

Sermon: Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit.

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, June 5, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today is Pentecost, the fiftieth day, or 7 weeks after Easter. Traditionally, it is the day that the Church celebrates its beginning. That story is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 2, where the Holy Spirit descended upon a group of frightened disciples, transforming them into bold proclaimers of the Good News of Jesus Christ, in multiple languages and tongues. According to the Scripture, more than three thousands (and their families) came to believe that day. Thus the first community of Christian faith was born.

However, today, I would like to take you to an even older tradition, to the Jewish celebration of the Pentecost, remembering where the Israelites first received the Law of Moses on the foothill of Mount Sinai.

Last week at Mount Horeb, we met Moses as a reluctant servant, initially unwilling to obey God's call to return to Egypt, to lead the people of God out of the land of slavery. Well, he eventually relented to the will of God and returned to the Pharaoh's court, and demanded that the Israelites be freed. With a mighty hand and outstretched arm, Moses demonstrated God's awesome power, through ten plagues of unimaginable horrors, and wrestled the Israelites from Pharaoh's control.

Yet, God hardened Pharaoh's heart, so a column of Egypt's finest chariots was sent in hot pursuit of the fleeing and defenceless Israelites, all the way to the Red Sea. There, God instructed Moses to strike the ocean water with his staff, and miraculously the Sea parted. God then sent pillar of fire and cloud blocking the path of the Egyptians, thus allowing the people of God to safely cross. Once across, as the Egyptians were lured into the parted sea, God restored the ocean just as miraculously and they were all swallowed up by the mighty water. A mighty deliverance for God's chosen, indeed.

It is important to reiterate and remember that particular salvation history, because every time we come upon the Ten Commandments, as written in Exodus 20, we are reminded by this preamble in verse 2, "*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*" **The Grace of God proceeds always the Law of God.**

[1] It is equally important to remember how the Law of God, as in the Ten Commandments, was actually received on the foothill of Mount Sinai. [2] We do not know precisely where is the biblical Mount Sinai. Exodus 19 informs us it is in the

wilderness of Sin, nearby to Rephidim, where God provided water to the thirsty and rebellious Israelite. To the best of our knowledge, Mount Sinai is in the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula. [3] Since the beginning of the 6th century AD, Saint Catherine's Monastery was erected by the foothill of the present day Mount Sinai. It is considered to be the world's oldest and continuously inhabited Christian monastery. It's library, containing a number of ancient manuscripts, including the Codex Sinaiticus, has been invaluable in the reconstruction of the biblical text. [4] Climbing the present day Mount Sinai has become an important pilgrimage and tourist site. One could do it on foot in about 3-4 hours, each way. [5] Or for about \$100 US, one could ride it up on a camel's back, taking only half the time and double the fun. [6] There is a Greek Orthodox chapel on top of the mountain, enclosing a rock which is said to be the source for the biblical tablets of stone. Interestingly, there is also a small mosque on the other side of the summit. Nearby that, there is the 'Moses' cave' where Moses was said to have waited to receive the Ten Commandments. [7] Here is a view from the summit when the sun is setting. Quite a magnificent sight to behold—a sight that only Moses got to see.

When the Israelites were brought to the foothill of Mount Sinai, God specifically instructed Moses to "*Put limits around the mountain and set it apart as holy*" (Exodus 19:23). Whosoever comes near or touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. Even the priests must consecrate themselves, in preparation for what was about to transpire. On the third day, people could hear and see thunder and lightning emanating from the mountain top. There appeared to be thick cloud, followed by a loud trumpet blast. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire, and the whole mountain trembled violently.

Moses was then summoned to the mountain top, for a period of 40 days, as he received the Ten Commandments inscribed by God own hand, on two stone tablets. The first four commandments contain instructions on how the community of faith is to relate to the Lord God:

Thou shall have no other gods before me.

Thou shall not make unto thee any graven image.

Thous shall not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

The following six contain instructions on how the community of faith is to relate to one another.

Honour thy father and thy mother.

*Thou shall not kill.
Thou shall not commit adultery.
Thou shall not steal.
Thou shall not bear false witness against thy neighbour.
Thou shall not covet thy neighbour's possession.*

Though only ten were given in that particular occasion, it is understood by the community of faith that the entire Pentateuch, the first five books of the Scripture, containing all 613 instructions, ordinances, rules and commandments are all considered to be sacred, imparted by God to Moses. All together, they constitute the Law.

*The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.*

(Psalm 19:7-10)

It is, nevertheless, equally and vitally important to remember the immediately aftermath of the Israelites, upon receiving the Law. Here I am referring to the horrifying episode of the golden calf, as recorded in Exodus 32. When the people saw that Moses was delayed in coming down from the mountain, they got anxious and became foolish turning rebellious. They gathered around Aaron, the brother of Moses who was left in charge, and said to him, *“Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”* Oh how quickly people forget all of God's benefits! How quickly they forsake the Lord God, their creator and deliverer! How quickly people turn to seek other gods who are no God but only craven idols in their own hearts.

If you think the people were bad, Aaron was worse. Here was this first high priest of Israel, upon whom all subsequent priestly lines would be traced. Instead of rebuking the foolishness of the faithless, he acquiesced and said to them, *“Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters and bring them to me.”* Perhaps thinking these foolish people would not be so quick to pay a dear price for their foolish request. Wrong! So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears and brought them before Aaron.

With no choice left, now that he put himself in that position, Aaron took these from them, formed them in a mold, and cast an image of a calf, and they said, “*These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!*”

When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it, and Aaron made a last minute plea and said, “*Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.*” One could almost feel sorry for Aaron, with everything that is going wrong, with community of faith on the edge of losing control, he at least tried to point them back to the Lord, but without avail. So the people rose early the next day and offered burnt offerings and sacrifices to the golden calf. That same evening, the idolatrous people sat down to eat and drink around the calf, then rose up to revel in debauchery. How easy it is for corruption to take hold? How quickly it is for degradation to permeate? What a thin line it is demarcating righteousness from depravity.

I won't go into more details of the aftermath of that sad episode. Suffice to say that Moses came down from Mount Sinai, saw the depravity before him, broke the two stone tablets, destroyed the golden calf, punished the wayward people, and had to re-climb Sinai to receive another set of stone tablets. Puzzling to us as readers, Aaron was never held to account for his participation in all these.

It should be noted that the people of Israel did repent, on that day and subsequently, in psalms and other writings. In the Jewish community to this day, the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, is the holiest day of the Jewish year where the community of faith atoned for their sin that was committed when they bow down to that golden calf.

It should also be noted, at the height of God's anger turning likely into an all consuming fire, Moses beg incessantly for God's forgiveness and mercy. He stood in the breach before God, and turned away the wrath that would have surely destroyed Israel. It is the same way that two thousand years after Moses, Jesus also stood in the breach before God, his death on the cross also turned away the punishment that was destined for all of us.

To the Gospel writers, Jesus is the new Moses. In Matthew 5-7, in the section that is commonly referred to as Sermon on the Mount, Jesus went up an unnamed mountain, with his disciples and others crowding in, Jesus sat down and began to speak. His teachings are not commandments per se, they are a set of eight blessings, known as the Beatitudes, beginning with “***Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***” With that Jesus would go on to recalibrate the Law, not to abolish it, but to infuse it with God's grace, and thus fulfilling it ultimately on the cross.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.