

## The Third Sunday of Lent March 7, 2021

Today's first reading from the book of Exodus takes place after God has freed the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. He did so by showing His power to pharaoh in dramatic ways - sending plagues and then parting the Red Sea to lead His people out into the desert. Now they would begin a forty year journey to the land He had promised to give them.

Why did it take forty years to cross the desert? Why didn't God lead the people by a more direct path to the Promised Land? Or, why didn't He find a land that was closer for them to inhabit? Why did He make a people who had been burdened with slavery their whole lives go through the added stress of a long, arduous journey through a lifeless wilderness?

The reason is that God not only wanted to free His people but He wanted to teach them what it meant to be free.

The Book of Exodus tells us that the Hebrew people were slaves in Egypt for 430 years before God sent Moses to tell the pharaoh to free them. All they knew was hardship and suffering. They were treated like animals. This had gone on for generation after generation. They needed not only to be freed from slavery but taught how to live as a free people.

How does God do that? By giving them the Ten Commandments.

When we hear the words "commandment" and "law", we think of something that limits our freedom. But, that is not the way our Jewish brothers and sisters understand the Law of God. To them, it is something that liberates them, that teaches them how to live as children of God, and that makes them wise.

Just consider today's responsorial psalm. We read that "the law of the Lord is perfect", that it is "trustworthy", "right", and "clear". It is something to take delight in and enjoy because it is "more precious than gold" and "sweeter than syrup and honey".

God gives the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel - and to us - not to put us under His thumb and humiliate us. Rather, He gives them to us to lift us up and to elevate us beyond what we would ever be able to accomplish on our own. He gives His law to us to make us free.

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And the first step to that freedom that God wants for us begins with His first commandment - "I, the Lord, am your God, you shall not have other gods besides me." When we make God the center of our lives, when we love Him above all things, when we find our meaning in serving Him alone, then we are truly free.

Just consider the alternatives. There are people who make an idol out of money. They slave at their jobs sometimes to the point of sacrificing their health and ruining their marriages. Money might give them some pleasure and satisfaction, but in the end they die and leave their money to someone else. They made themselves the slaves of money and ended up with nothing.

The same can be true of all the other idols our society worships - power, pleasure, fame, looks. They drive us to extremes but only give us momentary satisfaction.

On the other hand, when we serve God, we become our best selves. We find an incomparable joy in knowing that we are loved unconditionally by the God who made the universe. And we find joy in sharing that love with others. Putting God at the center of our lives makes everything better. It improves our family life, makes us more conscientious citizens, and honest workers. Our self-esteem is no longer based on what we make, how we look, what we have, or what others think of us. Rather, it rests firmly on the love of God. All this becomes possible when we follow His commandments.

Like the Hebrews in the desert, we can fall back into old habits of sin. But we can always return to the path of freedom. In today's first reading, God promises to bestow "mercy down to the thousandth generation on the children of those who love [Him] and keep [His] commandments. By going to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we meet Jesus, the loving face of God, who is always quick to forgive us and strengthen us to make progress on the path of freedom.

God created us to be free. We find our freedom by putting Him at the center of our lives and by following His commandments.