

Lent 3B
St. Barnabas
March 3, 2024

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, Oh God, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

I was surprised to see the 10 commandments as the Old Testament lesson for this morning because for the last two Sundays, the readings were about God's covenants.

First, the rainbow to remind God that "the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all the earth." Second, God made the covenant with Abram to make him numerous and be God to all his offspring and generations beyond.

Today, God gives the commandments to Moses after making this covenant with him: "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'"

The commandments were God's way of helping humanity live the life God envisioned for us in creation! They were not meant to constrain us; they were intended to free us.

In two weeks, we will hear the covenant God coveys to Jeremiah, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."

From the very beginning God was helping - teaching - the people how to live in a society - in harmony!

Throughout time, God had been forgiving and merciful when the people needed to be reminded of God's dream for them. **Finally**, God sent Jesus to teach us, both by preaching and example.

Before Jesus was killed, he also gave us a new covenant. As articulated in our Book of Common Prayer, "The new Covenant is the relationship with God given by Jesus Christ, the Messiah, to the apostles; and through them, to all who believe in him."

Without erasing the ten commandments Jesus gave us another way to keep them. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus's words were articulated: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself." The Gospel of John uses slightly different words, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

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What more will it take for humanity to finally get it?!!

We believe in a God who keeps coming back for us when we stray too far. And God's heart breaks for those who suffer the consequences of humanity's failures.

We are called to live lovingly, mercifully, and forgivingly. I think the most difficult part is remembering that first we are to love God with all our hearts, souls, and minds.

Life experience has taught me that if we are not watchful, we can easily make idols of things like raising brilliant children, gaining status in our circles, accumulating wealth and power. And when any of those happens we are no longer loving our neighbors as ourselves.

In Jesus's lifetime the Roman Empire occupied the Jews' land and were aided by some members of the Pharisees and Sanhedrin who wanted to maintain their positions.

Today's gospel is the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple of the money changers and animal vendors. Had it not been for the recent news about Alexei Navalny, I'm not sure that this story would have impacted me as deeply as it has.

Cleansing the Temple was a provocative act. Jesus knew very well that the local rulers, both Roman and some Jews, would not take kindly to this. Jesus knew that pushing against the society's structures would make him vulnerable.

Jesus knew he was putting his life in jeopardy. Yet, to fulfill his mission Jesus had to press on.

Alexei Navalny was a Russian activist opposing the corruption he saw in his country. Vladimir Putin has held either the position of Prime Minister or President continuously since 1999. In 2018 Navalny ran for President of Russia but was disqualified by fabricated allegations of crime. In 2020 he was poisoned by a nerve gas and had to be transported to Germany for medical care that ultimately saved his life.

After he recovered, he returned to Russia. As expected, he was arrested, incarcerated, and two weeks ago died "suddenly" in a penal colony.

He was buried on Friday. Thousands of Russians came out to honor him despite threats of arrest.

Navalny is not alone; he has joined other martyrs in our time like Bishop Oscar Romero in El Salvador in 1980; Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Germany in 1945; Thomas Cranmer in England in 1556; and numerous others many of whose names are not known.

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There is a parallel between Jesus and the martyrs that speaks to us today. What I hear is that we have an obligation to be engaged with what is happening in our communities. We need to be aware if we are straying from Jesus's Way.

I hope that everyone of us has already or will vote on Tuesday. A former rector of mine used to tell the congregation that failure to vote is a sin.

Our faith sustains us; helps us be faithful to God.

Navalny spoke about his faith during the closing statement at his trial on February 20, 2021. I'd like to share with you some of his final public words.

The fact is that I am a believer, which, in general, rather serves as an example of constant ridicule in the Anti-Corruption Foundation, because mostly people are atheists, I myself was quite militant.

But now I am a believer, and this helps me a lot in my work, because everything becomes much, much simpler. I think less, there are fewer dilemmas in my life — because there is a book in which, in general, it is more or less clearly written what needs to be done in each situation. It's not always easy, of course, to follow this book, but in general I try.

A person recently wrote to me: "Navalny, what is everyone writing to you: 'Hold on, don't give up, be patient, grit your teeth? Why do you have to endure it?' I think you said in an interview that you believe in God. And it is said: 'Blessed are those who thirst and hunger for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.' Well, that's great for you, then!"

And I thought — wow, this person understands me so well! It's not that I'm great, but I've always perceived this specific commandment as more or less an instruction for action. And so, of course, not really enjoying the place where I am, nevertheless, I do not have any regrets about coming back, about what I do. Because I did everything right. On the contrary, I feel such satisfaction or something. Because at some difficult moment I did as expected according to the instructions, and did not betray the commandment...

I don't feel alone at all.

On Friday PBS reported that an attendee at the funeral said, "**Navalny might have been imprisoned, but he died a free man.**"

And that, my friends, is the good news! Following Jesus sets us free!

Amen!