

# Sermon: Lent III

The Rev. Mike Wernick

March 8, 2015

Year B  
Exodus 20:1-17  
Psalm 19  
1 Corinthians 1:18-25  
John 2:13-22

Less than a month after I arrived here... I preached on this passage from Exodus... and because there are striking parallels between the creation stories in the ancient near Eastern Enuma Elish and those in Genesis... and the flood stories in the Gilgamesh Epic and those in Genesis... I talked about how the form of the Ten Words... or Ten Statements... was almost certainly based... on the ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaty form... which first defined who the overlord was... then recounted what they had done for the people... and finally outlined what was expected of them...

Having just come out of Egypt... the Israelites knew what it was to be dominated by pharaoh... they knew the hardships it entailed and the little it provided... but using the form of an aNE treaty in this way and for this purpose would have been unprecedented and brilliant ... because now the ten words define relationship... *I am the Lord your God*... tell what God had done for the Israelites... *who brought you out of the land of Egypt*... and what the Israelites were to do... and by applying it in this new way... in this new relationship... there was a pivotal shift for this people and for their future...

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote: *These commands might be taken... not as a series of rules... but as a proclamation from God's own mouth... of who God is... and how God shall be practiced* ... I like that... *how God shall be practiced... by this community of liberated slaves*...

And today's covenant shifts its focus... from the previous ones with Noah and Abraham... to an entire people... it moves from individual behavior to corporate behavior... from what's asked of individuals... and as a result... it creates a more

ordered relationship between God and Israel... which results in a social contract of sorts among the people themselves... and we have the opportunity to consider how God's relationship with these ancient people... reflects God's relationship with us today...

On Lent I we read the Decalogue... and responded with **Amen. Lord have mercy**... as a way of reminding ourselves about what is expected out of this relationship... as a way of reminding ourselves about the kind of behavior that ought to come... not from rules imposed from the outside... but from one unified inner reference point...

In today's Epistle... we hear about how God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom... and how God's weakness is stronger than human strength... and it reminds me of similar words in Isaiah... for your thoughts are not my thoughts... and your ways are not my ways...

In his book The Underground Church... Pastor Robin Meyers takes a look at how Jesus' wisdom makes ours look foolish... how he behaved according to a higher set of standards... even when those standards seemed *out there*... and he describes just how much of an insurrectionist Jesus really was... and writes about how we have sanitized him... reigned him in... made him into the kind of person you'd like to invite to tea...

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries... at a time when the new discipline of psychiatry was full of itself... there was a veritable outbreak of research into the mental health of Jesus... I mean... he did hear voices... and see visions... and even Albert Schweitzer took note of this analysis... and tried to soften it by reminding people that much of the New Testament is mythological... especially John... and so they couldn't reach any meaningful conclusions about Jesus' mental health... but Jesus did challenge the *status quo* of his day... he did sometimes seem to be on the edge... he did behave in ways that seemed out of control...

In Mark 3... there's that puzzling claim... when people were saying: *He has gone out of his mind*... the Greek word... *existemi*... has been translated as *being beside himself*... but it can also mean *bewitched*... *out of one's wits*... or *insane*...

And I like the idea... that in overturning the money changer's tables... Jesus' behavior... driven as it may have been by a consuming zeal... and which may have *seemed* insane to those witnesses who had bought into the *status quo*... was just what God wanted him to do... because the *status quo* kept the imbalances and injustices... in balance... and it makes me wonder... what kinds of *status quos* have we bought into... and what kinds of tables God might want us to overturn...

Then there's that delightful little story about Jesus cursing the fig tree for not bearing fruit *out of season*... and it withering away... Meyers wrote: but maybe it *was* the season for fruit... and the Gospel poets *moved* the triumphal entry... from fall to early spring... so that it would coincide with Passover... and if Jesus was in fact... on the way to his own execution... then who can blame him for one more metaphor about the barrenness of religion... if the fig tree and the money changer's tables represent everything corrupt in the system that brokered access to God... according to rank... privilege... and purity... then to curse it for not bearing fruit... is to curse the whole system... and we too must wonder... what systems do we see producing nothing... and do we continue to support them... or do we curse them...

Our friend Thomas Merton... once composed a critique of sanity... as it applied to nuclear strategic planning by the military-industrial complex... Merton called his piece... *A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann*... Merton wrote: one of the most disturbing facts that came out in the Eichmann trial... was that a psychiatrist examined Eichmann... and pronounced him perfectly sane... [Merton wrote:] I do not doubt it at all... and that's precisely why I find it so disturbing... apparently Eichmann slept well... had a good appetite... and only *seemed* disturbed when he actually visited Auschwitz...

And apparently... not a single Nazi believed that any of his comrades had lost their minds... they were proud of their jobs and deeply patriotic...

But Merton added... we rely on the sane people of the world to preserve it from barbarism... madness... destruction... and now it begins to dawn on us... that it is precisely the sane ones... who are the most dangerous...

Apparently... Meyers wrote: it takes a Christian mystic like Merton... to recognize that if the world itself has gone insane... then the last thing we need... is the kind of Christianity that we equate with sanity... especially if such sanity means that we have lost our capacity to love other human beings... to respond to their needs and their suffering... to recognize them also as persons... to apprehend their pain as one's own...

If so... then we are the ones who have gone mad... we are the ones who have lost touch with reality by justifying torture... by stockpiling enough nuclear weapons to make the world's rubble bounce 10 times... we are the ones who not only fail to recognize our face in the face of the enemy... but also pronounce them *evildoers* in the name of Jesus...

Perhaps in a country with the best stadiums and the worst schools in the developed world... where the salaries of helmeted athletes and helmeted soldiers seem somewhat out of whack... Jesus might just go ballistic on us... wondering why we know the cost of so much and the value of so little...

But there is still time during Lent... to continue our Exodus journey... because we haven't quite reached the Promised Land of God's freedom... we're not quite free enough yet from the things which enslave us... there are still too many walking across the Edmund Pettus Bridge... and although the Law is slowly being written on our hearts... as the prophets predicted... we're also the ones who hear too many voices which distract us but didn't distract Jesus... we're also the ones who see too many

things which cloud our vision but didn't cloud Jesus'... we're also the ones who have too many mental distractions which distract our decisions but which didn't distract Jesus'...

There is still time during Lent... to reflect on whether our nation's behavior is sane or not... whether it abides by the Spirit of these ten words... and whether the way we *practice our God*... is the proclamation that comes out of God's mouth... or the one that comes out of ours...

There is still time during Lent... to think about how we can push some boundaries... not leave well enough alone... ask impolite questions... speak truth to power... lash ourselves to the pews... become the kind of people we might not invite for tea... because we're learning what matters... because we're working to uphold these covenants with God... and because we're discovering that we have little or no patience for the things that keep God's *already* kingdom... from being fully realized... and again we say... Amen. Lord have mercy...

Mike+