

The Third Sunday of Lent, Year B (Annapolis, Children's Mass, 2009)

Exodus 20:1-3, 7-8, 12-17

John 2:13-22

Let's talk about the 10 Commandments. You know that's what we heard in our first reading, right? We got them this morning from the book of Exodus, Chapter 20. They sounded a little different today from how you usually hear them, since this version of the story was translated to be a little simpler than usual. This time you heard, "Do not," when usually we hear, "You shall not" instead. Well anyway, these commandments are kind of like God's instructions for the game of life. Jesus ended up giving us more instructions, including the classic and most important great commandments, to love our God with all of our hearts, all of our souls, and all of our strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. But these 10 are a great start, and they were given to the Hebrew people through Moses up on Mount Sinai, after God had lead Moses and the people out of slavery in Egypt.

Now how many of you have ever played a video game using the Wii, the Playstation, or the Xbox? Well, when you are first playing a game, say something like Lego Star Wars, or SuperMario whatever, what do you think is better, to just play the game by yourself and figure out all the moves and tricks and rules on your own, or to play with a friend who's seen the game before and can give you some tips on how to play? Which are you likely to do better with? I'm not even going to talk about reading an instruction manual! Most of us find it easiest and most fun when we are playing a game to get help from a friend who knows how to play so that we won't waste time repeating mistakes or trying things that an experienced player knows will never work, right?

Well I was thinking about all this in terms of the first reading today. Sometimes people think that the 10 commandments are about some distant God dropping laws out of heaven and making rules that cramp our style or take away our freedom. They think God is telling us what to do and they resent it. They think the commandments are kind of like when our mom sees that it is a beautiful day outside and tells us that instead of spending that beautiful day with our friends, we are going to spend the next three hours doing yard work, picking up sticks and mowing the lawn. Well that isn't what is happening here in this story at all! What is happening here is much more like the situation I described with the video games. When God gives the 10 commandments, he's acting like the friend who knows rules and can help us play the game. He's trying to coach us through the sticky situations in the game of life. God is the good friend who lets us in on the secrets, telling us what moves won't work and which ones will. And the beauty of it is that this God who is talking to us is not only a friend, but actually the designer of the game called life that we are trying to play. He can give us the absolute best advice possible to get to where we want to go, to win the game and to come to life and love everlasting, which is the prize at the end.

It's a pretty sweet deal. I want to point out something else too though. One of the things we say God is doing when he gives us these commands is that God is setting up a covenant. He's making promises to us. He's binding himself to us so that he can really be our God and we can really be his people. And for this to happen, he's giving us the rules we need to live by. If we want to be right with the God who gives us life, then these commandments are the rules we need to follow. But I don't think that they are just rules. I don't think our God simply lays down laws and says, "OK, here's the rule. You better

live it out or else.” No. I think the rules our God gives us are actually promises too. They are promises of what our lives will be like if we ask God to be our God and if we ask to be God’s people. They are promises of what our lives will be like if we keep coming back to God and asking for God’s help and God’s strength in all the moments of our life.

You shall not kill. You shall not steal. You shall not lie. You shall not be jealous of your neighbor’s goods. I think these things aren’t just rules we’re being expected to live up to on our own. I think they are promises of what God can do for us if we cooperate with his goodness and his life within us. If we draw close to God, we will not hurt other people. We will not tell lies. And we won’t be jealous. We’ll have the strength and the freedom to do what is right in difficult situations and to enjoy the peace that comes from right living. We will find that God and the gifts God gives us in our lives are enough and we won’t need to hurt other people or be jealous of what they possess. If we turn away from God though, you’d better believe we’ll start breaking all these commandments. I know if it wasn’t for God, I could never live the blessed and happy life that is described by these promises. And this life of no lying, cheating, hurting, or stealing is the life I want. I think we all do.

Now to finish my homily today I want to look at just one of the commandments as a promise and tie it to the Gospel. You know that commandment, “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain?” Well what do you think it means? You shouldn’t disrespect the Lord by misusing his name, right? That is definitely the fundamental, original meaning of this commandment. But I think we have a neat thing going on with our usual phrasing of the commandment in English, and playing with that,

I want to propose to you a different meaning for the commandment in terms of what I've been saying about the commandments also being promises. Do you know what it means to wait in vain, or to try in vain, or as the rock band, the Clash would say, to "Train in Vain?" It means to do something pointlessly right? You try something, you wait, but you never get what you are looking for. Bob Marley sang that he didn't want to wait in vain for someone's love. Well I think that we can look at our commandment, "You shall not take the Lord's name in vain" as much as a promise as a command. It's a promise from God that if you really take the Lord's name, if you call on God, if you commit yourself to God, and if you cry out to him from your heart, it will not be in vain. It will not serve no purpose. And Jesus refers to the greatest example of this in the Gospel.

At the end of today's gospel, Jesus talks about his resurrection, by saying that if the temple is destroyed, in three days it will be raised up again. Jesus' Resurrection, the event we celebrate every Sunday at Mass and the event that we are getting ready to celebrate in a very special way at Easter is the ultimate proof of the promise that we shall not take the name of the Lord our God in vain. If we call on God our Father the way that Jesus does throughout his life and even at the moment of his death on the cross, our God will come through. Even in the face of death, our call will be heard and God, our friend who has given us the rules and coached us all the way through the game will raise us from the dead and bring us finally to life and love everlasting.