

“Jesus Flips the Script”
Sunday, March 7, 2021
The Third Sunday in Lent
The Rev. Dr. Christopher W. Keating

Exodus 20:1-17
John 2:13-22

We have just recently resumed having “Chapel Time” with the kids from Mother’s Day Out, with even with all of the appropriate social distancing measures in place it is still a blast. Each week reminds me of how children flip the script around faith by inverting all of my expectations of where God may appear.

A week or so ago, I was finishing the story of Noah. I was using a wooden ark that was given to the church some years ago by Martha Faris. I had taken the animals out of the ark and placed them around the floor. I stood Noah up by one side of the boat and told the children the story about God’s promises. We talked about the storm that threatened all of creation, and then looked at pictures of rainbows. The kids helped me place the animals back into the ark – two by two, and we said our prayer.

At the end I said, “I guess I’ll need to find another story to tell you next week.” Without missing a beat, a little boy in the four-year-old class looked at me and said, “Maybe you should tell us about Elijah!”

Now I want to know where that little boy goes to church!

His precocious sense of theology inverted my expectations about where God shows up in life, and I believe his words are an invitation to us this Lent. Following 12 months of our extending wandering in the Covid wilderness, we need the confidence of a four year old to flip the scrip on how God is present with us. My little friend was right: we should be telling stories about Elijah, Moses. Maybe we should be telling stories about The Ten Commandments, and the giving of the law. We should be watching Jesus flip over tables and listen for his call to faithful discipleship. We should let the cadence and rhythm of the commandments fill our ears with the transforming grace of God.

We should be leaning into the way scripture flips the script regarding our expectations on where we discover God’s presence.

The pandemic, if nothing else, has forced us to ask ourselves deep questions about our connection to God and each other. Where is it that we encounter God, and what does that mean? If I am not physically present in the sanctuary, how does worship connect me with God?

If everything we have ever known is suddenly changed, where do we find faith?

Some years ago, theologian Douglas John Hall described the challenges the contemporary church faces. He describes four deep longings that he says permeate North American culture. He writes that there is a

longing for community, a quest for something mysterious and transcendent, a search for meaning, and finally a search for what he calls moral authenticity.

These sorts of longings are present in the two texts today. So let's tell a story about the commandments, and let's tell a story about Jesus, realizing that in both of these stories God is "flipping the script" a bit and challenging us to a deeper encounter of faith.

There's an old story told by preachers about the day Moses came down the mountain with the commandments. He looked at the crowds and told them: "I have brought you God's thirteen commandments!"

The leaders of the people were aghast! How could they ever cope with 13 laws! Thirteen wouldn't even fit evenly on a monument. They asked Moses, "Couldn't you ask God if the list could be shortened a bit?"

So Moses went back up the mountain and returned with an abbreviated list. "I have good news and bad news," he told the people. "The Good News is that God shortened the list to ten. The bad news is that number seven still stands!"

If you're not good at math, that's "You shall not commit adultery."

Our tendency is to see the Ten Commandments primarily as a mechanism to clobber people. We use them to scold or enforce a deep moralism. But God's purposes in these commandments that ignores the purpose of what scripture calls "the ten words," as a gift of God to people who had been freed from Pharaoh's oppression. They are reminders, Walter Brueggemann tells us, that there is an alternative to the ways of Pharaoh. (*Walter Brueggemann 2010*)

God has liberated Israel, and now God "flips the script." God imposes not the harsh rules of slavery, but the rules of freedom: worship God, honor the sabbath, love your neighbors.

These are the words of covenant call us into relationship with God and each other, and set us free to be our truest, deepest selves, individually and corporately. These words draw us close to God.

In the same way, when Jesus steps into the temple, his eyes immediately spot the many ways culture, tradition and ritual prevent people from experiencing God. It is not that Jesus wants to stop the sale of Girl Scout cookies or boy scout wreaths on Sunday mornings. Rather, his actions are rooted in the deepest meaning of the first commandment: You shall have no other Gods beside me. Jesus, the new covenant of God's love, spies the ways the buying and selling of sacrifices have obscured the path to discovering God. Anger flushes into his being, and he begins upending tables and flushing out the animals. Once more, God steps into the chaos of our broken lives and provides a way of discovering new life.

This is the sign, he tells the authorities. I am flipping the script so that no more will you need to offer sacrifices and burnt offerings. I am presenting myself in my flesh so that all people can see the love of God.

His challenge is sometimes taken to be a criticism of Judaism. That is not what is intended. Instead, he looks at how the rites and rituals and legacy of faith have occluded the people's vision. No longer do these rituals evoke a sense of God's transcendence. Instead, they are rote expressions of people who have lost track of where God appears.

He clears away the clutter that keeps people from experiencing the presence of God, and tells those who believe God is only found in temples of brick and mortar to think again.

These actions challenge and cause a scene. They upset those whose lives have been built around turning the temple into a religious mercantile store. But just as the commandments challenge us to center our lives on God, Jesus' actions call us to remember that the temple of God will be crucified, yet shall rise again.

This is what we need most to hear as we walk through our Covid wilderness. In these days when you have stopped coming to church, the church has had to come to you. It is a reminder of the promise of God, who flips the script, and who calls the church to carry the light of Christ deep into the world.

Honor God, the commandments tell us. Love your neighbor. And allow the presence of Christ to flip the scrip by discovering ever fresh ways of experiencing the glory of God's presence.

Amen.