

Sermon Lent 3, March 7, 2021 Covenant. Cleansing. Connecting.

Pray: Search me, O God and know my heart, test me and know my anxious thought. See if there's any offensive way in me and lead in the way everlasting. Amen.

And the sign said, "Long-haired freaky people, Need not apply"
 So I tucked my hair up under my hat, And I went in to ask him why
 He said, "You look like a fine upstandin' young man, I think you'll do"
 So I took off my hat and said, "Imagine that, Huh, me workin' for you!"
 Whoa, Sign, sign, Everywhere a sign, Blockin' out the scenery
 Breakin' my mind, Do this, don't do that, Can't you read the sign?

The critique of society in the song 'Signs' by Canadian rock group Five Man Electrical Band and other critiques of contemporary society, are dependent on a standard of measure. One of those enduring measures is the 10 Commandments. We don't have the original stone tablets Moses carried down from Mt Sinai, nor do I have my 45 of 'Signs,' but we have the Bible and the influence of its teaching.

Two questions arise: what if there were no 10 Commandments? And how are the two bible readings this morning linked; the 10 Commandments and Jesus rampaging through the temple? As we have explored Noah's covenant sign of the rainbow in the clouds, and Abraham's covenant sign of circumcision, we'll draw on the Covenant God makes Moses and humanity and Jesus protest.

Why focus on Covenants? God seeks to bring things together, things that may not seem like they fit. God is holy; we are human. Yet God sees us together. One of the goals of Lent is to 're-fresh' our faith or perhaps consider coming to faith for the first time, as an adult, as we follow Christ to the Cross. God seeks to restore the relationship humanity and creation once enjoyed with God. A beautiful sign. Without the covenant sign of the 10 C's, what would life be like? Who would there be to rescue or to make things right?

Life without commandments might look like what happened April 23, 2018 on Yonge Street Toronto. A 25 yr old man drives a white rental van up a busy sidewalk at high rate of speed, aiming the vehicle like a weapon at pedestrians, particularly women. He intentionally kills ten people and injures another 17. The Defense lawyer used the defendant's autism spectrum diagnosis as a defense; the Cdmt to 'not murder' not applying b/c of his intellectual deficit. In her ruling this week 'John Doe,' as he was called by the Ontario Supreme Court Judge Anne Malloy, was convicted on all 27 counts of murder or attempted murder. Even if the convicted murderer felt no remorse or no empathy for his victims, the law, the Judge stated, still applied to him. "This was the exercise of free will by a rational brain, capable of choosing between right and wrong," said Justice Molloy.

The bible says, 'Sin is lawlessness' (1 John 3:4). Sin is not anti-nomian, against the law; sin, in that passage is 'on-omos,' without law. It is anarchistic, deriving its own standards from itself, plays God, and spins its own morality for itself like a spider spinning its web.

The 10 Commandments are a gift, an establishment of boundaries that are signs of God's care and understanding of our unruly hearts, sign that pointing ahead to Christ, a skeleton of the reality Jesus embodied. Divine covenants are different animals than human ones. Human covenants are mutual agreements,

usually agreed to after lengthy negotiations by both parties that bind them to particular acts; real estate, intellectual property, a final will, or the covenant you sit down and talk with your children about, to do their homework or chores and the sticker reward system posted on the fridge. Works for a while, then, not so much.

God's covenants are initiated by God and open new possibilities for the human recipients. God covenanted with Noah not to flood the entire earth again. God covenanted with Abraham and Sarah, that they would be progenitors of a great nation.

Today we see God covenants with Moses and the people God had just rescued from slavery in Egypt. Next week, we'll look at a further promise makes with Moses regarding healing. In Exodus 20, God reminds the people of the covenant relationship they have with their Creator. "I am the Lord your God." The 10 C's are his laws for living with Him and with one another, now that they are free from oppression (found in two places Ex 20 and Dt 5). The Ten Commandments form a skeleton on which many of our society's values and laws are hung. The 10 Commandments are a sign, pointing to Christ, a skeleton of the reality Jesus embodied.

Now we come to Jesus cleansing the temple, the bible reading from John 2. While all 10 commandments were never far from Jesus' mind, when he went to the temple courtyard that day, it was most likely the first commandment on his mind and its blatant abrogation that must have most got under his skin. You shall have no other gods before Me.

It wasn't just Jesus who was critical of the temple. At that time there was growing dissent and a critique of the temple, not only among the Essenes a sect of the Jews who lived outside Jerusalem but a lot of the poor people; that the Temple and its practices were oppressive and ran to the High Priest's advantage. As Josephus, the Jewish historian recorded, the first things the Jewish rebels do in their revolt in 66 ad. is go into the Temple treasury and burn the record of debt in the temple tax bills; it's like someone hacking all the major banks' computers and deleting the balance owing on the bank overdrafts for millions of customers. So, a growing number of people thought the Temple was a bad thing. Jesus goes beyond that. Jesus is saying that God is now doing something that is making the system redundant. Transforming worship, not merely tinkering with laws.

In the outdoor courtyard of the massive temple area, where non-Jews are allowed to do the money changing and sell animals and presumably to worship, Jesus acts in a very non-Jesus, non-passive fashion, he erupts by turning over the tables of the money changers and freeing the sacrificial animals, thereby slowing down by a half hour or an hour the animal sacrifice required for the atonement of people's sin, it was not simply expressing repugnance of the commercialization of the temple, like someone protesting a book shop in a cathedral; it's not primarily that kind of protest. According to Tom Wright, Jesus' actions say that this whole system of temple and law are under judgement and one day before too long, the system will stop completely because the temple will be destroyed; which does in fact occur, in 70 ad. No more temple, no more animal sacrifice, and that's been the case for over 2000 yrs. Jesus was not only right. Jesus was putting things right. Jesus' standing up for the commandments, his cleansing the temple was a sign that worship would no longer be geographically dependent: "But a time is coming and has now come when the true

worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father is seeking such as these to worship Him. Jn4:23

When a law is broken, you change it, like the Famous Five Canadian women (Henrietta Muir Edwards, Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, Emily Murphy and Irene Parlby— their names should be as famous as Walter Gretzky or Lord Stanley’s Cup), five women who in the 1920’s successfully brought action against the Privy Council in Great Britain ruling that women under Canadian law, really are ‘persons.’ Unlike human law in need of reform, when God’s revelation like the 10 commandments are ignored, you take it deeper, where only God could take it. To humanity’s very heart.

Jesus was saying, what you have in reality, is what the law and the temple pointed to. Does this mean the law and the temple were bad things? Oh, yes, some historians will say, they thought they had to do those things with the sacrificial system and we’ve grown up and we don’t need to do that anymore. How stupid were they?!

No. To Jesus, the temple was a true sign post to God’s future and now it was ripe for destruction, not because it was a bad thing that needed to be abolished, but because it was a true sign post to the reality. When the reality has come, if people are insistent on looking at the sign post, they’ve missed the point and they’re on their way to ideology or idolatry. It’s like you’re trying to show something to a dog and you point to the object, the dog looks at your finger and not what your finger is pointing to. Architects build a model and then the actual building. The model gathers dust or gets trashed.

In that day, religious leaders were insisting on keeping not just the ten commandments but all 613 laws and looking so hard at the temple that they couldn’t see what Jesus was offering. That’s what we find in the last Supper and on the cross, Jesus was doing the reality to which the temple and the law had been pointing. If the 10 Commandments were about connecting with and honouring God and respecting others, and the law and temple system were failing miserably, here was God, fleshing out the skeleton of the law, fulfilling what a stone building and stone tablets could not.

God is not trying to crush us with red tape and regulations. The Ten Commandments are not prison bars, but traffic laws. Maybe there are some anarchists out there who think, “The world would be a better place without any traffic laws.” A few of us drive as if that were so! But even if you get impatient when you’re at a red light, try to zoom through the yellow—overall, aren’t you glad that there is some semblance of law and order? Vehicles stop and go. They slow down when driving by schools. They stop for school buses. You wouldn’t be able to drive your car to the grocery store without laws. Speed Limit signs and guardrails are there for our own good.

The Ten Commandments are not instructions on how to get out of Egypt. They are rules for a free people to stay free. Jesus, the embodiment of how to keep the law, the one who forgives, shows us the way. His temple tantrum was the right thing to do, and no animals were harmed in the protest; they were freed. That’s what the Christian religion does, frees us to live in relationship with the God who made us, free to live in peace and unity with our creator and our fellow creatures.

Sign won’t save you. Obeying them might; the Saviour will. Commandments won’t liberate you; the Lord will.

We finish where we began with the Five Man Electrical Band's 1971 hit, the last verse

And the sign said
"Everybody welcome
Come in, kneel down and pray"
But when they passed around the plate at the end of it all
I didn't have a penny to pay
So I got me a pen and a paper
And I made up my own little sign
I said, "Thank you, Lord, for thinkin' 'bout me
I'm alive and doin' fine"

Ah, the goodness of God. Amen.