

## **SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON**

### **Third Sunday in Lent**

**March 7, 2021**

#### **Psalm 19:1–14 (ESV):**

- 1 The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
- 2 Day to day pours out speech,  
and night to night reveals knowledge.
- 3 There is no speech, nor are there words,  
whose voice is not heard.
- 4 Their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.  
In them he has set a tent for the sun,
- 5 which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber,  
and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy.
- 6 Its rising is from the end of the heavens,  
and its circuit to the end of them,  
and there is nothing hidden from its heat.
  
- 7 The law of the LORD is perfect,  
reviving the soul;  
the testimony of the LORD is sure,  
making wise the simple;
- 8 the precepts of the LORD are right,  
rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the LORD is pure,  
enlightening the eyes;
- 9 the fear of the LORD is clean,  
enduring forever;  
the rules of the LORD are true,  
and righteous altogether.
- 10 More to be desired are they than gold,  
even much fine gold;

sweeter also than honey  
and drippings of the honeycomb.

11 Moreover, by them is your servant warned;  
in keeping them there is great reward.

12 Who can discern his errors?  
Declare me innocent from hidden faults.

13 Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins;  
let them not have dominion over me!  
Then I shall be blameless,  
and innocent of great transgression.

14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable in your sight,  
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

### **First Reading: Exodus 20:1–17 (ESV):**

#### **The Ten Commandments**

20 And God spoke all these words, saying,

2 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

3 “You shall have no other gods before me.

4 “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

5 You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

7 “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

8 “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. 11 For in six days the LORD

made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

12 “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

13 “You shall not murder.

14 “You shall not commit adultery.

15 “You shall not steal.

16 “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

17 “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.”

**EPISTLE: 1 Corinthians 1:18–31 (ESV):**

**Christ the Wisdom and Power of God**

18 For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. 30 And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us

wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

### **THE GOSPEL - John 2:13–25 (ESV):**

#### **Jesus Cleanses the Temple**

**13** The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. **14** In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. **15** And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. **16** And he told those who sold the pigeons, “**Take these things away; do not make my Father’s house a house of trade.**” **17** His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

**18** So the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?” **19** Jesus answered them, “**Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.**” **20** The Jews then said, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?” **21** But he was speaking about the temple of his body. **22** When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

#### **Jesus Knows What Is in Man**

**23** Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. **24** But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people **25** and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

### **Sermon 10 – Third Sunday of Lent**

#### **“Old Righteousness”**

#### **Exodus 20:1-17**

Dear friends,

Law. It is a profession but also a concept, it deals with justice, fairness, these kinds of things. Law is also one of the main things that God has to say to human beings. He spends an enormous amount of time in the Old Testament talking laws, talking rules, and meting out punishments and blessings based on those rules. It's easy to draw conclusions from this and many Christians do, and many Christians draw wrong conclusions from this, which is understandable, but still wrong. In our Old Testament lesson today we have *the* Law, the one that governs Jew and Christian alike, God's premier and never-changing standard for what is right and what is wrong. What can we learn from this? A lot. What can you veteran Christians learn from this, that you didn't at Sunday School or Confirmation? Well, let's see. Today we'll talk law, what it means, what it is, and why it exists.

Moses has brought the Israelites to Mount Sinai, the mountain God chose as the stage for this particular act of revelation. The entire nation is here, camped around this mountain. They have been told not to actually go onto the mountain itself, on pain of death. In the chapter before this, God further warns (He actually says it several times) that He is not going to tolerate mob behavior in His people. He tells the priests to bar the the people from approaching the mountain, they're just to stand on the periphery, watching and listening. Moses goes back and forth from the mountain to God, bringing the people's words to God, and God's words to the people. This is exactly what a priest does, it is Moses fulfilling his most basic function as priest, being the carrier pigeon of exchange. After the people have more or less settled down, God speaks these words to Moses in their hearing. Mount Sinai is on fire and covered with smoke. Either God caused a volcanic eruption, or something indescribably supernatural is happening, we're not sure, either way, fire and smoke and incredibly loud noise is repeated a number of times throughout chapter 19. So when chapter 20 starts, God's voice comes to all Israel and Moses faces the brunt of it. And here is what God has to say:

**“And God spoke all these words, saying, 2 “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”** It is easy to forget that the Ten Commandments start not with a command, but with a statement of grace, and that is what this is. God doesn't start by barking orders, God starts by reviewing the parameters He Himself has set up, and those parameters are defined by gracious action that human beings in no way have earned. He says, I am God, and this is who I am. I am the God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt and the house of slavery. I did this for you, Israel. Not in a “you owe me” sense, but in an opening position of generosity and consideration. Israel is already free, that's done, and God has done it, and Israel now benefits from it, and it is from that, from God's action, God's freedom, does their relationship begin. This is actually considered by Jews to be part of the Ten Commandments, this is their “first word” of the whole thing, and I think they're onto something with that. For Christians, for you, this is the same. God doesn't come at you with demands, He comes at you with gifts, freely given, out of His own heart. God always acts first, and He always acts for us. His opening statement to you is “I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,” followed by “I forgive you all your sins.” We've opened worship with those very words because those very words are how God begins His relationship with you every day.

Now the commands start. **“You shall have no other gods before me. 4 You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”** In this the pattern repeats. All the commandments are elegantly summarized here, because every commandment that follows calls back to this first one. By breaking any of the following commandments, you break the first one, because you

demonstrate that God is not your God. By lying, you say that the truth doesn't matter, when God has said that it does. By coveting, you are saying with that you know better than God, that you should have that thing, which takes God off His throne in your heart, and replaces you with God, which is the natural human tendency. God does not screw around here, stating very clearly that there are consequences for making idols of anything that is not Him. Our God is the only thing worth worshipping, because He is the only being with the power and the will and the righteousness to issue a command like this, expect obedience, and back it up. The devil doesn't qualify, because the devil is neither righteous nor true, incapable of living up to whatever standard he sets. And since God and the devil are the only supernatural beings out there, that pretty much omits everything except God.

Including, especially, us. God sets these laws for us to tell us what right and wrong is, but most of all God sets these in stone to tell us what wrong is, and that we are it. We are wrong. The Commandments, and God's words here, draw the harshest white and black line possible in order to show us where we fall on that line, which is on the wrong side. The rest of the Scriptures will call this sin, but the Ten Commandments are where we see this most harshly displayed. Do you and I make carved idols? No. Our gods are in our hearts, and this merits the same judgment and the same punishment.

Yet even in that description, God is revealing His attitude here, His preferences. He talks about jealousy and punishment, that He will not suffer another god in our life. That sounds very much not like the God that we picture. It sounds intolerant, a bit spiteful maybe. More to the point, it sounds... petty. More than anything, it begs the question of *why* God is this way, and *why* God has given us this first and most stringent of commandments. He visits anger on the third or fourth generation, so God's anger is a fierce thing and it lasts. But, He shows love to a thousand generations. God's love is greater than His anger towards sin. God's care for us is greater than His need to see us punished in the way we deserve. God cannot ignore sin, He cannot just brush away evil.

He must punish it. He considers worship of anything other than Him to be evil, and so must we. Yet we break this all the time, God is fully aware of this, and so He keeps the strength of the commandment, its harshness, its uncompromising nature. This is evil. That doesn't change. What changes is what's next, God's love, that is where the change comes in.

For the people of Israel, this change came about in different ways, and was tied to their land and their nation. For us, this change comes about in Holy Baptism, in absolution, in our return to God every day. This change is available to us all day every day, it is one "I'm sorry, please forgive me" away from you at all times and in all places. Jesus makes this possible and Jesus makes this shine as brightly as God's words do. God doesn't want to hurt anyone, He doesn't want to damn people, He doesn't want sin to wreck things the way it does. But God is not going to pretend it's all okay, God isn't going to ineffectually pat us on the shoulder. He's going to make sure the evil is punished and His people are saved, and Jesus accomplishes this in one swoop.

How does this change everything that follows? In strange ways. The Law for you and I is in full force, dear friends. These are rules and they do not change, they are there. Idolatry is wrong, murder is wrong, lies are wrong. Church is right, honoring parents is right, and so forth. We break these rules in spirit if not in actuality, and God doesn't distinguish between the two. There is enough lawbreaking immorality between you and I to account for a lifetime of damnation and much much more, let alone the world, let alone all of human history. Yet we are Christian. To be Christian is to believe that we cannot, categorically, for even a New York minute, keep any word of these. As I have tried to demonstrate, the First Commandment alone is an insurmountable obstacle, there is always something we fear love or trust more than God. There is always always something we want more than God. To be Christian is to give up the need to keep these for ourselves, to give up the need to be good for ourselves, righteous for ourselves, to be right before God for ourselves. To be Christian is to believe that Christ has done all that. He kept these

commandments perfectly, and He did it on my behalf. I don't have to do all this to make God happy, I don't have to somehow dodge the wrath of an all-powerful and all-seeing God because Jesus absorbed that wrath on the cross.

Party time, right? Far from it. The Law, the Ten Commandments, for Christians stands first of all as a reminder of our inability to keep the law of God. It stands as a testimony and a signpost of just how lost and wicked we are. It reminds us that when God thinks of us, He thinks nothing good of us, for there is nothing good in us. That reminder is to drive us to Jesus, to send us there knowing we need Him and what He offers. This is not misanthropic reflection, we are not supposed to be on some kind of rollercoaster of perpetual ups and downs, miserable one moment and super happy the next. That would be not only weird but missing the point. The Law stands as a barrier against pride and self-righteousness, and we humans are so very very good at thinking we're better than just about anyone.

Furthermore, these rules stand. Are they signposts to heaven? Hardly. Christianity is not just about heaven, Christianity is not just about the endgame, it is about the road there. This world is quite frankly awful enough, and the Law stands to tell us how to make it less awful. We are to be leaky buckets of God's grace, not just in what we share about the faith, but in our conduct in general. We are to be lights shining in a dark world, and these things blessedly tell us how we may shine. We can school our tongues, we can control our hands. We can let our forgiveness flow freely, we can have our words be both truthful and kind. These good works are all in your power, right now, to access. You have been given that wonderful gift by Christ, not just forgiveness, but freedom to do the good, to make your words salt and light like Jesus says. You will screw it up and your sin will get in the way, it will redirect you. What of it? Just like God's anger can never compare to His love, our sin can never compare to the grace that God has shown to us. Forgiveness is always stronger, righteousness is always bigger, light is always better than dark. That is God's work, not yours. That is God's righteousness, not yours, in Christ Jesus for you. That

is God's goodness in you, not yours. God can always outdo your evil with His good. Fear your evil, yes, that's healthy. But do not ever fear God's good within you. It shines brighter than your darkness, and He will make it shine out of you.

He's shown you the way. These laws are goodness, they are right, they are timeless. Memorize them again, like you did in confirmation. Align your hearts to the principals they teach. Ignore the false, hyped-morality that the world peddles. Not only is it hysterically overdone, it changes seemingly every time someone has a new idea. These things are ancient, constant, and divine, they will never fail you. They will show you what truth is, compassion is, and what right and wrong look like. God has told us that they never pass, that His words aren't just wind. Jesus has told us this is the way to be righteous, and He has made it so that this righteousness is at our fingertips. It is yours. Christ has given it to you. All these are you.

Amen.