"Covenant in an Age of Idols", A Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. C. Denise Yarbrough on Sunday, October 4, 2026 at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Penn Yan, NY

Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. (Exodus 20:1-2)

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him…(Philippians 3:)

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. (Matt. 21:43)

Today our lectionary offers us a reading from Exodus where we hear the story of the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mt. Sinai coupled with Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants, and Paul's eloquent words of self-identity in his letter to the Philippians. As we conclude our observance of the season of Creation, enter our annual stewardship season and continue the process of self-reflection and visioning for the future of St. Mark's, these texts offer rich wisdom for our reflection. The Ten Commandments have often found themselves at the center of public controversy. Every few years debates arise about whether they should be displayed in schools, courthouses, or other public buildings. When it comes to the Ten Commandments the issue in our modern context is not whether they should be displayed in public places, but whether we who identify as Christians actually live them out in the world and make them visible through our actions. Catholic theologian D. Brent Laytham once observed, "The appropriate display of the Decalogue is not a plaque on a wall, nor a replica out front, but the faithful people of God." (D. Brent Laytham, CC, 9/29/2008) The Ten Commandments were never meant to be merely engraved in stone. They were meant to be engraved on human hearts and embodied in human communities.

One thing often overlooked when folks read the Exodus account of the giving of the Ten Commandments is the way the story is told. As Professor of Homiletics, Tom Long observed,

> Understanding the Decalogue as a set of burdens overlooks something essential, namely that they are prefaced not by an order—"Here are ten rules. Obey them!"—but instead by a breathtaking announcement of freedom: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex. 20:2). We will probably always refer to the declarations that follow as the "Ten Commandments," but we can also think of them as descriptions of the life that prevails in the zone of God's liberation. (Thomas Long, CC, 3/7/2006)

Long offers a crucial insight into this critical text. The commandments are not arbitrary rules imposed by a demanding God. They are a blueprint for life in covenant with the God who liberates. They show us what freedom looks like and tell us how free people are meant to live. True freedom is not the ability to do whatever we want whenever we want. True freedom is living in right relationship with God, with one another, and with creation itself.

The first four commandments teach us how to live in relationship with God. The remaining six teach us how to live in relationship with our neighbors. Together they form a vision of human flourishing grounded not in self-interest or individual fulfillment but in covenant, mutual responsibility, and the common good. That vision stands in sharp contrast to much of what passes for wisdom in our culture today. Our culture tells us that happiness is found in acquiring more stuff and that we are rugged individualists responsible primarily for our own well-being. The commandments teach contentment and care for neighbor. Our culture tells us that identity is found in the groups to which we belong, the brands we consume, the political tribes with which we affiliate, the status we achieve, and the power we accumulate. The commandments remind us that our deepest identity is found in belonging to God. Our culture treats truth as something flexible and negotiable, indeed suggests there is no such thing as truth. The commandments tell us not to bear false witness.

And perhaps nowhere is the tension more obvious than in the matter of idolatry. While we may not carve golden calves and worship them, our power elites and political and cultural leaders engage in idolatry routinely, as they worship power, money, profits and material comforts before all else. Idols are anything to which we give ultimate loyalty, ultimate trust, or ultimate devotion. Even religion itself can become an idol when it serves our interests rather than God's purposes, when preservation of the institutions of religion becomes more important than living the covenant with God that is embedded in our religious tradition. Journalist Chris Hedges observes "Idols make us feel important. Our idols give us a larger identity, allowing us to define ourselves through the group. And our idols, if we do not let go, lead to spiritual death." (Lillian Daniels, CC, 6/27/2006) Covenant is the promise that we belong to God and to one another. Idolatry occurs whenever we seek our identity, security, or ultimate loyalty elsewhere. To live in covenant is therefore to keep returning our trust from lesser gods to the God who has already pledged faithfulness to us. Covenant is a sacred relationship of mutual commitment that endures through time and survives tribulation and conflict and discord because those in covenant relationships do not walk away when things become challenging.

We live at a time when many people seem willing to sacrifice truth, compassion, integrity, and even basic decency on the altar of political victory, economic gain, tribal loyalty, or personal advancement. We increasingly divide ourselves into competing camps and treat those who disagree with us not simply as people with whom we differ but as enemies to be defeated. The first commandment remains as radical today as it was at Sinai: "You shall have no other gods before me." Because every idol eventually demands a sacrifice.

And now enter Jesus and his parable about the wicked tenants. At first glance the parable seems very different from the giving of the commandments, but at its heart it addresses what happens when we forget the covenant promises we have made to God and start acting only in our own self-interest and not in the interest of the common good, our fellow human beings and creation itself. The tenants make a fatal mistake. They forget whose vineyard it is. They begin acting as though they own what has only been entrusted to them. What began as stewardship becomes entitlement. What began as gratitude becomes greed. And eventually that greed leads to violence. The tenants are not condemned because they enjoy the fruits of the vineyard. They are condemned because they forget that the vineyard belongs to God and not to them.

That may be one of the most important spiritual lessons any of us can learn. Everything we have is a gift. Our lives are gifts. Our families are gifts. Our abilities are gifts. Our resources are gifts. The earth itself is a gift. This congregation is a gift to us and to our local community. None of it belongs to us. We are tenants and stewards, not owners.

As we come to the end of Creation Season, that truth is especially important. The environmental crises we face are rooted not merely in technological failures but in spiritual failures. Like the tenants in the parable, we often behave as though the vineyard belongs to us alone. We take without gratitude. We consume without restraint. We exploit without regard for future generations. But the earth is God's vineyard, not ours. Creation is not a possession to be consumed. It is a trust to be tended and passed on.

The same is true of the church. This congregation does not belong to any one generation. Those who came before us created St. Mark's as a covenant community, cared for it faithfully, and handed it on. Our calling is to do the same for those who will come after us. As we reflect and pray about the future of this congregation, we must remember that we are stewards with a responsibility to those who will come next. The gift of this congregation to its members and to the local community in which it lives and moves and has its being is a treasure we must cherish as we listen for how God is calling us to shape it now.

Whenever stewardship is mentioned, people often assume the conversation is only about money. But stewardship is much bigger than finances. Stewardship begins with recognizing that everything belongs to God. Our time, talent and treasure all belong to God. When we support the life and work of St. Mark's with our financial resources, we are not just paying dues to keep a religious institution running. We are engaged in an act of gratitude. We acknowledge that all we have comes from God's abundance and that as faithful stewards we have a covenant commitment to preserve what has been given to us.

The covenant that God made with our ancestors on Mt. Sinai formed them into a community accountable to God alone and responsible for one another. We were formed as a community that was to show the world how God wants human beings to live with one another and with God. We Christians today are heirs of that original covenant with our Ancient Israelite ancestors, still bound by those commandments and also bound together as Christians by our baptismal covenant with our identity rooted in Christ. The church is not simply a religious corporation, it is a covenant community, called to live in the world while also making the kingdom of God a reality in our own day. We are called to live as covenant community and to reject the rampant idolatries of our secular culture.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians he lists all the idolatrous, worldly identities that he had once held so dear, before he encountered the Risen Christ. As Christians, our true and authentic identity flows from the covenant with God given at Sinai and then confirmed in Christ through our baptism. With Paul may we too affirm, "This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." Amen.