

Lent 3 – March 15, 2009  
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ  
Exodus 20:1-17

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The Ten Commandments. Probably the most well known of God's covenants with humanity.

Who could possibly forget the scene of the giving of the law in the movie, *The Ten Commandments*, starring Charlton Heston? Has everyone here seen that movie? If you haven't seen it, you'll probably get the chance in the next month or so – it usually shows on television around Passover and Easter time every year. Or, I can lend you the copy I have on DVD.

The scene goes like this: Moses has just led the people out of slavery in Egypt. God parted the waters of the Red Sea so they could cross on dry land, while their pursuers were drowned in the waters. Leading them day and night, by pillar of cloud and fire, God brought the people to Mt. Sinai. While the people waited below the mountain, God called Moses to go up the mountain.

And here's where the famous scene takes place. God speaking with Moses on Mt. Sinai. God hewing two stone tablets out of the rock with tremendous bolts of lightning. God writing the ten words – the Decalogue – on the tables with more lightning, as Moses cowers in fear.

This is a different sort of covenant than the ones we've encountered in the past few weeks. God begins by saying, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”<sup>1</sup> God is saying, “Because I have done this for you, then I expect the following...” Then God gives the Ten Commandments.

This is not like the covenant of divine obligation we saw God make with Abraham, to give him many descendants, to give him a land, to make his descendants a blessing to the nations – that was pure promise. It's not like the covenant God made with Noah, never to destroy the world by flood again – that was pure promise, too.

This time God outlines obligations for those whom God has delivered. Because God has already done this thing, God expects certain things from humankind. God is a righteous God, and has the right to expect certain things from His chosen people. This is a covenant of human obligation. In fact, there is only one commandment that comes with a promise – the fourth commandment: “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.”<sup>2</sup>

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The Ten Commandments are divided into two parts, which we refer to as the two tables of the law. The first table is the commandments which pertain to our relationship with God:

1. I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before me.
2. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
3. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.

The second table contains the rest of the commandments, and those all have to do with how we live with each other, how we are to live life in community:

4. Honor your father and your mother.
5. You shall not kill.
6. You shall not commit adultery.
7. You shall not steal.
8. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
9. You shall not covet your neighbor's house.
10. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his cattle, or anything that is your neighbor's.

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In 1529 Martin Luther wrote a little booklet called *The Small Catechism*. This small booklet – as an example, here's the one I received when I took Confirmation instruction – was intended to assist the heads of households to teach the members of their household basic Christian instruction. Brother Martin, as a parish pastor, had realized the sad state of Christian knowledge in his parish. In an attempt to assist parents in their baptismal promise to properly instruct their children in the Christian faith, he wrote *The Small Catechism*.

*The Small Catechism* contains those things that Luther considered essentials for understanding the Christian faith. He begins with the Ten Commandments, then moves to The Apostles' Creed and The Lord's Prayer. He then explains the two sacraments of the church – Baptism and Holy Communion. Luther purposefully ordered his catechism in this way, in an attempt to show movement from Law – that which would convict us of sin and drive us toward God – to Gospel, that which declares God's love and forgiveness to us. This is why Luther begins with the Ten Commandments, and moves toward the Sacraments.

In our first worship service today the Call to Worship was a recitation not only of the Ten Commandments, but also of Martin Luther's explanations of the Ten Commandments. Luther's explanations of the Commandments provide a far more expansive interpretation of the meaning of the Commandments than one might think at first look. For instance, we would probably all agree that it's pretty easy for us to not break the fifth commandment not to kill. But here's what Luther has to say: "We are to fear and love God so that we do not hurt our neighbor in any way, but help him in all his physical needs." This goes far beyond the simple interpretation of not causing our neighbor mortal physical harm. Luther interprets this commandment to mean that not only are we to not hurt our neighbor in any way, but also that we are to help our neighbor with their physical needs.

Here's another example – the seventh commandment not to steal: "We are to fear and love God so that we do not take our neighbor's money or property, or get them in any dishonest way, but help him to improve and protect his property and means of making a living." The way Luther interprets these commandments is that he not only gives the negative prohibition, but also provides a positive mandate to help our neighbor.

If you do not have a copy of *The Small Catechism*, I strongly encourage you to get one, and to read it often. In fact, I am so committed to every member of this congregation making *The Small Catechism* a regular part of your devotional life that I would like to provide a copy to anyone who does not have one. I have placed a sign-up sheet on the table in the Narthex, and I invite you to sign-up to receive a copy.

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Thus far I have spoken only about *The Small Catechism*. But its name begs the question: If there's a “small” catechism, there must be a “large” catechism, too, right? Absolutely! Luther's *Large Catechism* was first published in 1529. Its writing and publication arose as a result of Luther's parish visitations, wherein he became very troubled by the seeming ignorance of the clergy. Whereas *The Small Catechism* was written for use in the home, *The Large Catechism* was written specifically for parish clergy. It is considerably longer, and goes into much greater detail than *The Small Catechism*.

If you're one of those Lutherans who would like to delve deeper into the Catechism, then I commend Luther's *Large Catechism* to you. Just let me know, and I can direct you to online or print resources for further study.

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While I could, quite happily, talk to you all day about Lutheran history, our primary topic today is supposed to be the Ten Commandments, so now I'll get back on track.

I don't think anyone here would disagree that the Ten Commandments come to us as law. After all, that's how they're frequently referred to – as “The Law.” They're things we're supposed to do, as in the case of the third and fourth commandments, or not do, as is the case with all the rest.

Luther defined the Law as that which exposes and convicts us of our sin. As St. Paul wrote in the letter to the Romans, “No human being will be justified in his sight' by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.”<sup>3</sup> There is no doubt that this is what the Ten Commandments do! They point out to us how often we have failed, how often we have fallen short of the living the lives God would have us lead as those of us who profess to be Christians.

But then there is the Gospel. As Luther defines it, the Gospel is the good news that God loves us, and that God has forgiven us. The Gospel comes to us through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Because of Jesus' sacrifice, God sets aside the penalty for our sin. We are freed to live life as completely forgiven and loved children of God. Again, the words of St. Paul:

But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout history there have been people who have claimed that, since it is not the law which justifies sinners, but faith in Christ, then the Commandments are no longer binding on Christians. It defies imagination that people could claim such a thing! I can't begin to understand it. People who believe that believe in what the German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.” As St. Paul said: “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.”<sup>5</sup>

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A couple of nights ago John Mark and I went to see the play *Fiddler on the Roof*. At the very beginning of the play we meet the main character, Tevye. He explains the depth of traditions in his little Jewish enclave in pre-revolution Russia. What he calls “traditions” actually derive from Jewish law. He says:

We have traditions for everything.

How to sleep.

How to eat.

How to work.

How to wear clothes.

For instance,

we always keep our heads covered,

and always wear a little prayer shawl.

This shows our constant devotion to God.

You may ask,

how did this tradition get started?

I'll tell you.

I don't know.

But it's a tradition.

*And because of our traditions,*

*every one of us knows who he is*

*and what God expects him to do.*<sup>6</sup>

This is where this bit of Law – the Ten Commandments – can also come to us as Gospel. It’s good news to us that our God is one who has been intimately involved in human history. Our God didn’t simply create the universe and then stand back to watch as history plays itself out. Our God genuinely cares what happens to creation between the start of history and its conclusion. God cares enough to have given us a set of guidelines for how to best love Him, and how to best live in community with our neighbor. Our God is one who inserted Himself directly into human history, in the person of Jesus Christ, to teach us that the greatest commandment is to love God, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Is this not the epitome of the Ten Commandments? Praise be to God, for loving us enough to give us the law!

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 20:2

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 20:12

<sup>3</sup> Romans 3:20

<sup>4</sup> Romans 3:21-26

<sup>5</sup> Romans 3:31

<sup>6</sup> *Fiddler on the Roof Script-Dialogue Transcript*. [http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie\\_scripts/f/fiddler-on-the-roof-script.html](http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/f/fiddler-on-the-roof-script.html).

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