

The Second Sunday in Lent
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Bang

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Our first Thursday evening “Late Night Catechism” was a grand success. Despite the weather, a good number of us gathered for our traditional soup and bread dinner and were treated with four entrees that easily rivaled the finest any restaurant could offer. After dinner we joined our fine choir for a service of evening prayer in the choir chancel, and then adjourned to the Fellowship Room for the first of five in the series we’re calling “Late Night Catechism.” There were about forty catechumens that night as we explored that portion of the catechism that deals with the Ten Commandments.

We started off with a commandment puzzle, which I am pleased to report everyone completed and in the proper order with all the commandments spelled out as scripture would have them, and then went on to talk about each of the commandments separately.

I began by reminding those gathered that the commandments were the foundation upon which the Old Testament was built. No doubt you will recall what prompted their issuance: the Hebrew nation, having been freed from slavery under the Egyptian regime and led out into the wilderness by Moses after escaping from the pursuing Egyptian army, which was subsequently destroyed chasing the Israelites into the Red Sea, found itself in disarray and questioning not only its leadership in Moses and Aaron, but in God Himself. Taking all the jewelry they brought with them, some of which they stole from their masters before they left, decided to melt the gold down and cast it into a statue of a local fertility god, in hopes that this god would do a better job of caring for them in the desert than Moses’ God did.

Moses, tired of hearing their complaining, tired of hearing them say how good they had it back in Egypt (apparently their memory was short lived) and worried about this idolatry, goes up on the mountain to ask God what to do.

God is quick to remind Moses to remind the people whose short term memory seemed to be a bit impaired, that He had just rescued them from their oppressors and that He had kept His promises, and that now it was time for them to keep theirs.

And so after a time, Moses comes down the mountain with the tablets and reads them to the people.

At first glance they seem to be a list of do’s and don’ts, but they are much more than that. The Ten Commandments are the basis of the covenant that God makes with the Israelites. A covenant, as you know is a contract, a deal, an agreement between two parties; some might even say a testament. The Ten Commandments are the cornerstone of the Old Testament, the Old Covenant, the old deal God made with His people. And like modern day covenants, each party in the agreement agrees to certain things.

Last Thursday, I ask those gathered to think on other covenantal agreements to which they were obligated. We spoke of the covenant we are obligated to as citizens, as husband and wife, as lifelong partner. We spoke of the covenant we make with New York when we get our driver's license, of those with our credit card issuer, our mortgage lender, our employer, our landlord, our neighbors and so on. I then returned to the commandments and asked them if the commandments we read and know by heart speak of our do's and don'ts, thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt honor your father and mother, you shall remember the Sabbath Day and so on, but where in the commandments does it state what God promises to do, where is the landlord's portion, where is the creation's lender's obligations.

Which is when one particularly bright student said, "It's right there in the beginning, where it says, I am the Lord your God." Precisely. We have our end of the bargain, and God's end of the bargain, is to be God. And what is it that a God does? Well, to put it simply, everything else: God creates, God nurtures, God sustains, God redeems. To put it even more succinctly, if in this agreement one of the parties causes the sun to rise and set, the earth to spin on its axis, the stars to remain in their courses, the forces of nature act in order, that certainly wouldn't be me or you, and even though sometimes we act like we are, we know we are not.

I am the Lord your God, states in the briefest and most concise way possible, that it is God who is God and who does what God does, and as a result, or better as a consequence, is justified when God demands what the commandments require. And as I said that night, if you had to weigh who had the more demanding job, once again, it certainly wouldn't be us.

So the commandments are a covenant, in its purest sense, a deal made between two parties, an agreement, a testament.

I tell you all this, first in hopes that you might be persuaded to come to the next Thursday night event but also, to explain our first reading this morning from Genesis.

What's going on there is the same thing, only this time, the covenant is not between God and the people Israel, but God and Abram, and it is a covenant made not only with promises, but also one that is graphically illustrated. God asks Abram to be faithful and be a leader for His people. Abram agrees but turns to God and says that there will be no people to lead if he has no descendants. God promises that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens. Abram politely replies he hasn't seen any stars lately. God renews his promise and to seal the deal, tells Abram to go out and collect a young calf, a goat, a ram and some birds. When he does, he proceeds to cut them in half and set them on either side of an imaginary aisle. Shooing the birds of prey away from the fresh road kill, Abram sits and waits for a sign. It comes in the middle of the night when we are told a smoking fire pot and flaming torch pass between the pieces. In many Old Testament stories the presence of God is indicated by smoke and fire. In the Exodus story which we all know so well, what protected the Israelites from the pursuing Egyptians was a pillar by fire at night and a pillar of smoke by day.

In this story, the presence of God symbolized in the smoke and fire, passes through the bisecting animals. What we do now read, but which is typical in this kind of covenantal ceremony, and

documented in much literature of this period, are the words that accompanied such a ceremony. As the animals were cut in two, the two parties would pass through the carnage and say to each other as they agreed to the tenets of the agreement, "If either of us breaks this agreement, may what happened to these poor creatures happen to us." And so, emerging from the gauntlet, the deal was sealed, or "Cut". You've no doubt heard the phrase "to cut a deal." Well, it has nothing to do with cards and everything to do with this ceremony, the covenant was cut, as the sacrifice was made and the animals bisected, and the parties walked through, the deal was also cut, the covenant sealed, the agreement secured. And so, our Genesis author reports, "When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the river Euphrates,"

And they've been fighting to keep it for four thousand years.

There are multiple covenants recorded in Scripture. This is the Abrahamic covenant. There is the Noahic, made with Noah and sealed with the rainbow, the Adamic, and with Adam, the Mosaic made with Moses, the Davidic, made with David, and the one the Old Testament refers to as the "future covenant," which of course we refer to as the New Testament, the new Covenant, the covenant made between God and the new Adam, Jesus. This new covenant is the one we know, the one that tells us, again, of God's great love for us, made manifest in the person of Jesus Christ, and sealed, with his death on the cross on the one side of the aisle and his resurrection on the other. Someday, we too, will walk between them and secure our eternity.

Amen.