

Third Sunday in Lent – Year B

¹⁴Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, *

O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.

Last week, I said, “We cannot just stop singing the song, because the song is who we are.” – It was a reference to Billie Holiday being advised that she could stay out of trouble if she would just stop singing a particular song. I was reminded of all that when I listened to the short message that our new Assisting Bishop, Gladstone “Skip” Adams, gave on the diocesan Facebook page. I posted it on our parish group page also. One of the things he said was in reference to a line from Psalm 137: “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” Bishop Skip said that in this strange land of the pandemic and a diocese and church in flux, he sees us called not to sing our *own* song, but to sing *God’s* song – of hope, reconciliation, and freedom. I mention this partly to encourage you to listen to his message, and partly to smile at the connection to last week’s homily – “We cannot just stop singing the song, because the song is who we are.” But mostly I mention it because it gives us a different perspective on our readings for today.

God’s song of hope, reconciliation, and freedom is sung loud and clear in the message we have from Exodus – which is the first rendering of what *Christians* tend to call the Ten Commandments, but which our Jewish brothers and sisters often call the Ten Words – very possibly because this begins with the line, “Then God spoke all these words...” I grew up thinking these were the rules that I was bound to break... but several commentaries pointed me to a new way of looking at these Ten Words or Ten Commandments – not as a requirements or measurements, but as a way of life, or – as one person put it – a *return to God’s intention* for us. In Bishop Skip’s words, a return to hope, reconciliation, and freedom, to the song of God.

Think for a minute about the people to whom God is speaking “all these words.” The Israelites had gone to Egypt because of famine in their own land – and they had done well there. In fact, the Egyptians became concerned that they might be outnumbered by these foreigners, and so they enslaved the Israelites – made them “non-persons” – took away their rights – abused them. The Israelites lived in slavery under the Egyptians for centuries – and then God called Moses to tell Pharaoh to “Let my people go...” and they were led out of slavery – into the desert – on the way to a promised land – and

here, at Mount Sinai, God spoke all these words. And the words are really about hope, and reconciliation, and freedom. God says, “You are MY people.” And then God describes what that looks like.

One writer described it this way: “To a community whose national identity had been one of forced labor, in a culture of oppression, disregard for human life, and power born of ethnocentric narcissism, the Creator of the universe prescribes a way of life that requires not 50 minutes once a week but 24/7 action, that says to liberated slaves, you’re free, you’re free to worship me – because I’m faithful to the promise made to your ancestors. You’re mine. You are free to rest – in the rhythm of the way I formed the universe... Can you imagine the slave hearing the commandment to take a day of rest? Because of the relationship we have with God, how are we free to live with one another? We are free to believe God has *given us enough*. We don’t have to covet or take more than we have... This is a counter-cultural way of life.”

The Ten Commandments – a counter-cultural way of life. But those many words spoken by God have been debated and twisted and used and misused to do more harm than good over the centuries since they were first written down, perhaps. And when we use them as checklists to see how we’re doing in the realm of “keeping” the commandments, we are always found wanting. And we can always find others wanting, as well.

But Jesus boils all these commandments down to two. Remember when he’s asked by the lawyer what the greatest commandment is? He replies, “Love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself.” He states in the *positive* what I have always heard in the negative in the 10 Commandments. He makes clear what I had missed: That God’s *commandments* are really about a way of life – a counter-cultural way of life – that is about hope, and reconciliation, and freedom.

And so, when Jesus enters the temple in today’s Gospel passage, and sees there so little about hope, and reconciliation, and freedom – so little that embodies the song of God – he goes off a little!

In the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – this story of the cleansing of the temple comes later in the life of Jesus – just before he is arrested, actually. But John puts this story up front – right after the first “sign” that Jesus gives by changing water

into wine at the wedding feast in Cana. That sign was a message about God's abundance. And then John tells this story of Jesus going to the temple.

In John's account, the reference made is "Zeal for your house consumes me!" – with no mention of the house of prayer being turned into a den of robbers, as the other gospels tell it. Rather, there is a conversation between Jesus and his fellow Jews, focusing on the Temple. They ask, essentially: Who do you think you are? What gave you the right to do this? And Jesus responds with, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." -- This is John telling us many things. The followers of Jesus had come to recognize *Jesus* as the place God dwelled. Remember that the temple had already been destroyed by the time they are reading this gospel. So John is telling them that God has not abandoned them, God has not gone away just because the temple – where they as good Jews had come to meet and worship God – had been destroyed. No, God is present in *Jesus* – and thus is still and always with them.

That is quite some message, actually. You can find God outside the Temple. And you can worship God without coins or prescribed sacrifices and ritual. And herein is another of the community's key understandings about God and Jesus: Jesus has come to reveal that God is passionate, and God is accessible – more than we can know. And JESUS is passionate - about clearing away anything that will get in the way of God's people knowing God's love for them. Jesus has come to make God *accessible*.

It is also only in John's gospel that we have the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, who asks Jesus where people should worship God – on Mount Gerizim (as the Samaritan's believed) or at the temple in Jerusalem – and Jesus says to her verbally what he spoke through his actions in this morning's gospel passage: "The hour is coming when you will worship God neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship God in spirit and truth.... God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth."

Jesus is upset in this version of the story because the relationship of the people to God has been made into a marketplace. It is *transactional*; the people have been told that they must atone for their sins – all their violations of those Ten Commandments and the multitude of other laws written after them. There is no hope here. As the psalmist says, "Who can tell how often he offends?" And the people must obtain God's favor by making sacrifices. It's a *quid pro quo* relationship – you will get something only if you give something. There is no true reconciliation here, and no freedom.

What Jesus tells us repeatedly, though, is that our relationship with God is grounded in Love – because that is the *nature* of God. All those many commandments are contained in two: Love of God, and love of neighbor.

We see the *passion* of Jesus in this gospel passage. Usually we think of the crucifixion when we talk about the Passion of Jesus – but here, we see Jesus being “passionate” – perhaps *angry* – and that tells us anger is not always a bad thing. What we get angry about can tell us what we want to change. What am I passionate about? Perhaps a better question is, am I passionate about the same things Jesus was passionate about? One writer said, “Part of our commitment to following Jesus has to involve our being committed to what mattered to him... letting what Jesus got worked up about shape what we get worked up about.”

There was a line in our opening hymn – and I apologize for the last line getting cut off in the bulletin. But the line that stood out for me was, “Keep these laws and find within them where my love and justice meet.”

Our passion, if it is real, will lead us to action. We, too, are called to clear away – for ourselves and for everyone else – anything that is an obstacle to knowing the love that is God. Those obstacles may be “religious truths” that we’ve absorbed and held as hallmarks, but which really hold us bound into a vision of God that is too small and that is not true! They also may be societal systems that tell some people that they are literally worth-less. It is said that charity is bringing drinking water to people whose water is undrinkable – and justice is going upstream to see why their water isn’t drinkable to begin with.

This week we’re invited by our *Living Well Through Lent* reflections to work on listening to our neighbor – neighbors far away...and those in our own families. Let us hold onto the practices we’ve begun in listening to God, and then move toward opening our hearts to our neighbors – singing that song of God – of hope, reconciliation, and freedom for all of us. Amen.

- [Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16](#)
- [Romans 4:13-25](#)
- [Mark 8:31-38](#)
- [Psalm 22:22-30](#)