

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

HOPE-DRIVEN OBEDIENCE

Exodus 20:1-17

The theme for St. Matthew's during 2009 has been *Being a community of hope*. Although we determined that hope would be the focus of the church during last summer before the economy began to collapse and even in a lull in the anxiety-producing activities of the Episcopal Church, I do not think we could have timed it better.

In concert with our theme, the Lenten programs on Wednesday have been prepared to investigate the substance of our hope. The first Wednesday evening we addressed the question, "What is hope?" Looking at the catechism in the *Book of Common Prayer*, we read that [t]he Christian hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God's purpose for the world (p 861). And we also heard from John Calvin that *Hope is nothing else than the expectation of those things which faith has believed to have been truly promised by God (Institutio III.2.42)*.

Last Wednesday we sought to answer the question, "What is the foundation of our hope?" With the help of Max Lucado's book, *3:16, the Numbers of Hope*, we were led to the fact that Jesus Christ is at the center of that famous summary of the Gospel (John 3:16):

*For God
so loved the world
that he gave his one and only Son
that whoever believes in him
shall not perish but have
eternal life.*

St. John's summary starts with God, continues with Jesus and ends with life. Jesus is central to our hope, which is the salvation of the world.

What then did Jesus say about the Law? According to St. Matthew, Jesus said, ¹⁷*"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished (5:17-18)*. If Jesus is the center of our hope and Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law, how are we to look at that part of the Law we know as the Ten Commandments?

Since our hope is predicated on the faithfulness of God and his promises and Jesus has opened the way of reconciliation with God, maybe we need to look at the commandments through the lens of that relationship. For when we look at the Ten Commandments as a list of do's and don'ts or prohibitions against damaging society or even as a recipe for

salvation, we disconnect the Law from the Law-giver. In this country we experience this practically in the functioning of the Supreme Court. Originally the judicial branch of the government was designed to be the most conservative element in the balance of governmental powers. The basis of the Court's interpretation of the Constitution was its connection to the mind of the framers. With the advent of judicial activism came the movement away from what the framers meant and toward what we want it to mean. The Constitution then evolves from an instrument of protection and guidance into a bludgeon for activism.

To understand the intent expressed in a work, one needs to look back on the situation and attitudes of the authors. Certainly when it comes to the Ten Commandments we need to look at all of Scripture to discern God's intent. But in the reading from Exodus we can glean God's intent in his one verse preamble: *²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.* If the Commandments were given in the context of the promise would not that cause us to read them a bit differently?

Imagine yourself standing in front of an unexpected benefactor who is promising to leave his entire vast fortune to you in the future. First, he reads his signed promise to you. Then he tells you that there are certain conditions you must meet in order to obtain the promised gift. The list goes like this:

1. You must acknowledge me as your benefactor and not attribute your good fortune to another;
2. You must not tell lies or say negative things about me; and
3. You must not disgrace me by being convicted of doing something illegal.

Even though the consequence of not meeting those conditions is the loss of the gift – who would not want to conform to them anyway? It is clear that the promise outweighs any possible reluctance to conform to someone else's criteria.

In the case of the Ten Commandments, you can add to that the fact that the One who makes the promise has both a proven track record and is absolutely faithful. So what would the Commandments look like through the lens of hope?

I am your deliverer. I am your salvation.

1. Why would you look for another God?
2. Why would you worship a lifeless idol?
3. Why would you use my name to curse and not to bless?
4. Why would you not put just one day aside to be with me?
5. Why would you dishonor the parents through whom I gave you life?
6. Why would you take away the life I gave to another and might redeem again?
7. Why would you be unfaithful to the one with whom you are to share my love?

8. Why would you not think that I cannot supply your needs, but instead take that which belongs to another?
9. Why would you ruin the reputation of one, who like you, I have created?
10. Why would you not find all your desires fulfilled in me?

Could God be asking you why you would do these things that separate yourself from him, the One who is the source of your life and your salvation? God has demonstrated his steadfast love specifically and symbolically by delivering you from slavery in Egypt – our enslavement by sin. And, he has promised to bring you to dwell with him for ever.

³...“Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: ⁴You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.” (Exodus 19:3-6)

To deny God’s Commandments is to deny God and to deny God is to deny your future. Our obedience to the Commandments is not meant to be a blind adherence to arbitrary rules, but rather hope-driven and grateful obedience to the One who was willing to die for us in order to bring us back to himself.

As a Community of Hope, let us see the Ten Commandments as God’s Ten Tools for Blessing rather than the Ten Hurdles of Salvation.

Let us pray.

Most High and glorious God, enlighten the darkness of our hearts and give us true faith, a certain hope and a perfect love. Give us a sense of the divine and knowledge of yourself, so that we may do everything in fulfillment of your holy will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Francis of Assisi, 1182-1226)

Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia, on March 15, 2009, the Third Sunday in Lent.