

# Third Sunday in Lent B

## March 3, 2024

Holy Family Episcopal Church

Exodus 20: 1-17

Psalm 19

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

I have an acronym for you this morning. SBNR. SBNR. Anybody? No, not you Carmen. Spiritual, but not religious. Spiritual, but not religious. People who claim this designation are present throughout society and their prevalence increases with each new generation. Church folk become anxious as they look at their beloved buildings, programs, and budgets in the face of this withdrawal from organized religion.

Now, let's turn this around. Have you ever heard of someone religious but not spiritual? RBNS? For us churchgoers, it's easy to assume that if someone goes through the motions- attends church, receives the sacraments, serves on committees, volunteers, and makes consistent monetary gifts- you know those religious types, surely, they must also be spiritual. What's the difference between being religious and being spiritual? Have you ever really thought about it?

I think being religious has more to do with external things like institutional affiliation and assent to a set of beliefs- like our Nicene Creed. Spirituality, on the other hand, is about experiences of self-transcendence, belonging, and connection: Spirituality is about relationships.

Among all of our liturgical seasons, Lent may be the most focused on personal experiences. We aim to clear away debris that blocks loving connection with God, and one another, and open ourselves to encounters with the divine through prayer and saturation in scripture. Lenten "disciplines," despite their stern-sounding name, are more about spirituality than religion. Self-examination and repentance, -changing our hearts and minds-, prayer, fasting, and self-denial; reading and meditating on God's word: all of these are pathways towards a relationship with the liberating, loving, and life-giving, God, (described by Bishop Curry) and friendship with those on a similar pilgrimage. But now, here, in the middle of this 40-day spiritual journey, we are asked to wrestle with something that may conjure up images of religion at its worst: The Ten Commandments. Litigation about courthouse walls or monuments on public property; Catholic school kids scouring their consciences to have something to confess; Evangelicals who display yard signs with the two tablets, which can feel like a litmus test for whether or not "some people

are welcome”, and, of course, the kind of easy self-righteousness that accompanies the selective reinforcement of shaming associated with any of “God’s laws.”

We sure are getting our fill of the Ten Commandments this morning. They aren’t something we usually think about or pay too much attention to, except maybe in Lent. First we heard them recited in the Penitential Order, which is our practice during Lent and now again in the Old Testament lesson from Exodus.

There were 613 rules/laws/commandments (The Mitzvot) the Jewish people adhered to. Most of those were focused primarily on dietary and safety restrictions. Once they left Egypt and made it through the 40 years in the desert to the Promised Land, God, through Moses, gave them a new Top Ten. As you know, the first four deal with their relationship with God. The remaining six are about relationships and connections. Then Jesus condensed them down to two, which are what we here at Holy Family are all about- Say it with me- Love God. Love each other. That’s it.

For us, this reading presents us with an invitation to reclaim the Ten Commandments, not as a tool for judgment and shame, but rather as a set of teachings that guide us into life-giving spirituality. The teachings figuratively construct a space for those experiences we are made to long for self-transcendence, belonging, and connection. They lay a foundation for spirituality to blossom out of religion, for encounters to emerge from rules, and for transcendence to arise from tradition. These teachings provide a foundation for spirituality in at least three ways.

First, we realize that we worship a God whose desire for our well-being transcends our small-mindedness, resistance, and selfishness. The very first commandment is “You shall have no other gods before me.” But those words have a preface: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” This preface is not optional; it is a necessary prologue that frames the intention of all that follows.

- The Lord who yearns for us to abide by the teachings is the same One who heard our cries in Egypt and has committed to liberating us from every kind of captivity.
- And this Lord has demonstrated power in real-time by intervening to rescue the oppressed. The Lord is the One who went to the mat for us against Pharaoh and all of the other Pharaohs since the first one, whether they were the Babylonians or the Herodians or the Roman Empire or any political or economic system that seeks its own well-being to the detriment of others.
- The Lord is the One who provides for us, even when we resist that generosity, who made water spring from a rock, and who provides manna and quail in the wilderness.

That is the One before whom we should have no other gods. The Lord is eager to encounter us and put our limitations and weaknesses in the eternal context of infinite love.

The second through sixth commandments, about

- not making or worshiping gods other than the Lord,
- revering God's name and not using it in vain or in an attempt to control God,
- Resting with creation and our fellow human beings on the Sabbath, just as God did after creating us, and
- Honoring our parents, so that our days in the land may be long,

They are all about connection. You could almost think of these teachings as an umbilical cord, tethering us to what nourishes us accomplish energizing us so that we can discern and accomplish God's good purposes for our lives.

Our culture doesn't talk much about idols, but if we're honest, all of us can name things that compete for our ultimate allegiance, demand our attention, and suck up our resources: professional sports, alcohol, social media, or investment accounts. These things aren't bad in and of themselves, but they easily take up more space in our lives than they are to, squeezing out our availability for caring for ourselves-both our souls and bodies, and our communities. It is as though we have a limited number of portals for connection and if each of these takes up a port where do we plug into the nourishing life-giving flow of God's love?

The commandment about sabbath rest is an astonishing gift for us if we slow down enough to receive it. When we rest, we practice being in the promised land. We put our worries, fears, and anxieties in the metaphorical parking lot and are invited to trust that God will attend to them while we are simply "being," rather than constantly being concerned about them. Can you imagine how much better our relationships would be with others if we all "rested" together once a week? If we spent time playing together, enjoying each other's company, telling stories, enjoying g food? The commandment to rest, at its best, is the command to enjoy, to focus on the enough-ness of what God has given you, The space to breathe, to receive that nourishment that God has prepared.

And thirdly, the final five Commandments are about belonging. Wouldn't it be impossible to feel a sense of belonging if you were always worrying about staying physically safe, or someone stealing your cattle, or your car, or your Social Security number, seducing your spouse, lying about you, viewing all your property with an acquisitive eye? Trust is the foundation of any sense of belonging. Beene' Brown, The psychological researcher, talks about belonging as the ability to show up as your authentic self. If we don't expect a basic level of trust in a community, there is no way will ever feel safe enough to show up as we actually are, much less learn that we are worthy of belonging... As if we actually are.

During Lent, most Episcopalians, just like we do, begin Sunday liturgies with the Litany of Repentance. The officiant recite each commandment, to which the people respond with a prayer for God's mercy, implying rightly that they have failed to abide perfectly by these commandments. But maybe the next time you hear them, (Like next week) you'll remember their deepest purpose isn't to induce guilt or to serve as a litmus test for true Christians; rather, they guide us into a genuine spirituality that God wants for us and with us: transcendence, connection, and belonging.

But maybe the Psalmist puts it better: the law of the Lord is "more to be desired than much gold, more than much fine gold, sweeter far than honey, then honey in the comb."

Don't we all want to taste the sweetness?

Amen