

**SERMONS ON EXODUS: XX**  
**THUNDER, LIGHTNING AND A THICK CLOUD**  
**(Exodus 19:9-25; 20:18-20)**

‘Twas a wondrous and fearful sight, fearful and wondrous, such as can be found neither before nor since, nor anywhere else on the face of all the earth. Yahweh descending in a dark cloud upon the peak of the mountain amidst thunder and lightning and a grand crescendo of trumpet blasts, having warned the people not to dare touch the mountain nor even draw near lest Yahweh break out upon them and they perish. Wondrous and fearful, fearful and wondrous!

The people were carefully prepared three days beforehand, being instructed to wash their bodies and their garments, to mark carefully the boundary around the mountain lest they trespass upon it, and to abstain from sexual intercourse. On the morning of the third day a trumpet announced Yahweh’s descent. The mountain shook and the people trembled; and Moses alone, with Aaron, the High Priest, ascended to the top of the mountain to meet God..

That is the setting for the revelation at Sinai, and for the Ten Words, as they are called, the Decalogue, that God spoke there. We are obviously meant to mark well the august setting and the reminder of God’s holiness, his absolute inapproachability and otherness. Søren Kierkegaard spoke of “the infinite qualitative difference between God and man,” a difference rendered all the greater by the stark contrast between our sinfulness and his burning purity. But as we are made to remember God’s utter holiness in such a dramatic way, we must never forget, as we said last week in our reflections upon the earlier part of this chapter, that this revelation of God’s law is set against the clearly emphasized backdrop of his grace, against the explicit reminder of God to the people that they had seen how he dealt with the Egyptians for their sake and how he delivered them as an eagle swoops to save a falling eaglet on his mighty outstretched wings. We must never forget, though we often do, that the giving of the law is preceded by and given its context by God’s prevenient grace, and by his covenant promise to make this people his special possession, his royal priesthood, his holy nation. The Ten Commandments are to play a key role in the fulfillment of this promise; they are given to sanctify the people, and to enable them to show themselves God’s special people and to transmit his truth, his justice and his love to the world.

The Ten Commandments are, of course, one of the four basic building blocks of Christian catechesis or instruction, the others being the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer and the Seven

Sacraments. We have dealt in the past at some length with each of the other three, and have long needed to address the Ten Commandments, or, rather, to let them address us. I have hesitated to do so because I wanted enough time to deal with them in other than the usual manner, that is, simply by themselves, as ten bare dictates or demands of the Almighty, all but two being stated in negative form as prohibitions. That bare, straightforward stating is how we find them in the Catechism. That is the way they are read at the beginning of the service of Holy Communion in the *Book of Common Prayer*, each followed by the response, “Lord, have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law.” That is the way they are treated by the priest in the Confessional, and that is the way they are usually treated by scholars and homilists. I have collected over the years, and in part in preparation for these sermons, some 21 books specifically on the Decalogue, and only one of them, by a Rabbi, deals at any length with the context of the Commandments, which is absolutely essential.<sup>1</sup> That is why I have taken, counting today, 20 sermons to lead us up to the Decalogue, and will continue with Exodus for some weeks afterwards, because unless we understand from the context why the Commandments were given we will never really understand them, and will usually feel that they are solely the stern dictates of a Mighty God to scold us and make us feel guilty and ashamed, since it is obvious that we will never perfectly fulfill them. Or else they will be seen as merely, as they are described in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, “an organic body of religious and moral principles, based on the Hebrew monotheistic conception of God.”<sup>2</sup>

It is the *context* that we must strive to keep in mind, and I mean ultimately the total biblical context, since at the beginning of the divine-human drama there lies the sin of man against the creator in whose image he was made and whose love he was intended to enjoy, the sin that left man trying to hide from the presence of God in the evening of the day and that ultimately led to his expulsion from the Garden. The story that follows that beginning is what Abraham Heschel describes as “God in Search of Man.” That story which had a new beginning in God’s call to Abraham leads to the drama we have been following, lo, these many weeks, the drama of God’s hearing the cries of his people in bondage, remembering his covenant with the Fathers (though, of course, he never forgot), and then, as he just reminded them as they stood at the foot of Mount Sinai, of “how I bore you on eagle’s wings *and brought you to myself*” (19:4). The very next words of God, spoken to Moses, are, “*Lo, I am coming to you* in a thick cloud” (19:9). Note the connection. “I brought you to myself,” and “Lo, I am coming to you.” Rabbi Cassuto

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<sup>1</sup> *The Ten Commandments* by Solomon Goldman, ed. by Maurice Samuel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956) begins his treatment with Exodus, chapter 19.

<sup>2</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., p. 318.

paraphrases, “Just as I brought you to Me so that you should come near Me, so shall I come and draw near to you.”<sup>3</sup> If this should begin to remind you of a wedding ceremony, you would not be far wrong. There at a wedding, there is first the Declaration of Intent asked of each party: “Wilt thou have . . . .” Here God promises, “Now if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples . . .” (19:5); and in response the people vow, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do.” (19:8). These two statements represent the essence of the covenant God made first with the Patriarchs and now makes with the whole people: “I will be your God and you will be my people.” When they are faithful, they are indeed as his bride, loved as tenderly as Solomon put it in the Songs of Songs; and when they are not, they are as the unfaithful wife of the prophet Hosea. And in this relationship between God and Israel is pictured, of course, by way of foretelling the relationship between Christ and his Bride, the Church. We are his and he is ours.

In preparation for the great day of God’s coming, the people ready themselves with ritual washings and the putting on of clean festive garments. For the three days they abstain from marital relations, not because that is anything impure, but to concentrate their focus and devotion on God alone.

Gören Larsson, who reminded us, as we saw last week, that this day of the coming of God occurs on the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost, a week of weeks or 50 days after the Passover, and thus that this day of the founding of the holy nation of Israel corresponds to the founding of the Holy Church among all nations, . . . Gören Larsson describes the events of this day most wonderfully:

When the people are ready, all the powers of nature, accompanied by a heavenly trumpet, play the prelude to the divine liturgy in the tremendous open-air temple of Sinai, covered with fire and incense. The king of the universe, the God of Israel appears in his holy temple. Heaven and earth meet. The holy and the unholy, the divine and the human, unite in a way that makes all creation shake at its foundation and every human heart tremble.<sup>4</sup>

This coming of God upon the mountain is that most wondrous and fearful event of which we spoke. It is as though God employed every fortisissimo voice of nature to make sure he had the undivided attention of the people, and he surely did. Martin Buber said that some regard this display as mere “optical and acoustical pomp and circumstance”<sup>5</sup> for the unveiling of the Ten Words. The great Jewish philosopher, Philo, described it more fulsomely:

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<sup>3</sup> *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, p. 228.

<sup>4</sup> *Bound for Freedom: The Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, p. 135.

<sup>5</sup> *Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant*, p. 110.

And, moreover, as was natural, [God] filled the whole place with miraculous signs and works, with noises of thunder too great for the hearing to support, and with the most radiant brilliancy of flashes of lightning, and with the sound of an invisible trumpet extending to a great distance, and with the march of a cloud, which, like a pillar, had its foundation fixed firmly on the earth, but raised the rest of its body to the height of heaven; and, last of all, by the impetuosity of a heavenly fire, which overshadowed everything with a dense smoke. For it was fitting that, when the power of God came among them, none of the parts of the world should be quiet, but that everything should be put in motion in his service. . . . [Then he continues:] And a voice sounded forth from out of the midst of the fire which had flowed from heaven, a most marvelous and awful voice, a flame being endowed with articulate speech in a language familiar to the hearers, which expressed its words with such clearness and distinctness that the people seemed rather to be seeing than hearing it.<sup>6</sup>

Once again, as earlier to Moses on this very mountain, God speaks *out of the fire*. Now this is not, as is sometimes said, the angry, wrathful God of the Old Testament in contrast with the God of love and grace in the New, for God changes not. Even the New Testament speaks of God as “a consuming fire” whom we must serve with reverence and godly fear (Heb. 12:28-29). His love is a holy love, a fiery, passionate holy love that consumes the dross and purifies, that wants us to be wholly his.

And the voice from the holy fire speaks the great Commands, as it is written, “And God spake all these words, saying . . .” (20:1). Gören Larsson, continuing his analysis of this passage as a grand liturgy, describes the Ten Commandments, which here follow the description of God’s appearance, as the ‘*sermon*,’ which seems apt, because after describing the peoples’ reaction to the appearance, which description immediately follows the Ten Commandments, or the ‘*sermon*,’ as he terms it, there are given instructions concerning *the altar*. The description of the sacrifice on the altar, where the blood which seals the covenant is sprinkled on both the altar and the people will have to wait until chapter 24, but the analogy to the basic structure of the liturgy, the pulpit and the altar, the Word and the Sacrament, seems appropriate.

Exodus describes the reaction of the people to this wondrous and fearful appearance in the verses that immediately follow the giving of the Commandments in chapter 20,

Now when all the people perceived the thunderings and lightnings and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled; and they stood afar off, and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will hear; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.” And Moses said to the people, “Do not fear; for God has come to prove you, and that the fear of him may be before your eyes, that you may not sin. (20:18-20)

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<sup>6</sup> *On the Decalogue*, XI.(44-46), <http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philo/book26.html>

Two things Moses says to the people: “Do not be afraid,” for God comes in grace and love to make you his own people, as he said. “Do not be afraid,” but also “Let the fear of God be before your eyes,” “May you never forget his greatness and power, his holiness and the reverence that is his due.” Do not be afraid, but let the fear of God be upon you. There is in the presence of God that two-fold, seemingly contradictory power that Rudolf Otto talked about in *The Idea of the Holy*: that drawing, fascinating power of his beauty and love, on the one hand, and that mysterious, awe-inspiring holiness, on the other. It is a presence that attracts us even as it makes us draw back, as did Moses at the bush. But it is the first message that Moses stresses, “Do not be afraid;” “Have no fear,” for as Larsson puts it again so beautifully, “God has not appeared to chastise but to teach. Not to lash but to lead. Not to divorce but to wed the people to [himself] in an intimate relationship of mutual interaction.”<sup>7</sup> “God has not appeared to chastise but to teach. Not to lash but to lead. Not to divorce but to wed.” Keep that in mind as we move on next week to consider the First Word. We need not say, “Do not let God speak to us lest we die,” for in hearing his word we will find our true life. In the Ten Words God is coming to reclaim us, to redeem us, and to make us what we were intended to be. They are death only to sin and life to us.

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<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 137.