Sermon for the 3rd Sunday in Lent

March 3, 2024

Exodus 20:1-17

For centuries, Lent has been a time of preparation for the church. Those who would be baptized at the Easter Vigil would spend the weeks of Lent in prayer and study, perhaps fasting, to prepare their hearts and minds.

The readings assigned during Lent reflect that practice, reminding us of the promises God made and the ways that God has remained faithful to those promises throughout history. Hearing them encourages those preparing for baptism to trust the promise that God forgives our sins.

This year, we hear a series of covenants. Each of them, in some form, offers us insight into God’s relationship with the people. Whether they use the words or not, they basically say,

“I’m your God, you’re my people, and here’s what that means for us.”

We’ve heard about the covenant spoken to Noah and his family and the covenant spoken to Abraham and Sarah. Through both, people learned that God can be trusted, even when what God promises seems impossible, even when it seems to be taking too long to come to pass.

Today, we get words that we’re probably not used to thinking of as a covenant. But they follow that basic covenant pattern: “I am the Lord your God. Here’s what that means.”

God begins speaking to the people with a reminder of what they’ve already experienced: “I brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

The people were at Mt. Sinai, and they’d only been on the road for a few months. The memory life in Egypt was still fresh. So was the way God provided for them along the way, the manna and quail and the visible sign of God’s presence among them in the pillar of cloud by day, the pillar of fire by night.

To those people, God essentially says, “You’ve seen what I can do. If you trust me, if you trust my promise that I’ll provide for your needs, then you’ll have no other gods but me. You’ll be careful with how you use my name. You’ll take a day of rest. You’ll take care of your parents. You won’t take what is your neighbor’s.”

These words are a promise to a people who have already been redeemed. God’s gift of salvation – freedom from slavery, deliverance from their enemies, provision in the wilderness – comes *before* God teaches the people what they will be like living as freed people.

And while the words we hear today remind us that our choices can have ramifications that extend beyond our own lifetimes, *nowhere* does God say, “and if you don’t do all this, if you *aren’t* perfect at living like this, I will stop being your God. I will stop loving you.”

By remembering how God had provided for them, the people were invited to trust that God would continue to be faithful.

They learned what was important to God, too. Because if this is what we’re like when we trust in God, then this must tell us what God values.

But these words also tell us that, when we aren’t trusting that God will provide, when we don’t take a day of rest for worship and reconnection with creation, when we take what belongs to others, then those offenses are not just against our neighbor. They’re offenses against God, as well.

The words of Exodus 20 are a part of the covenant God made with Moses and the Israelites.

When we forget that they are a part of the Covenant, it’s all too easy for them to become a holy to do list. Or a holy to don’t list, I guess. And all sorts of messy things can happen when we treat them solely as laws. Like assuming there’s one and only one way to understand what it means to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Or honoring the letter of the law, and thinking we’re OK because we didn’t take someone else’s stuff.

But when we remember that they’re part of an invitation to trust in God’s faithfulness, then it’s easier to see that it’s not just a lack of doing a harmful thing that matters.

When we trust that God provides for our needs, then we are freed from the fears and anxieties that might tempt us to take what isn’t ours. Freed from the fear that we won’t have enough, freed from the fear that we might lose God’s favor, it’s easier to be the kind of people who do things so that our neighbors can flourish.

When I was a kid, there were some pretty busy streets near the street we lived on. So I basically had two blocks I could spend my time on, roaming around, playing with friends.

We all knew that staying on those 2 blocks and making sure we were home before the sun set were two of the basic rules our parents set for us. If we broke a rule, we learned that our parents would still love us, but there would be ramifications for our disobedience.

There were only a few kids my age on those 2 blocks, which made it important to not be a jerk. Because you wouldn’t have anybody else to play with if you were mean or if you were selfish. There wasn’t a list of rules that we could recite, but we knew them, because we learned what happened when someone broke them.

What I ended up absorbing was that our parents’ rules about staying on those two blocks kept us safe from harm. Learning to play nicely with others gave me a community.

Thousands of years ago, as the people spent time in the wilderness, they were absorbing lessons. They were learning how to be a community. And they were learning how to be faithful to the God who brought them out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. Instead of being oppressed by the Egyptians, they were freed people who needed to learn to govern themselves, make decisions about their welfare. Things their people hadn’t been able to do for generations.

What God tells them here in Exodus 20 is basically, if you trust me, this is the kind of people you will learn to be. In the process, you’ll form a community where everyone is safe. Where everyone flourishes.

We need these words to be **both** a promise of what happens because we trust, **and** guidelines for when it’s hard to trust. Because life is hard and messy and it’s not always easy to trust that God will provide for our needs.

But if God can raise Jesus from the dead, then God can surely supply our needs.

Remembering how God has provided for us in the past, we, too can grow in our trust that God will be faithful in the future.

Let us pray: Gracious God, help us to hear your Word, trust and obey it, so that we become instruments of your redeeming love. Amen.