

Third Sunday in Lent, Year B  
Exodus 20: 1-17; I Cor.1:18-25;  
John 2:13-22  
March 15, 2009

Trinity Episcopal Church  
Sonoma, CA

Guidance for Lent  
A Sermon by Jack Dison

This season of Lent offers us an opportunity for the amazing and challenging adventure of self examination, both at the individual and the institutional level. Today's scriptures give us important guidance for that adventure.

A key thing we do in this spiritual quest and in our life journey as a whole, is it not, is to find our way to the Holy and to find our way to God's direction in the midst of a world which in many ways is anything but Holy and, to say the least, which is not guided by God's call and God's commandments.

A theme woven among the three scriptures in today's readings point to the extraordinarily important notion that the foundation on which our life must rest is in keeping God and God's will at the center of human activity. Each reading in its own way calls us to get our priorities in place.

Can there be any clearer statement of that than we find in the Exodus reading which reminds us that the first of what we call the Ten Commandments is "You shall have no other gods before me."

I think it is no accident that this is the first commandment. It tells us that our highest priority is our relationship with God. And this relationship is not with any god, but with the God.

It is an interesting commandment in many ways, not the least of which is that it implies that there can be other contenders for divine status. And isn't that true? We human beings can and often do find other gods to follow. Some that come to mind for me are power, money, substances, and an ego that claims "I" am the center of it all.

Similarly, when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment is, he had no trouble making up his mind. He did not have to go out and do research on the matter. The first he said is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." In other words love God with all you have got – with all your time and energy and talents and resources.

It is easy to say that we will have no other gods before God and that we will love God with all of our heart, but what does that look like in day-to-day life? I asked a group of spiritually savvy inmates in a state prison that very question. Let me share a little of what they told me about how that works in their lives. You may find it hard to believe that such conversations take place among men who have been convicted of serious crime, but I can assure you that they do, at least among inmates who are making huge changes in their lives. I have the honor of being present for and of facilitating a few of these conversations.

One inmate told me that so much of it has to do with the fact that we have been given free will. We can either follow that which leads us to light and life or we can follow that which leads us to darkness and death. “I was on that dark path for most of my life. I have changed direction now. It is not easy to make those changes, but I can tell you that life is so much richer for me now, and for those who are around me.”

Another said that he has to rely on prayer to keep him focused on God and the path that God has for him. “It is very easy for me to think I am doing the thing God wants me to do while I am doing something very different.”

Still another said “I have to watch very carefully the choices I make, particularly who I spend time with and what we talk about and do.”

Still another said that I have to spend time reading the Bible, particularly the four gospels. “That gives me a pattern to follow. It is not easy to do, but through careful reading I can get the idea of what I am called to do if I want to follow the path that Jesus laid out for us.”

Another said “I find that when I share my time and what little I have with others, or when I find ways to help others, it just feels like I am turning to God and maybe finding a way to love God.”

Finally one said “I have to have the help of being with others who are on this path so that we can share our experiences and learn from each other, both what to do and what not to do.” That “being with others on the same path” is what I would hope we mean by the word “church.”

Such rich and wonderful reflections on what it means to work toward keeping God as ones highest priority. A lot for us to think about.

The passage from Corinthians adds yet another dimension to the conversation about keeping our priorities focused on God and God’s way of doing life. It reminds us that there is often a distinction between what passes for wisdom in human culture and what is divine wisdom. Frequently our

spiritual wisdom is dismissed as so much foolishness. Don't you run into that? I encountered that especially when I was in higher education working with a group of folks that saw themselves as wise. And in some areas they were well informed, if not wise. But many of them were also convinced that their smarts in one area made them smart in most, if not all, other areas. I think they overestimate themselves.

I am not trying to start or fuel another version of culture conflict or war, but I am not hesitant to point out that some of what passes as commonly accepted (conventional) wisdom is anything but wise. For example we live in a world which has adopted and defends the strategy that major conflicts between nations and regions must be settled by contests resting on the ability to gather and employ violent force. In other words we rely heavily on organized, intentional, rationalized massive killing as an, if not the, accepted method for resolving serious conflict. One result of that kind of "wisdom" is that over 160,000,000 persons were killed in wars during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most of whom were civilians. I do not know what you think of that, but that seems not so terribly wise, particularly when held up for comparison with the vision of the world that Jesus calls us to.

Similarly we live in a world that rations all kinds of things in ways that seem, to say the least, counter to the wisdom expressed through the life and teachings of Jesus. A huge example is that we ration that which can lead to or deny children basic necessities of healthy life. It is bad enough within our nation, but when we look at it on a global level the situation is astonishing and shocking. Each year about 10,000,000 children die from malnutrition and preventable disease. Ten million! According to my pocket calculator, that means that on average we are looking at the deaths of over 27,000 children each day. Given that there is relatively inexpensive technology to prevent a great many of those deaths due to preventable disease and that food distribution, not production, is the issue in most of those deaths due to malnutrition, we have to wonder about the kind of wisdom on which that institutional framework rests.

Let me also say that there are numerous instances of widely accepted "human wisdom" which are consistent with and is even based on spiritual wisdom. Commonly accepted human wisdom is not necessarily counter to God's wisdom. We too, in word and deed, can participate in the incarnation of the logos, the Word.

For our purposes here, the issue that there is wisdom that fits closer with what God calls us to do and that there is wisdom which falls far short of that. It gives us a lot to reflect on in this Lenten season.

And then finally there is that remarkable scene recorded in John's gospel of Jesus' confrontation at the temple. The story was so noteworthy that it is found, although told in different ways, in all four gospel accounts.

I think that our image of Jesus and what he did can be limited, if not distorted or romanticized. It is tempting to see only the gentle and merciful Jesus, and of course that is an extremely important aspect of what Jesus did and what he taught. It is an important part of what we are still offered today. Clearly that is the case.

But even a casual reading of the gospel accounts shows us that there were many scenes in which Jesus was other than the kind and gentle figure who healed the afflicted, expressed his love for children, and did generous things. Jesus was not afraid of confrontation. Not only was he not afraid of confrontation, it was a major part of how he lived and interacted with others. Let's face it, in many situations he was seen as a troublemaker. Let's face it in many instances he was a troublemaker. By the second or third chapter of Mark the authorities are telling each other that they must find a way of getting rid of this Jesus, which of course before too much time had passed, they were successful in doing.

And troublemaking, I would suggest, is what is taking place in this scene at the temple. Jesus is upset about the kind of practices and the consequences of those practices that have become associated with the temple. He is furious. This cannot be ignored! And he takes action – upsets the tables and drives away those whom he found to be desecrating the temple, and releases the animals they were selling.

We might be inclined to minimize or explain away what Jesus was doing here. For example we might want to say something like: "Give Jesus a break, he was just having a bad day like all of us do from time to time. Think of the stress that he had to be under!" I have become convinced that that sort of explanation misses the mark. I believe that Jesus was not an impulsive troublemaker or bully or anything of the sort. I believe that his stirring of the pot was intentional and fully in line with his ministry and his mission. He was challenging and confronting instances and situations which fell short of the Kingdom he came to proclaim. One of my teachers described this "troublemaking" part of Jesus' life as his nonviolently

disturbing the peace as a means of moving toward a higher level of peace, toward shalom.

Maybe the word confrontation is the key to this story. Jesus shows us here that confrontation is an important aspect of following God's call. It is not easy to do, and it is very tempting to avoid confrontation. But Jesus as part of his journey confronted, again and again, not only individuals but also social institutions which he found out of sync with his Father's will. How and when should we confront? And how should we approach confrontation? And what might the consequences be for courageous confrontation? Again, lots for us to think about.

The season of Lent is a time for self examination. How do we measure up? Or more on point, how do I measure up? How am I doing on this journey to come closer to God and to have my story come closer to the story of Jesus?

These three passages of scripture offer us specific and challenging guidance in our taking stock of ourselves in this Lenten season.

Is my relationship with God my highest priority? Do I love God with all my heart, or more realistically, am I moving in that direction?

Am I able to distinguish between wisdom in this culture which is consistent with God's wisdom and that which is not?

Finally, how can I follow Jesus' pattern of confrontation? Do I have the courage to do that? If so, how is the best way to do that and in what circumstances?

To move our stories and our lives in the direction of patterns offered to us in these scriptures is not only to participate in the adventure of self examination, but also to launch us in the much larger adventure of finding ways to participate in and even to help construct a new world, a world based on loving God and loving our neighbors.