

Ash Wednesday, February 26, 2020

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

Lent, the Fourth Commandment, and Your Father in Heaven

Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 6:12a, 13–15

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

“Take care lest you forget the LORD. . . . It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by His name you shall swear. You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you—for the LORD your God in your midst is a jealous God—lest the anger of the LORD your God be kindled against you” (vv 12a, 13–15).

Last year our Lenten midweek services touched on the first table of God’s law, the first, second, and third commandments. This year we focus on the second table, the fourth through tenth commandments, looking especially at the fourth commandment today.

First, I want to make a confession about this reading from Deuteronomy 6:

I find it discouraging.

And before you ask—no, that’s *not* why I chose it.

Lent may be solemn, but it doesn’t have to be gloomy.

The best description of Lent I’ve ever heard is “bright sadness.”

But I can’t see much that’s bright in this part of Deuteronomy.

It’s not that Moses’ words are sad in themselves.

Quite the opposite.

They’re energetic and moving.

The problem is that I know what’s going to happen next, and it’s not pretty.

Listening to Moses in Deuteronomy

is like hearing the coach’s inspiring pep talk before the big game . . .

when you already know the team gets totally annihilated.

And I mean *totally* annihilated—

Jerusalem, the capital city, sacked,

temple destroyed,

the last thing the king sees —
before his eyes are plucked out and he's taken into exile —
the last thing he sees is the execution of his sons.
There's no sweet comeback or silver lining to it.

Now Moses comes way, way before that,
but looking back it seems that everything that could've gone wrong did go wrong.

When life is good and there's material prosperity and peace,

"take care lest you forget the LORD" (v 12)

. . . and they forgot Him.

"It's the LORD your God you shall fear" (v 13)

. . . but they didn't fear Him.

"Him you shall serve and by His name you shall swear" (v 13)

. . . but they served and swore by others.

"You shall not go after other gods" (v 14)

. . . and they *did* go after the gods of the people around them.

"For the LORD your God in your midst is a jealous God" (v 15)

. . . He sure is.

"Lest the anger of the LORD your God be kindled against you" (v 15)

. . . as it most definitely was.

How did Israel get *there*?

How did they *forget* the LORD,

the LORD whose rescue of them from Egypt was so, so, so unforgettable?

Lately I've been asked a similar question more than once:

How did it get to this?

This political discord and social rancor;

this violence and abuse and porn culture;

this deadly coronavirus and flu season;

this total breakdown of marriage, family, sexuality, and gender;

the recent burial in Indiana of the remain of two thousand aborted children.

There's a growing lament and concern about our society and where we're at.

That's what happens when the fear and love of God grow cold,

when faith wither and dies,

when His name is dishonored and His word is despised.

These things have consequences,
consequences not just for our relationship with God,
but consequences also for our relationships and life in this world.

So what happened?

The commandments, the statutes, and the rules

that the LORD commanded Moses to teach the people (v 1)

were addressed to the adult generation listening—to **you**—

and to **your son and your son's son** (v 2).

Three generations.

Maybe that's the clue.

They were given the great *Shema*, the creed and confession of ancient Israel:

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart

and with all your soul and with all your might,

and the words that I command you today shall be on your heart.

You shall teach them diligently to your children,

and talk about them when you sit at home,

and when you go out,

and at night,

and in the morning,

and put them on your hands and between your eyes,

and at the entrances to your home (vv 4–9).

God's word, His commandments included, was supposed

to saturate the lives of His people Israel,

and our lives, too.

It starts with a breakdown of the first three commandments,

and then goes haywire with the breakdown of the Fourth Commandment:

Honor your father and your mother

that your days may be long in the land

that the LORD your God is giving to you (Ex 20:12).

What happened in Israel?

What is happening among us?

People despise and mock authorities, instead of praying for them.

They hate to be governed and told what to do (*I hate to be told what to do!*).

They are disobedient, insolent, and sullen toward parents.

They are rude to teachers and fight their superiors.

They ignore and thumb their nose
at the things they've been taught by their spiritual leaders.
But it cuts the other way, too.
There's the failure of parents, both fathers and mothers,
to fulfill their God-given task,
not just to provide for and protect their children,
but to nurture them in the faith.
There's the failure of spiritual leadership,
of pastors and other Christians to teach the faith.
There's the failure of our authorities and rulers
to make just laws and administer them properly.

What human community can survive in a world like this?
God gave us parents and other authorities
to protect us against the breaking in of chaos.
We were placed into these orders for our good.
The Fourth Commandment is meant to be a safeguard for us.
When that gets chucked,
what further protection do we have?
The order and peace established by God is at stake.
That's what we lose when we lose the Fourth Commandment,
when we forget the Lord our God,
for our Fourth Commandment failures from below and above.

The Fourth Commandment won't lead us to heaven,
but it sure does help with life here on earth.

Our God is a jealous God.
He will not be mocked—
not in His own person,
nor as He comes to us through parents and other authorities.
Surely His anger is kindled against us.

So how do we deal with this mess,
with a Fourth Commandment that's not just broken
but shattered?

It starts with repentance

Not with repentance *out there*, but with repentance *in here*. With us.

**“Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and He relents over disaster”**
(Joel 2:13).

“On behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

**For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin,
so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God”** (2 Cor 5:20b–21).

Now I remember how it ends.

It didn't end with the total annihilation of Israel,
with hell and damnation for them,
not for those who returned, not for those who repented.

Though everything that could go wrong has gone wrong and does go wrong,
one thing went right.

[God] turned to me — *and to you* — a Father's heart,
He did not choose the easy part,
But gave His dearest treasure.

God said to His beloved Son,
It's time to have compassion.
Then go, bright jewel of My crown,
And bring to all salvation.
From sin and sorrow set them free,
Slay bitter death for them that they,
May live with Me forever.

The Son obeyed His Father's will
Was born of virgin mother,
And God's good pleasure to fulfill
He came to be our brother,
His royal pow'r disguised He bore
A servant's form, like mine He wore,
To lead the devil captive. (LSB 556:4–6)

The brightness of Lent is the brightness of what we see at the end:

It's the brightness of the cross —
shining from that deepest darkness.

The Son who honored His Father,
and who prayed not for His own will be done but “Thy will be done,”
and who took the cup,
and who drank the chaos and judgment and wrath to the very bitter bottom.

No matter how badly you’ve screwed up as an authority,
and no matter how badly the authorities have screwed it up for you,
and no matter how terrible it may get,
you’ve got something far better through Christ:
YOU HAVE A DEAR FATHER IN HEAVEN.

Christ has reconciled you to the Father.
Remember that jealous God?
Now His jealousy doesn’t oppose you; it protects you.
Remember His anger?
Now His anger is no longer kindled against you. It fell on Christ.
And our Father still gives parents and other authorities,
as broken as they may be.
He still serves us forgiven sinners through those broken vessels.
And He still serves others sinners through us broken vessels.
And we believe that He’s working for our good,
even—no, especially when we can’t see it.

Your Father who is in heaven knows and sees what you do.
Even when the right hand doesn’t know what the left hand is doing,
He knows.
He sees what you give to the needy.
He sees you pray in secret, and He hears those prayers—
your prayers for parents and authorities and pastors
and for everyone committed to your care.
He sees your fasting,
even when no one else can see it.
He is **the LORD your God**,
the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who gives the promised Holy Spirit.

Now it's less sad and more bright.

Now we take up the sign of the cross—

black and ashy as it is—

and we pick up the Fourth Commandment, too,

praying that our Father in heaven

would set our hearts to obey this and all the other commandments,

and also that we, being defended from the fear of our enemies,

may live in peace and quietness;

through Jesus Christ, our Savior.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ
Jesus.

Phil 4:7
