

Sermon – 3rd Lent
Exodus 20:1-17
March 5, 2018

“A Date in the Desert”
(read Exodus 19:3-6)

When I begin the year with my confirmation class I tell them, much to their delight I might add, that I have no rules of conduct! I do tell them that I have class goals that I want to accomplish though. It's up to them to set the rules we need to accomplish them – ‘we make em as we need em.’ Usually, by the end of the day (er... year) we need em! As luck would have it the Commandments are our current subject – for that and their significance in general we'll talk about them this morning.

The conventional thinking is the Ten Commandments were given start up a relationship between God and Israel. But Sinai was no blind date for God. God knew Israel well - he'd been courting them over the last 600 years. Still, I'm not sure “*eharmony.com*” would recommend this match. Abraham and his descendants had bobbed and weaved morally over centuries with lots of bad choices sprinkled among spurts of faith. In the run-up to their date in the desert at scenic Sinai they were up to their old tricks - muttering about the sparse conditions in the wilderness as opposed to ‘good ol Egypt.’ Israel may have been the “*apple of God's eye*” but she sure was hard to please.

This covenant was how a faithful and holy God and a finicky and sinful people could have a relationship at all. God used Sinai to identify himself and tell Israel about their new identity. If anyone was on a blind date in the desert, it was Israel. Sure, the covenant contains rules – law is the better and proper word, but law is not some impersonal code in the Old Testament. Exodus 19 says God spoke directly to the people. In Fact, the Commandments are the only words in the Old Testament spoken directly by God to all Israel. They are intensely personal. To hear these words was like talking to God face to face.

But this law has a purpose beyond Israel. Psalm 24 says “*The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and all who live in it.*” Recall what Psalm 19 says; “*the law of the Lord is perfect, it refreshes the soul...in keeping them there is great reward.*” Sinai was a covenant for a people – the Jewish people, but if it were obeyed, and that was always a big if – then things like God's rescue of Israel through sad episodes like the Red Sea crossing would be far less necessary. I tell my confirmation class right from the beginning, no rules...unless we need them. God's original intent for the creation started the same way – but that intent was being thwarted, and so...Sinai.

The Old Testament story can be summed up like this - God had a 'class goal' for the world, and so it's not just his confirmation class – Israel that he is tutoring. God has a master plan for the whole of creation and submerging Egyptian soldiers in the sea is not the way God wished to deal with the world. In Genesis 6, God submerged the entire world save Noah and his family in the flood, and it didn't change the heart of that family at all. Though by comparison fairly contained, the Red Sea drownings were yet another judgement of God on sin and an act of grace toward a family - Israel, who though chosen by grace were no more worthy of it than anyone. Sinai is big risk for God – but God's love for the world is so strong he'll take it.

If God hit it off with Israel, eventually everyone else might know God's heart too – that was the plan. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann said, *“the commands (after Sinai) would henceforth be negotiated – that is, debated about how they are to be fulfilled – but they remain forever non-negotiable.”*

“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession.” If is a really big word though, isn't it? *“If”* is really a big word in this passage - *“if you obey my voice and keep my covenant.”* British author G.K Chesterton once said *“all morality hangs on an “if.”* On this “if” in our lesson today hangs a lot. If only Israel would keep covenant – it would their finest hour. And if not, it would be their fall. In our lesson today from John, Jesus entered the temple on the Passover, saw what *“remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy”* not to mention *“you shall not steal”* had become in Israel, and with a whip of cords made his point.

We don't much like the image of an angry Jesus, I know. I don't much like preaching an angry Jesus, let me be honest with you. I don't like rules in my confirmation class either. But what we do in class matters. What we live like and therefore say about the God we believe in and have promised to love and serve matters too. Psalm 19 is right on when it says; *“the law of the Lord is perfect, it refreshes the soul...in keeping them there is great reward.”* The word God spoke to you through Jesus in baptism rescued you from sin and the same word calls you to be a citizen of a holy nation – the church. That's not an easy thing, but the church, and we who are part of it, despite all our failures is the best hope of the world – because we cling to THE hope of the world – Jesus. God has a class goal – that goal is the world, the word to it is Jesus, and our task is to continually imagine what that world might become “if” we listen to him. AMEN