

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**

*Preached by the Rev. Jacqueline Clark on February 16, 2020 (Epiphany 6 Year A)*

I've been thinking about the things that shaped Jesus. Luke tells us that Jesus did not come out of the womb fully formed as the person he would come to be. He grew into it. After the infant Jesus is presented by his parents in the temple, Luke tells us that he grew in strength and in wisdom as well as in years.

The Gospels tell us precious about what happened before Jesus' baptism at age 30, about his childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. Much of what happened in those years is a mystery. But we do know that Jesus grew up practicing the faith of the people of Israel, the religion that would come to be known as Judaism. He was shaped by its rhythms and practices. The last thing he would hear before falling asleep was his parents reciting the Shema: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord, the your God, is one." After he learned to talk, he himself would have recited these words twice each day. Before every meal, from childhood through the last supper, he would have blessed his bread with the words: "Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth." Each week, his family would have ceased their work, observing the Sabbath as a day of rest, a remembrance that they were created by God, and that God intended for them to be free. Each year, Luke tells us, the holy family made the long journey to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. They joined with tens of thousands to pray in thanksgiving that God chose them and liberated them from slavery in Egypt. Fifty days after Passover, they would again join the whole people of Israel in praying in thanksgiving for the gift of the law. Mary and Joseph would have taught their son to observe that law day by day, letting it guide his life and nurture his connection to God.

Jesus grew up practicing the faith of the people of Israel. The law, and the practices and commandments and rhythms it proscribes, are some of the things that shaped him, that made him Jesus. When he embarks on his ministry, he does not leave the law behind. We see him praying, observing the Sabbath, traveling to the temple for the pilgrimage festivals, and wearing a fringe as an ever-present reminder of the Torah. He continues to be faithful to the law, and it continues to shape him, all the way to the cross.

We tend to lose sight of that, I think. Many of us, me included, have been taught to see the law as an oppressive burden. We've been taught to see it as a system for earning our way into God's favor before Jesus came along and introduced the new and much improved concept of grace.

But God did not get a personality transplant between the Old and New Testaments. In fact, that's considered a heresy! Grace was there since the beginning. The people of Israel never believed that they needed to earn their way into relationship with God. They understood that God freely choose them when God called Abraham, and again when God freed them from slavery in Egypt. God's love has always been unconditional. The law was *part* of God's grace, a gift from God, one that offered people a way to nurture their relationship with God. The law was, as one scholar puts it, like the things you do to strengthen a marriage—like the mid-day phone call, date night, doing the dishes when it's not your turn, compromising on your preferences, or making the effort to understand your partner's much different perspective. The law offered a set of practices, a love language, for loving God, coming to know God more intimately, and deepening that relationship. This is why Moses celebrates the law in this morning's reading from Deuteronomy. He has led the people out of Egypt, through the wilderness, to the very edge of the Promised Land. And now, as he prepares for his own death, he offers this parting wisdom: choose life. He's not talking about literal life and death. This is not a threat about what will happen if they don't obey. He's urging them that if they want the fullness of life, life with God, they must choose it by loving God, by following God's law. That is his dying hope for them.

The law is a gift, part of God's grace, not something we needed to be liberated from. Which is why, in last week's Gospel, Jesus said that he had not come to abolish the law or the prophets but to fulfill them, and that not one letter, not even one tiny stroke of a letter would pass from law until the end of the

age. What Jesus did do-- and what might look to us like rejection of the law-- was to engage in the very Jewish practice of debating the interpretation of the law. Hundreds and hundreds of years after Moses, now under occupation in the promised land, faithful Jews had different ideas about how the law should be observed in their context. Think of our own Constitution. Jesus didn't overturn the law, but he did interpret it, arguing with groups like the scribes and the Pharisees about what it looked like to follow it. We see this, for example, in the debates over healing on the Sabbath. Did healing count as work? And if so, how did it interact with the commandment to love one's neighbor?

Jesus debated the law because he was invested in it. In fact, I believe that he loved the law. It profoundly shaped him, and guided him in nurturing his relationship with the one he called Father. I think that's what we see in this morning's Gospel. It is so precious to him, he has such reverence and honor for it, that he wants to protect it. And so he does what the Jewish tradition calls building a fence around the law. He creates a second, more stringent law, a kind of protective barrier around the first law. If we hold this second, more stringent law as our standard, we might slip up and break it (in fact, we will, because we're human!), but we'll be less likely to break the first law, God's law. In order to make sure you don't violate the commandment against murder, he says, don't even get angry with your sibling. In order to make sure you don't commit adultery, don't even lust. To make sure you don't swear falsely, he says, don't swear at all.

We might understandably be put off by the scary, hyperbolic language about hell and lobbing off body parts. But remember that following the law was never about earning God's approval. Hell is nothing more and nothing less than life without God, than choosing separation from God. What Jesus is doing here is echoing Moses' words in Deuteronomy. Jesus is telling us to choose life, fullness of life, life with God, by loving God and following God's law. He wants us to experience what he has-- a deep relationship with God. Observance for us sitting here today does not look the same as it did for Jesus. Jesus himself gave us new practices—the Lord's Prayer, the washing of feet, baptism and Eucharist. Later, Paul argued for a softening of parts of the law, especially for Gentile converts—people like us. And since then, Christianity and Judaism have parted ways. Observance in each has continued to evolve, and continues to be debated. For example, parts of the Christian tradition, including our own, have come to believe what Jesus's Jewish contemporaries believed: that there are times when we better honor God by allowing divorce and remarriage.

Despite the evolution, two core truths remain. First, God chooses us and loves us freely. That love is unconditional. It does not depend on anything we do or don't do. And second, the commandments and practices we have been given are a gift, a way to love God, to know God more intimately, and to deepen our relationship. To choose them, to practice them, is to choose life. It is to allow ourselves to be shaped in the way Jesus was shaped. Moses and Jesus urge us to follow them, not out of fear that we'll be punished, but because if we don't, we will be missing out.

In just a week and half, we will begin the season of Lent. It's a season I love, because, despite its reputation, it is in fact a beautiful opportunity. As we move toward it, I invite you to consider-- how might you use Lent as a time to choose life? What commandments or practices might you engage more deeply in order to let yourself be shaped? How might you love God by following God's law, and live into the fullness of life God dreams of for you?

### Sources:

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