relationship with God by observing the law, but the New Testament makes it clear that the ten commandments still operate as the maker's instructions. They're still the best guide we have to how to live in a just, moral and Godly way.

Actually, it's not just the New Testament says that. I came across a book this week by someone who wasn't a Christian, but he was a psychotherapist. He was called Leonard Felder and he says this, "The ten commandments should be renamed the ten hardest things we're trying to do in life, honoring parents, dealing with adultery, attempting to get off the treadmill one day a week, not feeling jealous about what other people have. These topics aren't ancient history," he says. "They're the core issues that most of us struggle with in our personal lives." From his experience of psychotherapy, he sees the commandments as addressing the central issues of our life. He writes a book talking of the need to reactivate the ten commandments. "The task before us," he says, "is not creating a new ethical framework, but reactivating the one we already have." We're called to observe the ten commandments not to get right with God, but because that's how our maker thinks we'll have a good and flourishing life.

As I draw to a close, let me ask, what's the alternative? Is there a better, more succinct moral code to live by? If you've got one, please have a word with me afterwards. I've yet to find one. I've had lots of talk with friends who aren't Christians and asked them about their moral code when any issues come up. How do they distinguish between what's right and what's wrong? They all respond by drawing bits from various traditions here and there, some are more thought out than others, but I always feel that what's lacking is a strong foundation. There's no basis or any consistency to their moral beliefs.

When it comes down to it, the bottom line seems to be that if I want to do something and it doesn't cause anybody any harm, then it's okay. A whole moral system can be built on the twin pillars of pleasure and self-fulfillment, and I don't think that will do. For one thing, that's why we hear so much talk about individual rights and not enough about our responsibilities. The ten commandments are strong on our responsibilities to God and to other people. We're not called to live our lives on the basis of our own preferences and tastes, but rather on God's law and his justice.

That great truth is as true for us today as it was for the people of Israel wandering around the wilderness in Sinai. We may live in very different contexts, but we share the same human nature and we share the same maker. What was good for the people of Israel is still good for us. What the psalmist said in that psalm we heard so beautifully sung is still true. "The law of the Lord revives the soul. It makes wise the simple and enlightens our eyes."

Amen.