

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

March 15, 2009

Lent 3B 2009

In the Name of our on living, ever surprising yet ever faithful God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our reading this morning from the Book of Exodus in the Hebrew Scriptures continues the theme of covenant from the past two Sundays. Here, God is making a covenant, a solemn treaty, with Moses and the people who will become the nation of Israelites. Unlike the past covenants with Noah and Abraham which were unilateral with all the obligations resting on God, this one is bilateral with both God and the people making solemn promises to one another. A relationship of mutual objective and mutual accountability is being born. In short, humanity is entering a partnership with God, based on this covenant, in the ongoing creative process.

The people in the story did not like God's sound and light show; they were afraid of the manifestation of God's might and power in the roar and movement of an earthquake. They sent Moses up the mountain on their behalf to make the deal with this unseen God who had power over all creation. Many of us still feel that way. Moses came back down from the mountain with the 10 Commandments. The first three relate to the people's relationship with God – not to worship idols, not to make wrong and false use of God's name and to observe God's primacy by keeping the Sabbath holy. The remaining seven deal with relationships within the family unit and the larger society.

I don't know about you, but most of what I was taught growing up about the 10 Commandments was a whole bunch of “nō's”. And that is not bad. We are baptizing

little Maril this morning. She's still little, but someday soon she is in for a whole lot of "No's". We have to both protect our kids from danger and teach them self-control and about limits and boundaries. That's our job as parents and as leaders of the community.

I hate to contradict Nancy Reagan, but just saying "No" is not enough. Learning to say "no" is only a necessary first step; it is not a destination. We have to be able to move beyond the "No's" of the Ten Commandments to see the "Yes" that is contained within them. We recently have even been capable of making an idol of the 10 Commandments, carving them in stone in front of public buildings or nailing them to courthouse walls.

However, if we continue to grow in our faith and keep our eyes open and be willing to continue to ask questions, we can begin to see that the Ten Commandments are not an end in themselves. Rather, they are like getting on a bus that will take us to the true destination – a balanced life for each of us individually that can be lived out in a just society that is able to faithfully live into the future God wants for us. This is the promise that God set before Moses concerning the Ten Commandments in Exodus 19, "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, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." The whole point is to make us, individually and as a community, instruments of God's love, of God's grace and blessings.

That is the "Yes" that God promises. Like the "No's", it relates both to the individual and to the society. This, too, we have to learn for ourselves and teach our children. We have to learn that saying "No" is really just a step on the way to saying "Yes" to a good and just life within a good and just society.

A priest friend of mine who is also a psychotherapist and was once a Benedictine monk, told me that he thought that everyone has buried deep in their heart or subconscious a memory of once having been touched and caressed by hands far more tender and loving than ours. It is hard to explain exactly but each of us longs for that sense of being loved and cherished in a way that the world cannot. I think this is what the psalmist was getting at in Psalm 139 when he exclaims,

“For it was you who formed my
inward parts;
you knit me together in my
mother’s womb,
I praise you, for I am fearfully
And wonderfully made.”

When this sense of being cherished beyond our knowledge is violated, the hurt and anger run deep. It is this hurt and outrage that Jesus is acting out in today’s Gospel lesson as he shuts down the Temple on its busiest day declaring that they have turned his Father’s house into a marketplace that cheats and oppresses God’s children. As the Son, he takes this personally. Jesus here is modeling our Covenant for us. Anger, like love and compassion, is a relational emotion. Just as we are called to share God’s love for God’s creation, we are also at times called to share God’s outrage when we see it abused.

Jesus goes onto promise that the Temple will be destroyed and rebuilt in three days. He is replacing the Temple cult with the living Body of Christ. It is to this new Temple of God’s care and love – the Body of Christ – that we bring little Maril today. It is a great gift her parents are giving her. They are bringing her to a place where she

will always remember her identity – as a Child of God. It doesn't get any better than that! Today they will promises for her and enter a covenant with God on her behalf. It is the same promises and covenant that was made on our behalf. When the time comes, we will renew our own promises as hers are made and we will remember our own true identities as children of God. So let's go make a new Christian.

Amen.