

The Tablets of the Covenant

Hebrews 9:1-5; John 1:1-18

This season we have looked forward to Christmas, much as I used to look forward to Christmas as an overwrought, unreasonably hopeful, little boy, watching the tree take its shape and color and imagining that, come Christmas, there would be some set of magical gifts there, gifts brilliant enough to fill my life with sight and sound and motion and fun on Christmas day.

Of course, all these hopes were a tall order for my mother to fill, but she did her darndest and, whatever the presents lacked, she put herself out to fill with holiday meals at home and holiday services at church where she sang the carols so clear and bright and her voice soared so that it seemed like she might float out of the pews and join the angels if my brother and I weren't holding her by the arms trying to keep her from getting entirely carried away.

But, with my mom on the case, it didn't pay to try to be Scrooge at our house, so when I finally came around to wanting and loving Christ for myself as a young teen-ager, I would try to be the last one to bed on Christmas Eve and I would sit on the couch by the light of the tree and read the Christmas story from Luke, the pages colored by the tinsel which glimmered over the presents, all filled with wonder that here in Luke was a gift from God that outweighed all the sadness and chaos that also swirled in my family back then.

So God's people through all the centuries between Moses and Jesus worshiped in the candlelight on the far side of a curtain from a Christmas gift box that Moses and Aaron had covered with gold and loaded with presents that also spoke of wonder, the sight and sound and motion of wonders that God had worked for Israel in the wilder-ness and the gifts also spoke of wonders in the future through a Savior great enough and good enough to heal the sadness and chaos that swirled among God's people even on the high holy days.

It was the Ark of the Covenant, a big, bright, gold covered box with angels on top and wonders inside. There was a golden urn full of manna, that magical bread that God gave his people in the desert every morning with the dew at dawn. And Jesus would remember the manna centuries later and cry out to his disciples and to us that he was "*...the True Bread, come down from heaven to bring life to the world.*" By which he meant is that he can feed us, can fill our hearts and sustain our souls through those stretches in life we could never finish if he weren't there with us giving us the strength to stay at it.

Also in the Ark was Aaron's rod that blossomed, a walking stick that had come to life one night in the desert with leaves and almonds as a message to God's people that if they would worship God together, in his house, under his priest, God will bring us to life with qualities that none of us could possess without worship, apart from God's people. Because in his day, Aaron was the

man through whom Israel could reach for love and forgiveness and power from God. So Aaron's walking stick came to life, while all the rest remained dry and dead.

And centuries later, Jesus would say to his disciples, *"I am the True Vine...I am the vine and you are the branches, he who abides in me and I in him, he bears much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing."* So Jesus in John 15 painted a picture of himself as Someone greater than Aaron, that true, living vine who, when we stay near him, when we worship him together, we come alive with those qualities that make us like Jesus. But there's another part to the picture

On the ground, all around the vine, Jesus pictured dead, bare, separate, fruitless branches who wouldn't abide in him, wouldn't worship him together and so these branches withered. They ended up without the love that Jesus promised to every soul willing to abide to him and stay together in the church. Jesus said, *"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you! Abide in my love as I have abided in my Father's love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love...This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you."*

And you may remember that I struggled to finish last week's sermon, couldn't find words that grasped how Christ sustains our hearts and souls through life much as bread and food sustains our bodies through the days. I couldn't find words to describe how abiding close to Jesus, how worshiping him in common connects us to a kind of spiritual sap that teaches us, first to be loved by God and then to love each other in a way that is fruitful, that adds meaning and beauty to life. I kept talking, I'm still talking but none of us will own these things until each of us and all of us to share in the bread and abide in the Vine for ourselves and with each other.

The last present God had Moses and Aaron stuff into the Ark were the two stone tablets Moses and Joshua had carried down Mt. Sinai, tablets on which were written all the commands and promises that bound God and his people together. The first gift God gave Israel, and the last gift mentioned in our Call to Worship was the Word of God which, if Israel read and took it to heart would define and clarify everything they needed to know about life, about God, about themselves.

But forget the stone tablets, lose the word of God and Israel would lose everything God gave them, the sanctuary including the Ark, the land God gave them to guard and to keep, their homes, their children, their marriages, their own heart and minds. Israel lost it all. Everything that grew from holiness and was defined by love, Israel would lose, because they couldn't stay interested in what God had told them life was all about.

So as I've recounted for you many times, they all ended in refugee camps all over the Ancient Near East, relearning all those lessons that were too dull, too dusty, too hard for them to bother with when they had it all. Because when we have it all, we think it's about us. And I know how they felt. Because I was brought up to be a Christian, Irish Catholic Christian. I was dragged to church every Sunday. Ready or not, happy or not, my mom got us in the car and held us in the

pew and expected us to listen because it was all she'd ever known and it made life make sense and she didn't want us to miss it.

But somehow I managed. Heading into 13, 14 years of age, I got caught up with a hardscrabble bunch of kids who had taken to laughing at everything our mom's and dad's stood for. We were kids in a hurry to find and play with stuff that people twice our age struggled to handle. Everything was too early, too fast, so chaotic that by the time I was 16 my heart had been bent and bruised and broken so often that I actually knew I was in trouble, headed nowhere good.

So one night I lay on the cot my parents had set up down in our basement to keep me and my music the maximum distance possible from my father and, as I lay there in my little beatnik cave, I said to God, "If you're out there, and anything I ever heard in church was true, this would be the time to help me!"

So guess what God did! He had my mother enroll me in a religious class one night a week, something I really didn't want! But when I got there, the first thing they gave me was a paperback Bible that I began to take out into the woods and read. And then God had this guy on my track team who wouldn't let me alone. Keep telling me I needed Christ in my heart. Kept nagging me to join him and his friends in a Bible Study in his basement. No way! I wasn't ready for that!

But I couldn't stop reading that Bible and by the end of the school year I'd begun to nag my Jesus Freak friend with questions. Now I know I've already told you this story through the years. I'm still young enough to remember I've told you this before! But the point of the exercise for me was that the words in the paperback Bible came alive. It says in the book of Hebrews that *"The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two edged sword, cutting to the division of soul and spirit, bone and marrow, judging the thoughts and intentions of the heart."*

I couldn't begin to count all the things that worked together that year to steer my heart toward God and away from trouble. But at the center of it all were the words I read in that Bible that slowly and surely opened my mind to think and my heart to feel differently about God. And I learned a fact that has stuck with me all the years since. And that is that a genuine love relationship has intellectual content.

I'll say it again. A genuine love relationship has intellectual content. Jesus commanded us to love each other, but our ability to share affection and trust and space and time and power together can only happen to the extent that we share ideas and ideals, and principles and values and definitions in common.

So in the Ark, in God's gift box, along with the bread that fed God's people and Aaron's little living tree that promised God's people life, in God's gift box, there were also stored stone tablets

bearing God's word because God's people needed to remember that to be fed by God and made alive by God, we must also be taught by God.

The Apostle John in his gospel went so far as to teach that Jesus not only brought us God's word, but that, before the beginning of time, Christ, God the Son, was God's Word. *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. This one [this person] was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him. Apart from him, not one thing came to be that has come to be."*

The central fact of human history according to John was that *"...the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the Only Begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth."* The point being that truth is not abstract and cold and unfeeling as so many modern Christians imagine it to be. To the contrary, when Jesus welcomed children and forgave sinners and healed and guided sick and broken, bent and confused sinners, in all these acts of grace, he was only living out the truth that is written in the heart of the Father who has always begotten him.

Months ago, we hosted a symposium on Faith and Addiction Recovery and on the panel was a fine young man, my daughter's age, who sadly had become an addict, but who now is so invested in getting free and clear of his addiction that at 21 years of age, he is coordinating a recovery group on Saturday nights at St. Paul's in Angola. As the symposium wound on, someone asked him, what can the church do for addicts. And he said something like, "Just love us. Don't trouble us with any doctrine or details."

But John says that *"...the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the Only Begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth."* The point being that the love in God's heart, the grace of God is all interwoven with the truth of God, the details and the doctrine. It follows that we find real grace and love from God only after we're willing to wrestle with truth from God's word.

When I gave my life to Christ at 16, I was pretty deeply involved with a young girl, who wanted nothing to do with anything about Christ, which left me in a dilemma. The long and the short of it was that I spent a year reading my paperback Bible looking for a passage that would tell me that I could stay in love with a girl who didn't share any of the ideas and principles and values and definitions that go with loving Christ. Because I was 16 and I thought I would die without her. Of course, I didn't find the solution I was looking for in Leviticus or anywhere else in Scripture. There just aren't any quick and easy answers for lovelorn 16 year olds in the Bible.

But what I learned through the exercise is that truth is alive. In the Word, through God's Word, every time I opened the book, Christ grew in my heart and mind and, as I've continued to search of answers in his Word, God has taught me through the years a general sense of direction and purpose which does comfort me in those tough twists and turns where there are no easy answers to be found.

It works that way because a genuine love relationship always has intellectual content, our affections are always founded on ideas and values and principles. The most important commandment, Jesus taught us is that we should “...*love the Lord our God heart, soul, mind, and strength.*”

To be sure, God has given us a Savior with a beautiful mind. He is the Word, Christ lives out the love and goodness and justice that lives in the heart and mind of God. Christ has a beautiful mind and we will never really love him until we are willing to hear and take to heart what's in it. Because it is in God's word, through God's word, that we learn to love God back for all he has done for us in Christ.