

MARCH 2021 DEVOTIONS

SUNDAY, MARCH 7, 2021

Gift of the Ten Commandments - Exodus 20:1-17 (NRSV)

Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work —you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

The joy and celebration of the Christmas and Epiphany season precede the season of Lent, somber, and a time to repent. We are called to reflect upon our lives and how we have failed to embody a Christ-likeness in our lives.

Following liberation from their bondage in Egypt, this covenant provided a gift that would help the people of Israel structure and shape their lives in relationship with God. This was not a punishment, rather a means of protection for the both individuals and the community of Israel that provided a path for successful, fulfilling lives within their relationship with God. Here we also learn how a faithful relationship with God helped to shape a proper love for our neighbor. As Christians we know how the Ten Commandments were brought to their fullness in Jesus' life, and as a faithful witness to the church.

Lent is also a gift; a time to confess that we have not always spoken or acted in a Christ-like way. Lent can be a time for increasing our love for our neighbors - near and far, shape our lives in the way of Christ, and deepen our relationship with God.

Questions to Ponder

- What does it mean to speak and act in a Christ-like way?
- How am I reshaping a proper love for my neighbors?

Prayer

Holy God in you alone I find refuge and release from whatever holds me in bondage. Help my words, my acts, my very life to be Christ-like. Amen.

SUNDAY, MARCH 14, 2021

Signs of God's Love and Mercy - Numbers 21:4-9 (NRSV)

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food." Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Moses was leading the Israelites who were freed from Egyptian bondage, and now they're complaining. They're troubled and suffering, perhaps thinking it wasn't all that bad back in Egypt. At least in Egypt they had fresh water, food to their liking,... and I'm guessing they were tired of their journey, and wondering why it was taking so long to get to their new home. This scripture reminded me of a four-hour family trip from Hershey, Pennsylvania to a town just outside of Pittsburgh. As we entered the highway (just 5-10 minutes from home), a sign appeared that read *Pittsburgh* and my preschool-aged son asked, *Are we almost there?* He didn't get whiny, but each time a sign for *Pittsburgh* appeared along the way, the same question would follow.

Most significantly the Israelites were speaking against Moses and God, and this did not go unnoticed. Snakes appeared and began biting the people. Many died, but eventually they came to their senses. They repented and pled with Moses to intervene with God. God's response? *Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.* People only had to look at the pole to be healed. The pole was a sign God's love and mercy.

Perhaps over the past year, we too have known times of suffering. During the 40 days of Lent, we can examine the brokenness and emptiness of our souls that we have sometimes felt. The Israelites saw death on a pole. Yet when the serpent on the pole was raised, they saw life.

As Christians look to the cross and see Jesus lifted high. We see death, God's love given for the world. We also see life, a resurrection. As we examine our lives during this season of Lent, lift up your eyes to the cross. Trust in the light of God's redeeming love and grace that relieves suffering and provides resurrection of our lives.

Question to Ponder

- During Lent will I choose to complain or look to the cross to receive the love and grace of God?

Prayer

Holy God. Throughout our lives, there will be times of suffering, yet I also know that your saving love and grace will bring healing and relief. Amen.

SUNDAY, MARCH 21, 2021

A New Covenant - Jeremiah 31:31-34. (NRSV)

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

These words of hope were written as the prophet Jeremiah struggled with Israel's disobedience toward God. Their disobedience led to consequences that included the downfall of their nation, leveling of the Jerusalem walls, destruction of the temple, and the exile of many to Babylon. Jeremiah ascribed this entire mess upon the Israelites, yet followed with encouraging words of hope for their future. It was not the law written on stone tablets they could disobey. Their future would be a covenant with the law they would embody, and would be written on their hearts.

Having the law of God written on our hearts invites a freedom for our words and actions to reflect what God desires for us as well. Is this not what Jesus spoke of as a sign of freedom promised by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit?

Jeremiah invites us to confess and repent because of the already-and-not-yet promise that God will forgive and not remember our sins. This scripture also invites us to prepare for the good news of Easter. Hope persists, and eventually the cross gives way to life.

Questions to Ponder

- How do my words and actions reflect the God's word written on my heart?
- As I prepare for Easter, do I know the hope that persists? How?

Prayer

Holy God. Lead me through the path of confession and repentance knowing the hope that persists in your word that is written upon my heart. Amen.

SUNDAY, MARCH 28, 2021

God's Steadfast Love - Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29. (NRSV)

*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!
Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."*

Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it. I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

This hymn of praise is centered on God's steadfast love; the very essence of God's character. Instead of imaging God as wrathful, stern, angry, powerful, and to be feared, we find the true character of God as love.

In this psalm, we are taught that our lives are set in the context of God's love. We offer thanks because we will know brokenness, despair within our own lives, and God will save us. The Bible reveals God's saving love and grace, and we witness that in the lives of others and in our own lives as well. Our futures are based upon the faithfulness of God knowing that will endure forever. Thanks be to God.

Questions to Ponder

- Name a time when God's steadfast recused me from brokenness, despair in life.
- How does God's steadfast love provide hope for the future?

Prayer

Holy God. You've created everything that has been, is and will be. Because of your steadfast love, we can look to the future with great hope knowing that this love will endure. Amen.

Sunday, March 21, 2021

Questions to Ponder

Prayer

Sunday, March 28, 2021

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