

GOING BACK TO FIRST PRINCIPLES

SERMON FOR THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

FIONA GARDINER

Lord, continue to teach us how to live as your people growing together in the flow of your love.

Amen.

So, today we are going back to first principles in our passage from Exodus. I wonder how YOU felt as the Ten Commandments were read to us.

So familiar that the words just wash over us, making little or no impact?

Do they perhaps seem a bit old fashioned, irrelevant and superseded by the coming of Jesus and his commands to love God as Lord with all our heart, soul and mind and our neighbours as ourselves?

Or perhaps we found ourselves mentally assessing that, personally, we could do better against this checklist of God's rules.

I was very taken by one quotation that Tudor used on Tuesday night at the Lent course. It went like this:

You and I were created to wake up in a garden. Instead, we open our eyes each morning to a fallen wilderness, a world where our omnipresent God seems disturbingly absent. . . God transforms us by His grace into a pathway back to his presence. This path is found in the language of lament. ¹

When we look at or listen to the latest world news, It's as if we are living in a 'fallen wilderness' that day to day is getting worse with more violence and injustice, more suffering and desperation.

Where is God's kingdom of hope and forgiveness? Where does love win the day?

So we cry to God in our frustration. We lament: frustration, sadness, loss, grief, anger...even revulsion.

Things just shouldn't be like this, should they?

A cry from the heart. Sometimes we can barely find the words, so overwhelmed are we.

Words.

¹ Michael Card 'Worship in the Wilderness' DTS Voice

Have you ever noticed how Jesus strides on the scene of his ministry in John's gospel? There is magnificence in the first verses of John's retelling:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.*²

Jesus is the Word that speaks to us, speaks for us, has spoken us into existence.

He came to us, he came for us and lived amongst all the chaos and darkness and turmoil of human existence. And in today's passage from John 2, Jesus' frustration and righteous anger take centre stage.

Imagine the scene: the bustling temple courts, filled with people and tables and livestock. Voices bargaining, the chink of coins, the bleating, mooing, cooing of the chained animals and caged birds, the smell. Jesus erupts into this melee with all his carpenter's strength and outrage: 'How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!' Tables go flying, coins are spilled, animals panic and people flee. 'How do you dare?'

Now, I'm not for a moment suggesting that we take direct action like this, but we need not stay silent. In fact we **MUST** not keep silent!

We can cry out all our frustrations and confusions and griefs to God. We can lament. It is a vital element of this season of Lent, this mourning for our own ineptitudes and failings and for a world that's in a torment of its own making.

But we can't stop there. Lament, crying out to the Lord, has an element of petition. We come to our knees in tears and anguish and we find ourselves pleading for change, for healing, for a way out of all this mess.

Note too, that this weeping, articulating, venting all the anger and distress means that we are in honest communication with the Lord. No holds barred.

We may feel like a child crying in his Father's arms, or beating her fists on her Father's chest, or pleading over and over and over. It may even be a wordless sobbing.

It's all still talking to God, with God. And the Jesus who scoured the temple clean will be the Word for our wordlessness, always. He is at the Father's side, even now, being the Word for all our pain and our petitioning.

Let's pause for a moment. Let's think back to those Ten Commandments. How often we see them broken or ignored in the world all around us. Why? Because people do not know God: how can we expect them to understand his simple rules for living peacefully with one another and with Him?

And, actually, how do WE HEAR THEM? Are these commandments spoken with finger shaking warning about doom and gloom: do this OR ELSE?

² John 1:1 NIV

Or are they to be inscribed on our hearts as first principles; the way things just need to be if we are to live properly with one another in this world, as God's beloved children, as Jesus' faithful followers?

Let's put it another way: boil water and it turns to steam. Freeze water and it turns to ice. **Inevitable.**

Ignore God, fill our lives and time with trivia, turn on each other, lie, steal, make our parents' lives a misery, cheat on our spouse, make this a world all about me, me, me and things will **inevitably** fall apart. How would we even dare live like that?

But, says the Lord, if you are mine, truly mine, you won't want to do these things, will you? And if you fail, then guess what, says the Lord. You get another chance. I'll take your heartbreak when you mess up, I'll forgive you and dry your tears, and together we'll try again. Together. The Father and us. Jesus and us. The Holy Spirit and us. Him and me. Wow!

The world is in a mess. It is crying out for a better way. What we need to do...**MUST** do...is cry out for our world. Pray for our world. Speak out our outrage and not keep silent in the face of corruption and injustice. Weep. Write. Speak. Petition. Protest. Give generously. Help sacrificially. Bring change.

And let's tell the world that there is a better way by showing the way, by telling our stories of forgiveness and of being renewed, reborn and set on the right path.

Let's share love and let go of bitterness.

When the days seem darkest and the world is at its worst, we need to cling on to the one who is life and the light of the world. He lay for three days in a rock tomb...they thought they'd destroyed him...but His light exploded into history with resurrection and hope and power.

Let's get back to first principles. Let's live right for God, with God and with each other. Let's be bringers of hope even as we lament.

Amen.