

Sermon for October 2, 2011

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The earlier chapters of the Book of Exodus—the book from which our first reading is taken for today—tell us how God tried time and time again to reach out to humanity, but we repeatedly turned our backs on God and God’s will for us. Over time, however, God began to form a relationship with one particular group of people, Abraham and his descendants, who became known as the people of Israel.

The Book of Exodus tells us how this people became enslaved to the Pharaoh of Egypt, and how God raised up Moses to help to deliver them. Moses *threatened* the Pharaoh ten times with ten plagues because he would not let the israelites leave Egypt. *Pharaoh refused each time*, each time a plague came to pass.

The final plague was especially deadly and killed the first-born son of every Egyptian family, but the families of Israel were spared. Their houses were passed over. Only then did the Egyptians send the people of Israel away in haste.

Jewish people of today think of the escape from Egypt as perhaps the most important event in their history. Can we Christians consider this to be a part of our history too? Yes, our history as Christians begins with the story of Israel. We have been “grafted onto” the root-stock of Israel, as Paul describes us in his letter to the Romans. [Romans 11:17-18]

After the crossing of the Red Sea, the Lord led the people of Israel into the wilderness between Egypt and Palestine. At the mountain of Sinai, the Lord gave Israel the law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, through the hand of Moses. While they were still in the wilderness, the people of Israel agreed to obey these ten commandments, and thus the Lord formed a covenant with Israel.

He would be their God

And they would be his people.

As you know, a covenant is a solemn agreement that binds two parties to each other in a permanent relationship with promises, claims and obligations on both sides. It can be a bond that is entered into voluntarily by two parties in which each pledges to do something for the other—like in a marriage—or it can be offered by a powerful person or nation to a weaker one. In the Old Testament, an all-powerful God chooses an insignificant people, sets them apart, promises faithfulness to them and requires their fidelity in return. God initiates a “covenant of love” towards his people Israel, his ‘treasured possession’, and, in addition, God promises to sustain the covenant to a thousand generations if they will love him in return.

[from *Discovering the Book of Common Prayer vol. 2*, by Sue Careless, p. 69)

Now, will you please turn to page 68 in *The Book of Common Prayer*? It is the page where the Ten Commandments are written out in full. You will see that the first four have to do with loving God:

Thou shalt have none other gods but me.

You shall not make to thyself any graven image...Thou shalt not bow down to them, nor worship them.

Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.

Remember that thou keep holy the sabbath day.

And the next six have to do with loving your neighbour:

Honour thy father and your mother

Thou shalt do no murder

Thou shalt not commit adultery

Thou shalt not steal.

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.

Thou shalt not covet your neighbour’s house, wife, servant, maid, ox, ass nor anything that is his.

And the reply after each commandment is,

“Lord, have mercy upon us

And incline our hearts to keep this law.”

Here at St. Leonard's each Sunday at the 8 am service we hear the summary of the law, which Jesus gave:

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. This is the first a great commandment. And the second is like unto it: thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”

[Mark 12:29-31]

And the response in this case is,

“Lord, have mercy upon us, and write both these thy laws in our hearts, we beseech thee.”

Since we can't fully keep the Ten Commandments, are they useful at all, you may have asked yourself? Well, I believe that they are. They give us a law by which our lives as Christians are to be governed, and they remind us that we cannot even begin to try to keep them without God's help. They remind us that God wants to be in a covenant relationship with each of us throughout our lives; and that God, our creator, is our God, and we are God's people.

We know that it is God to whom we belong and we know that God loves us and that God wants us to be in a loving relationship with God. This is why we strive, with God's help, to obey God's commandments and to walk in God's ways all the days of our lives.

Amen.