

The Ten

Every Lent we are confronted with the Ten Commandments/the Decalogue. In the reading of *Exodus* today we heard

1. Hear the commandments of God to the people:
I am the Lord your God who brought you out of bondage. You shall have no other gods but me.
2. You shall not make for yourself any idol.
3. You shall not invoke with malice the Name of the Lord your God.
4. Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. You shall not commit murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not be a false witness.
- 10 You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.

And the response after each one is

AMEN. LORD HAVE MERCY.

When I was a child, I thought of the Ten Commandments as a scary list of things I should do or shouldn't do. They reminded me of my sinfulness. Maybe some of you had that childhood understanding too.

My adult understanding of the Ten Commandments has changed, of course, through reading and study. In *Exodus*, they are the words of God to his people on Mt. Sinai. The other Biblical recording is from *Deut.5:6-21*. In the *Deuteronomy* one, Moses recounts the words that God revealed to him at Mt. Horeb. Both accounts, however, have to do with the fact that God freed the Israelites, his people, from slavery in Egypt. That is an integral part of the whole story.

It is about relationship-the covenant-between God and his people. As some scholars put it, the Ten Commandments were not a new bondage or new form of submission, but a response of love, on the part of God and the Hebrew groups of society. The Israelites were to respond to God in love too, hence, a covenant. And, it's more than that. The Commandments were-and still are- a pattern of life that obliged the people to respond with love to God *as well as* how to get along with each other in community.

In *Deuteronomy* the number ten was comprehensive and complete, scholars say. God added “no more” to the list. No judges or scribes or others needed to get into the act; the only requirement was a response of love from the Hebrew people. If there were breaches, they compromised the life of the community and therefore the state of being in right relationship with God.

The phrase “Ten Commandments” had to do with ten basic words and from that we get the Decalogue (10) that we recite and take into our hearts each Lent.

I’d rather call the *words* the Decalogue and **not** the Ten Commandments. *Commandments* is a strong word. They will require us-you and me-to do something, to confront something we don’t want to. Whereas *Decalogue* is a nice, genteel word. Ten of something. I can handle that. Can you? Have you had that same feeling?

The Ten start out understandably. “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of bondage. You shall have no other Gods but me. “ We Episcopalians believe that. We abide by that. The list goes on to say “You shall not make for yourself any idol...” We can all think of a few idols that we might have, such as money, addictions, beauty obsession, idols of all kinds.

But as the list goes to the 10th one, I’m feeling “woe is me.” Or, as in the lingo of the day, I’m in the weeds. Why can’t I just do my penitential work, recalling that I am not right with God? I recognize that my life has not always been loving, and I ask for forgiveness. God does offer us mercy and compassion when we seek repentance. And he’s taking our hand to do that. However, It’s not a one-

and-done situation unfortunately. Lent calls us to do the work of repentance yearly, even daily. We’re reminded of the forms of confession in the Daily Offices and at Sunday Eucharistic services.

Maybe we are still in the wilderness, as Fr. Trace talked about a few Sundays ago. The time of wilderness of 40 days. I personally really don’t want to be there, but, friends, I need to be there to get to the day of resurrection.

I've never been in an actual wilderness for 40 days, but I did see wilderness, as Jesus probably saw it, from the windows of the bus we traveled in the Holy Land last year. But I saw it from a foreigner's eyes. There were vast swaths of nothingness as our tour bus drove from one point to another. From a distance in that wilderness, I did see a monastery carved out at the bottom of the hills -the very hills that Jesus talked about and walked. In this case, it was Bedouin territory, as I recall. Bedouins are Arab nomads who settle in the deserts from time to time.

There's another of the Decalogue that is meaningful to me. "Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy." Here I've stumbled a bit. There is so much ministry to be done and so many people in need that I sometimes forget that I myself need to slow down. Sabbath is a reminder that all creation is a gift, like St. Francis of Assisi believed-humans, other creatures, the earth and the environment.

Focusing on Sabbath is not to say that the other 9 words-let's call them-are less important. It is a way for me to reflect on one of the 10 words at a time. All 10 are important to our relationship with God-they are like a woven tapestry. A two-part tapestry, God and his people, and we with one another. God's love is like the glue, the grace that holds the relationship and the covenant together.

However, I'd like to look at Sabbath rest in another light now. Not just a whole day but a period of time, a sabbatical period of time. Soon I'll embark on a Sabbatical, like Fr. Trace did in France, except I'll be in Spain-Santiago de Compostela. This city in NW Spain is the end point of the pilgrimage routes that pilgrims have been traveling for over a thousand years.

The theologian and writer Walter Bruggemann says in his book *Sabbath as Resistance* that "Sabbath is not simply about keeping rules but rather about becoming a whole person and restoring a whole society." He disparages our society as a consumerism society in which achievement is the highest goal. We want, we buy, we do. He models for us a way to break this cycle and focus "on God, other people, all life," he says. Those are the important elements of sabbath and the spiritual life.

During my sabbatical, I will be walking from Sarria to Santiago, the last part of the French route with my daughters. That's about 110 km. I'll need strength and I'll need courage. I'm told, it's a time of reflection, perhaps resolving some of life's perceived problems, focusing on dreams perhaps-and alone time. I shouldn't forget walking is good exercise too. Another element is the interaction with pilgrims along the way.

And here is my active part of sabbatical time. The other focus of my stay is to live at the Casa Anglicana, an ecumenical hospitality center in Santiago that was purchased jointly by the Diocese of Spain and the Friends of the Anglican Pilgrim Center. My ministry is to be a pastoral presence in La Casa and listen to pilgrims and to engage with them as they finish the Camino walk. I will celebrate with them and participate in their joy from what I call a listening ministry. But I WILL take time to rest, enjoy sabbatical rest-and listen to what God is saying to me. I will “remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy.”

Therefore, I invite you to a Holy Lent. I invite you to seek out a quiet place- perhaps in your home or outdoors-and take the time to reflect on the Decalogue/the Ten Commandments. Choose one or two and sit with them. Remember that the Ten are not a burden, but can lead to a disciplined way of life, a gift, of relationship with God and our neighbors in community. You may be surprised by your deep learnings as you journey through the rest of Lent and finally get to the glorious day of resurrection. I invite you to regard Lent as the gift from God that it truly is.

Amen.

The Rev. Anita Miner
Third Sunday in Lent, Year B
Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19;
1 Cor 1: 18-25; John 2:13-22