

8.25.2024 Trinity 13 (Galatians 3:16-22)

I can't remember the first time that I saw the 1956 film, *The Ten Commandments*, but I can't forget watching Charlton Heston, as Moses, standing on Mount Sinai receiving the Law, written by the finger of God on two stone tablets. In that movie, and in Holy Scripture, when the LORD visited Sinai the earth quaked violently, and there was thunder and lightning and the entire mountain was enveloped in smoke because God descended on it in fire (Exodus 19:16-19). To the rebellious Israelites, and to all who have erred and strayed from God's ways like lost sheep, this unforgettable, very dreadful image of Sinai, is an image of the Law. To all who have "*sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23), the Law is judgment, judgment flowing down from a mountain like molten lava, destroying everything in its path, revealing to the world what Scripture describes as "*the wages of sin,*" the misery, sorrow, and death that our sin has earned for us (Romans 6:23).

The Law comes down from the mountain as thundering judgment, and while we'd normally look to the Gospel lesson on a particular Sunday morning to receive the good news after being confronted by the judgment of the Law, this morning it's actually the words of the Epistle that provide us with hope, and a peace that surpasses understanding. In the passage we read today, St. Paul wrote about promises God made to Abraham and his seed, who we're told is Christ. The promises that Paul spoke about are found in this familiar verse, in which God said to Abraham, the Father of Faith, "*blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore... Through your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed...*" (Genesis 22:17-18).

The Seed, that in the Garden of Eden, God said would crush the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15), is the same Seed that God promised Abraham would bless all the nations of earth. The Seed is Christ, the Prince of Peace, the promised Savior of every tribe, tongue, and nation - the Savior of the world. St. Paul lays this firm foundation of the perfect peace that is found in the promises of God, and then he goes on to write about another covenant, the covenant portrayed in the film, *The Ten Commandments*, the covenant made at Mount Sinai and mediated through Moses, the law written on stone tablets.

Paul identifies these two covenants, and then addresses the question of what effect the thundering, fiery covenant of the law has, or does not have, on the promise God made, His promised covenant of peace found in the blessing of our Savior Christ.

The answer, Paul tells us, is that the earlier promises of blessing God made to Abraham and his Seed are not annulled by the fiery law, instead the law can be seen as an addendum that was attached to the original promise 430 years after that promise was made. This addendum, with its ceremonial regulations and detailed instructions, has nothing to do with the original promise of blessing, it was added centuries later, and therefore, the next question Paul asks is this: Why then was the law given on Mount Sinai? What was its purpose? Paul writes, *“It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made...”* (Galatians 3:19). In other words, *“The purpose of the law was to keep a sinful people in the way of salvation until Christ came, inheriting the promises (of blessing) and distributing them to us”* (MSG).

The law was an instrument God used to keep His wayward, troubled people moving toward the blessing of peace, rest, and perfect freedom that could be found only in the arms of their merciful Savior. The thunder and lightning and fiery imagery of the scene upon Mount Sinai was meant to point the Hebrews to the peace found in the silent, gentle, humble image of *“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”* (John 1:29), our Savior Christ, whose gracious invitation to those who’ve found that saving themselves through perfect obedience to the law is a load too heavy to bear is this: *“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”* (Matthew 11:28-30).

Christ’s yoke is easy. It stands in sharp contrast to the yoke of the law, which St. Peter described as *“a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear”* (Acts 15:10). Christ’s yoke is easy, and His burden is light, because the load He gives us, and then helps us carry, is not the unbearable burden of a ceremonial legal system that demands perfect obedience - or death. Instead, His burden, His commandment, His law, is love (Romans 13:8-10), and this

truth is revealed in the Gospel lesson today. In that passage, when a certain lawyer asked Jesus, “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” (Luke 10:25), the answer we heard was this: “*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind: and thy neighbor as thyself*” (10:27).

Love is Christ’s yoke. Love is the load He helps us carry. Jesus said, “*Do this...*” Carry *this* load. Love God and love your neighbor, “*and you will live*” (Luke 10:25-28). He then told the Parable of the Good Samaritan to help us understand that the love of which He speaks is not an easy, natural affection, or warm, emotional feelings of attachment. The Parable of the Good Samaritan isn’t a story about loving the lovable. It’s a story that calls us to love without discrimination, to deliberately and sacrificially love every person God places in our path - even our enemy (Matthew 5:44), and when we manifest this love in our lives, when we love like the Samaritan loved the wounded traveler, Scripture declares the truth that we have “*fulfilled the law*” (Romans 13:8; Galatians 5:14).

The entire law is fulfilled through love, and therefore the priest and the Levite, the two men of God who chose not to love, but to pass by on the other side, revealed their ignorance and contempt for the law. These men would’ve been known as those who observed every fast and feast, every Sabbath and sacrifice, every tithe and dietary restriction, those who observed its every letter, but clearly failed to recognize the spirit of the law. In this story, it’s the Samaritan, the outsider, who views the wounded traveler as his neighbor, who loves him as he loves himself, and in doing so fulfills the law - through love.

Two thousand years ago, our Savior Christ came from heaven to earth. Abraham’s Seed, our Lord, inherited the promised blessings. He distributed them to us, and through Him, all the nations of the earth are blessed. Now, the fiery law no longer comes thundering down the mountain to keep a sinful people in the way of salvation. Instead, it is love, God’s sacrificial love that “*has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit*” (Romans 5:5) that keeps a redeemed people in the Way of salvation, and empowers us to love God and our neighbor, and to live godly lives that honor and glorify His holy name.

When a certain lawyer asked Jesus, “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” (Luke 10:25), the answer did not speak of a ceremonial legal system that demands perfect obedience, but instead, the answer to the question of what must I do to inherit eternal life is love, “*love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind: and thy neighbor as thyself... Do this, and thou shalt live.*”