

# *Living in God's House*

Third Sunday in Lent

March 23, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage – Exodus 20:1-17 (NRSV)

Then God spoke all these words:

<sup>2</sup>I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; <sup>3</sup>you shall have no other gods before me.

<sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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, <sup>6</sup>but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

<sup>7</sup>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.

<sup>8</sup>Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup>Six days you shall labor and do all your work. <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>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.

<sup>12</sup>Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

<sup>13</sup>You shall not murder.

<sup>14</sup>You shall not commit adultery.

<sup>15</sup>You shall not steal.

<sup>16</sup>You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

<sup>17</sup>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.

*What the Ten Commandments are not*

The Ten Commandments sometimes make it into the news. Recently, an Alabama judge provoked a controversy by posting the Ten Commandments in his courtroom. Ted Koppel said that America's moral problems could be solved if we'd all simply follow the ethical guidelines in these commandments. These are well-intentioned actions and sentiments, but misguided. The Ten Commandments are not ethical guidelines for humanity. Most humans might agree that we shouldn't murder or steal. But what is a Hindu or a Wiccan to make of the commandment to avoid the misuse of Yahweh's<sup>1</sup> name or to keep the Sabbath holy? Such commandments are meaningless to those who do not worship the LORD God or even acknowledge his existence. So, if the Ten Commandments are not guidelines for humanity, what are they? This can be understood by putting the passage in context.

## The Presence of God

Presence is a wonderful thing. We can talk with loved ones on the phone, but nothing is like being with them. When Job was stuck by tragedy, his friends came and simply sat with him for seven days. They knew that Job needed the comfort of their presence.

When God gives his people the Ten Commandments, he is present with them. Indeed, they all hear his voice. God promises that his presence would go with them. God instructs them to build a tabernacle, and later a temple, in which his presence would dwell. What a remarkable proclamation – that God dwells with his people!

In his letters, Paul teaches that the Holy Spirit is God's presence with us. He describes the community of God's people, the church, as God's temple, "built together in the Spirit into a dwelling place for God" (Ephesians 2:22). But not only does the Spirit dwell in the church, but also in each of us individually. Paul writes, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God . . ." (1 Cor 6:19a).

<sup>1</sup> God's name in Hebrew is YHWH, meaning something like "I am" or "I am who I am." In our translations, we render God's name as LORD. For more on this, see the page 2 text box in the March 9 background study. All the background studies can be found at [www.standrewcl.org](http://www.standrewcl.org). Just click on "Sermon Background Studies."

## *God comes to his people*

After rescuing his people from slavery in Egypt, God has led them across the Red Sea and through the Sinai wilderness to the mountain where God had first shown himself to Moses (Exodus 3). The Israelites had arrived at Mt. Sinai, God's dwelling-place (Exodus 19). There, Moses climbs the mountain to appear before God, who proposes a covenant with the Israelites: "If you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my special treasure" (Exodus 19:3-6). When Moses returns from the mountain, the leaders of the people meet and agree to accept the covenant: "to do everything Yahweh asks of us." After all that God had done for them, the Israelites' willingness to accept God's covenant shouldn't surprise us.

Then, the most amazing thing happens. God tells Moses that he will come to the people in a cloud of smoke so they can hear the audible voice of God! God is going to spell out clearly the terms of the covenant Israel has accepted so that all can hear. Thus, Moses assembles the people at the base of the mountain where God, in smoke and fire and announced by the blowing of a ram's horn, addresses his people, "I am Yahweh, your God . . ." (these words begin today's passage).

### *Instruction in the covenant*

In God's address to those who have embraced a covenant relationship with him, Yahweh lays out a series of ten terse commandments. In these commandments, God begins to shape a people who will be holy, who will reflect God's own character. The Ten Commandments begin God's instruction on how to live in right relationship with God and with one another. This passage lies at the heart of the biblical narrative and there are at least two keys to understanding why this is so.

*First*, God's choosing and saving of Israel was never simply for their own sake but for the sake of the whole world. Looking back from Mt. Sinai, the Israelites can remember God's promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3). More than a thousand years later, Jesus would remind his disciples that they were to be the light to the world and not hide their light under a bushel basket (Matthew 5:14-16). But to be the light to the world, to be the ones through whom God would restore all creation, God's people had to grow in holiness. Their character had to reflect God's own character. The Ten Commandments begin to show the Israelites what it means to love God and to love neighbor. The commandments are inherently relational because God is inherently relational.

*Second*, God is going to dwell with his people. In Exodus 25, God gives them instructions for building a tabernacle, a moveable shrine in which God will dwell. Now, the Israelites didn't imagine that God could be contained in a tent, but they knew that God's presence would be with them in a way that he was not with other peoples. God would dwell with *them*! Imagine that God came to you and told you that he would live upstairs in your home. What a privilege; what a responsibility. The fact that God's presence would dwell amongst them meant that the Israelites had to build a community suitable for God's presence. What would such a community be like? It would be founded on two primary commitments – to love God (the first four commandments) and to love neighbor (the last six commandments).

### *Christians and the Law*

Sometimes Christians are confused by Jesus' statement that he had come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it (Matt 5:17). Too many of us are brought up in the church believing that the OT law is nothing more than a bunch of rules that Israelites/Jews tried, unsuccessfully, to keep so that they could "get to heaven." But this is woefully mistaken. Israel was to be a "holy nation," set apart for the purpose of their vocation, to be the ones through whom all creation would be restored. They were to show the world what it means to live in right relationship, to live grounded in love. More than a thousand years after Moses, Peter wrote, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). Moses could have penned those words. We do not live under the covenant of Moses, but we do live under the covenant promised by Jeremiah, a covenant written on "tablets of the heart" not "tablets of stone." Now, as then, we are called by God to be a holy people, loving God and loving neighbor, striving each day to reflect God's character in our own character.

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Exodus 19:20 God appears to Moses and the Israelites at Mt. Sinai; the Ten Commandments</p>	<p>Day 2 Exodus 21 &amp; 24 God begins to elaborate on the covenant law; Moses spends 40 days on Mt. Sinai</p>
<p>Day 3 Exodus 31:18 – 32:35 Moses gets the tablets of stone; the people abandon the covenant</p>	<p>Day 4 Exodus 33 – 34:10 God forgives his people and the covenant is renewed</p>
<p>Day 5 Jeremiah 31:31-34; 2 Corinthians 3 There will be (indeed there is!) a new covenant, written on “tablets of the heart” not on “tablets of stone”</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

## Sermon Notes

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### Spring Bible Academy Session begins this week – You are not too late!!

We are offering a variety of daytime and evening classes. There are four different courses. On Monday evenings, Scott Engle will teach *Introducing the New Testament*. On Monday mornings and Tuesday evenings, Scott will teach *Our Life in the Spirit*. Both of these classes are lecture-oriented and are suitable for those who know little about the Bible. Rev. Doug Meyer, Rev. Kathryn MaGee, and Monty Moore will teach a class on Thursday mornings based on Brennan Manning's book, *Ruthless Trust*. Also on Thursday mornings, Frankey Commer is going to lead a class on the Gospel of Mark.

We hope you'll join us for one of our spring classes! You won't regret it!

For more info and to register on-line go to [www.standrewccl.org](http://www.standrewccl.org).

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon remind us “that the commandments are so straightforward and terse suggests not that they are easy to know, but that they are not self-sufficient.” After all, not all Christians agree on what “you shall not murder” means. Is this only referring to our modern legal definition of murder or does it speak more broadly about the sanctity of life? The meaning and application of these commandments are worked out in the life of God's people. How does this happen? How do we build a community that attempts to be faithful to God's will and way, yet stays humble? Surely, sometimes we get this wrong. Hauerwas and Willimon suggest that “we don't know what adultery is apart from a church that shows us what marriage is.” Do you agree? How do we as individuals or as the church work through the meaning of these commandments? How does the church influence your own moral decisions?
2. Imagine that God came to you and proposed that he live in your house. How would this make you feel? Would it make a difference if God had done some good things for you? Suppose that God posted the Ten Commandments as new rules of the house. Do they make sense to you? Is there anything missing? Why these ten and not others? What would you like to see on the list that isn't there? As you look over the list, which ones make you the most anxious? The Jews found joy in the rules of their house (see Psalm 119). Why do you think this is so? Many of us find little joy in any rules. Even the word “obedience” can make us nervous. How can we find joy in being obedient to God's will for our lives?