

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM
September 3, 2017

Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-9 Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. 2 Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you.

6 Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." 7 What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? 8 And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? 9 Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.

The Heart of Obedience

So much commotion lately has gone on about statues. People get very emotional about monuments getting torn down or put up in honor of famous or even infamous people. To me, one of the most amazing monuments in the world has to be the Crazy Horse Memorial. And all kinds of people have all kinds of opinions about that project. Is this the best way to commemorate a hero? Is this the right hero to receive this honor? Any significant monument shows there is much more to the monument than just what meets the eye. There is meaning behind the monument.

In Deuteronomy chapter 4 we hear about a different kind of monument. This one was also etched into stone originally. There were no explosives or drills used on this stone, only the finger of God. When He was done, he had left his people with a very beautiful monument of his relationship with them. And it wasn't just a way to commemorate history. It was an ongoing witness of who they were and who God was, giving them direction for their lives and giving testimony about the kind of God they had. More than just commandments, though, God wanted to leave a monument that would get to the heart of obedience.

1) God Blesses Children with Guidance

Moses begins: **"Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you."** (Deuteronomy 4:1) More than some statue, God wants to leave his people a lasting legacy that will seal the relationship between himself and his people. Think of a parent sitting children down to share important life principles with them. God prescribes for them standards for their relationship with him. In our English Bibles we call them "decrees," but we could just as easily think of them as something written down for the benefit of God's children. Or parameters that set in order

our lives with God. God also gives his people his laws. Those are basically his verdicts about how people are directed to interact with each other. There is an order for our lives. In how we live toward God and how we live toward other people, God has a plan and guidance.

God even attaches promises of blessings to these commands. God gives them to his children for their own good. Hearing, learning, and doing God's commands will enable them to have and enjoy and inhabit the homeland God had promised. There are only benefits to this relationship and nothing to lose!

At least that's the way God mapped it all out when he designed the monument of his relationship in the first place. Eventually, children grow tired of being children. It might start when infants try to take control of feeding themselves and make a mess or toddlers follow their older siblings into trouble or when teenagers try to show their parents how mature and independent they are by proving they can make poor choices all on their own. Even God's children get tired of being treated like children.

2) Rebellious Children React Childishly

God had a good understanding of human nature when he handed over his monument. So Moses cautioned them: **“Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you.”** (Deuteronomy 4:2) God's commands contain plenty of things that make me uncomfortable or seem unpopular or even downright impossible to live up to. And the copy I have isn't etched in stone. So it's not immune to attacks from erasers or tearing out certain pages or pasting in section I think should be added.

But there is more to the monument itself than what is etched in stone. At its heart is a struggle for control. The fight God's children engage in over these commands reveals more about us than about God. We can acknowledge God's right to have a say in our lives. We can appreciate God's efforts to provide us with guidance. But we know it is really about our own hearts. But I want to have the final say about what goes on in my heart. I can acknowledge some useful and beneficial commands from God. But his law sounds so absolute, almost tyrannical in its demands of complete acceptance with no compromise.

And as Jesus pointed out to the Pharisees in Mark chapter 7, what is going on in our hearts isn't always obvious to others. We can mask this internal rebellion with outward obedience. We look like good people. We do the things good people are supposed to do. But inside, things aren't what they seem to be. Inside there is a revolution brewing against our God.

But behind that rebellion lies fear. Fear is at the heart of reluctant obedience. Fear prevents wholehearted abandonment to God's commands. Fear masks divided loyalties with empty obedience, masking what's really in our hearts. It's the fear of a child standing on the shore of the ocean. The sand is warm and safe. The waves splashing on the shore are playful and inviting. The water farther out looks promising. But it's also dangerous. Unknown. We'd love to just dive in, plunge headfirst into the cool, refreshing water. But we can't. We're paralyzed by fear.

3) God's Commands Reveal God's Special Relationship

You can mask your heart through half-hearted efforts of obedience, but they won't change your heart. You can cover up the fear surging through your heart, but you can't fool yourself. What you hide from others is on display before your all-knowing God. God leaves his commands so you come face to face with the truth about yourself, you get to see a God who knows you.

Moses commands God's people to observe His laws and decrees carefully. It's not just a matter of doing the right thing. Moses phrases it this way: **"What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?"** (Deuteronomy 4:7) God wants to reveal something about himself through your life. God is near to you. God comes to you to bring you a deliverance no less miraculous than the ones he displayed for the Israelites.

God has to get to the root and source of fear in your heart. Jesus is more concerned about your heart than about your good behavior and your outward appearances and your respectability before the standards of your peers. That's why Jesus had to correct those Pharisees. He didn't stoop to engage in an argument about traditions. All those efforts at putting on a good show for everyone around you just prevent you from revealing the real deficiency in your heart. That's where Jesus comes in. Jesus comes with a pure and selfless heart. Jesus comes with perfect obedience flowing from fearless motives.

Jesus has an even better monument for you than the monumental fear and failure in your heart. The monument of the cross stands as God's eternal message of sacrifice. Your God is truly unique among the nations, because your Jesus took your place under God's law and completed the perfection you could never attain. Jesus took your place under God's wrath over your acts rebellion and revolution. The cross is God's monument of what he was willing to do to free your heart from fear and dread. The monument of the cross now proclaims your freedom in Jesus Christ.

4) Obedience Reveals God's Unique Character

When we come to these words in Deuteronomy chapter 4, God had already done more than enough to be considered Israel's hero. He begins this chapter: **"Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you."** (Deuteronomy 4:1) "Now" picks up where God had left off. The children of Israel were on the cusp of entering into the land promised to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. They had been liberated from slavery in Egypt, passed through the miraculously-parted waters of the Red Sea with Pharaoh's army in hot pursuit, then provided for them miraculous provisions from heaven during 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Now God want to commemorate his gracious acts of power for his children.

A few years ago Phil Vischer, the creator of Veggie Tales, gave an interview where he expressed some regrets. He said: "I looked back at the previous ten years and realized I had spent ten years trying to convince kids to behave Christianly, without actually teaching them Christianity. And that was a pretty serious conviction. You can say, 'Hey kids, be more kind and forgiving because the Bible says so.' But that isn't Christianity. It's morality. And that was such a huge shift for me. From the American Christian ideal. We are drinking a cocktail that's a mix of the Protestant work ethic, the American dream, and the gospel. And

we've intertwined them so completely that we can't tell them apart any more. Our gospel has become a gospel of following your dreams and being good so God will make all your dreams come true. It's the Oprah God. So I had to peel that apart."

Think of the way we can treat tragedies from a Christian perspective compared to a moralistic perspective. A moralistic perspective says you better get in your boat and rescue as many people from flood waters or you're not good enough, you can't criticize all the really bad people, the world will be a worse place for you. A Christian perspective says I have everything I need in Christ. And no matter what happens to me, my reservation in heaven has already been made by Jesus. I have complete freedom to abandon myself in service to others.

I've never been scuba diving, but I want to try. There is something appealing about being drawn away from the shore, deeper past the shallow water crashing against the sand, and going out deeper into the water. It's unnatural at first. Just diving into the water. But then it's liberating. To be able to swim out past where you are able to stand and just bob up and down on top of the waves. And then a snorkel and mask allows you to go out farther, to stay focused on what is going on beneath the surface and witness life under water. And then proper training and proper gear allow scuba divers to see underwater caves and underwater fish and all the activity that takes place below the surface. First it requires letting go. Then there has to be hanging on. You have to let go of fear and let go of expectations for how things work on land. Then you have to hang onto your training and trust in the equipment that allows you to go our farther and dive down deeper. And there you find freedom.

When Jesus comes with his perfection, it allows you to let go of your fears of trying to measure up to God's standards, to be good enough, to try hard enough, to get close enough. When Jesus abandons his life on the cross it means an end to your efforts to hang onto control of yours. There is nothing you can do to get closer to God. And there is nothing you need to do. It has been done for you by Jesus Christ. So let yourself go and abandon yourself on the wisdom and love of your gracious God. Hand over control to the God who gives you the peace you can't get on your own. Depend on God for your life. Give God control over your heart. And see the joy God gives in his freedom. There's meaning behind this monument. Amen.