



THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

March 23, 2003

Exodus 20:1-17

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

John 213-22

What we have for so long dreaded has finally come to pass. We are now engaged in that most evil and destructive of all human enterprises, war. Lord, have mercy upon us.

Regardless of whether a person considers the armed invasion of Iraq and the “shock and awe” fire bombing of Baghdad to be just or not, I must believe that there is not a person of good will anywhere who does not deeply mourn that it has come to this. As I’ve listened these past days and weeks to you in this parish who are veterans of war and to other veterans of war, you and they have all to a person testified to the horror and insanity of war. If anyone thinks they do not believe in original sin, they need merely look upon war and they will have all the evidence they need that we are in bondage to a sin from which we cannot free ourselves. No one who has been in battle or who has viewed or experienced the long-lasting, devastating, and always unforeseen effects of war can call this war or any war anything but the most tragic testimony to the fallen and sinful nature of humankind.

This is the Third Sunday in Lent. By long-standing tradition, this is the Sunday when the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments are proclaimed as a part of the liturgy – and so you have heard them here as our first reading. The Ten Words as they are known in Judaism are a summary of the Torah, the covenant God made through Moses with the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob. The word “Torah” in Hebrew literally means “the finger pointing the way.” The Ten Commandments, the Torah in miniature, are a gracious gift from God that point for us the way to live in harmony with God and with one another. As Jesus interprets the commandments for us in his Sermon on the Mount we also learn that in the light of the commandments none of us is righteous. “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not kill’; and ‘whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment . . . and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to hell.” As one young person said in one of my catechism classes, “Wow. That means we’re all killers.” Precisely.

Jesus goes on: “I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also . . . Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

“But that’s impossible!” howled my catechism student. Yes. On our own, precisely so. But we are not left on our own.

Mark Hanson, the presiding bishop of our church, has called upon us in this time of war to remember our baptism. In baptism, the old sinful self is crucified with Christ, and a new self arises, a new self whom God sees as clothed with the righteousness of Christ. In baptism, *we have died to sin* so that we might walk in newness of life. Now the commandments as interpreted by Jesus no longer accuse; now, for us the baptized, they speak of who we *truly* are as reborn sisters and brothers of Christ.

Reborn in Holy Baptism, we are a people who no longer covet material goods, who no longer covet prestige and power, who are no longer consumed with getting and having. Reborn in Holy Baptism, we are no longer people who scheme to deprive others of their goods or means of making an income. We are no longer a people bent on murderous thoughts, words, and deeds. We are no longer people who are jealous of other

people's relationships. Now, rather, we are a reborn people who do everything in our power to ensure that our neighbor has meaningful employment and just wages. We are a people who, for the sake of the neighbor, work for honesty and justice in the marketplace. We are a people who strive for a social order in which all people are properly fed, clothed, housed, and educated. We are a people who respect, guard, and support one another's relationships and who remind ourselves and one another that our partners are gifts from God. And we are a people who honor our elders for they tell each new generation of the wonders and promises of God.

We are also a people who hear the word of God which tells us that while we live on this shadowed planet we do not have complete free will. Rather, our wills are bound up in webs of greed and injustice, in webs of tyranny and hate – and so we need to be here where we receive the forgiveness of our sins. We need to be in this place where we hear over and over *who we truly are* as the baptized of God. We need to be here where we receive the true body and blood of Christ which gives us strength to live our baptism, strength we cannot summon up on our own.

And we are a people who no longer use the name of God to legitimize or prop up *any* of our human, worldly orders; we are a people who do not use the name of God to judge or damn others, who do not presume know the mind of God. Rather, we are a people who praise God's name. We are a reborn people who give thanks to God everywhere and at all times. We are a people who call upon God in time of trouble – praying for the peace of the whole world, praying for the women and men in the military and their families, praying for those in harm's way, praying for those *who by no choice of their own* were born in Baghdad or Palestine or North Korea.

Above all, we are a people whose trust is in God alone. We do not put our trust in *any* of the orders of this world, in governments, constitutions, presidents, kings, prime-ministers, flags, congresses, socialism, capitalism, or any other "ism." Our trust is not in our own strength or our own wisdom, not in war or threats of war; our trust is not in weapons or sanctions; our trust is not even in our own visions of what peace might look like. Our trust is in God alone, the God of Jesus Christ whose way and wisdom is the cross. Our trust is in God alone who says to us, "I am the Lord your God, and you shall have no other gods before me, for I alone will be your God when all else fails. I alone will be your God, your only hope – no matter what shall befall you. I alone will be your God, your only hope when the skies rain fire, when the terrorists strike fear, when tyrants rule.

"I alone will be your God on that day when death, the greatest tyrant of all, comes to rob you of your life; but death shall have no power over you. I am the Lord your God and when you take your last breath of the air of this fallen world I am there – the power of death conquered and defeated in the cross. I am there to bring you to myself, for you are my beloved and in me you already have eternal life. I am the Lord your God and you will have no other. And I shall make it so."