A couple weeks ago we recalled that the season of Lent is 40 days in duration, not counting the celebratory Sabbath Days, and that there was a great deal of biblical support for 40 day periods of spiritual preparation in both Testaments of Scripture. One of the assigned New Testament texts for Lent is the story of Jesus being sent into the wilderness for 40 days in preparation for his ministry. We considered that text in our message on the first Sunday in Lent.

Today we are considering an Old Testament text assigned for this third Sunday in Lent which recounts the giving of the Ten Commandments. Why? Because Moses spent 40 days and nights on Mt. Sinai receiving the two tablets of stone upon which the words were engraved. This is strangely appropriate in light of a notice you will find in our bulletin insert highlighting a new adult Bible study which will commence next week focusing on the Ten Commandments.

The resource used for this study is one I authored 20 odd years ago entitled: To Fulfill the Law: A Timely Dialogue with a Timeless Decalogue. The term “the Ten Commandments” is translated from the Hebrew and is more literally rendered as “the ten words.” When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, an ancient translation called the “Septuagint,” this terminology was rendered as “the Decalogue” (the Greek prefix, deca, means “ten,” and the suffix, logo, means “word”).

“A Timely Dialog with a Timeless Decalogue,” which is also the title of our message for this morning, suggests that those ancient commandments which form the core of the Hebraic Law are just as relevant for us today. They preserve timeless spiritual truths and it behooves us to continue a dialogue with them in our day. As Thomas Reed says in the quote at the top of our bulletin: “If there’s one thing for which I admire you, it’s your original discovery of the Ten Commandments.”

There are some who want to keep the Ten Commandments elevated in the public consciousness as a foundation of moral law. The Oklahoma legislature voted to have a granite monument of the 10 Commandments erected on the state house lawn. The American Civil Liberties Union opposed it without success, but this past October someone intentionally smashed their vehicle into it--effectively destroying it. Now there is a legislative move to have it replaced.
Displaying the Ten Commandments is one thing but being able to list them from memory is quite another. I suspect that a very small percentage of Americans are able to do that, and an even smaller percentage can say that they have studied them in biblical context. They certainly lend themselves to a lengthy sermon series, and in the case of my authored study there are actually 12 chapters rather than 10, but it is hard to reach everyone that many Sundays in a row.

We will settle for an overview of the 10 Commandments in a single sermon which, while a challenge, will not only serve to introduce the upcoming Bible study but to introduce us to the 10 Commandments as a whole. A marital infidelity joke proclaims, “Oh well, 9 out of 10 is not bad.” But I think a closer look at these commandments will reveal that our track record is not so good as 9 out of 10. Therefore let us begin “A Timely Dialogue with a Timeless Decalogue” and see how it continues to speak to us in our day and what it means for us “To Fulfill the Law.”

And God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery (Vs 1-2). Before the words were written in stone, God spoke the words directly to the people from Mt. Sinai. The Decalogue reflects the structure of ancient royal treaties beginning with a preamble, “I am the Lord your God,” followed by an historical prologue, “who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” Then follows the treaty--or covenant--stipulations. God’s use of the ancient royal treaty pattern establishes the Lord as Israel’s King, and the Israelites as his subject people.

Hence the first stipulation: You shall have no other gods before me (Verse 3). No other influence will supersede me in your life—not the god Mammon (aka, money), nor any carnal passion, nor any worldly temptation. Indeed, sometimes God will call us to sacrifice such things for a higher cause, just as Jesus was called to make a great personal sacrifice. No matter the sacrifice our spiritual commitment is to God, and God’s commitment is to us. We promise to take up our crosses and God promises to raise us up to something new and better.

The second stipulation: You shall not make for yourself an idol… (Verse 4), is not to be confused with a prohibition against making sculptures or portraits or other expressions of art. Indeed, God not only delivered to Moses the 10 Commandments but also instructions for myriad ornamentations for the tabernacle and its appointments. There is a difference between art and an idol. An idol is a representation of God, and no one should presume to know the unknowable.

Most of the idols we make end up looking a lot like us. The Bible says that we were created in God’s image, but we keep on trying to create God in our image. Whether we are Black or White we assume God reflects our values. Whether we are Democrats or Republicans we assume God has endorsed our views. Whether we are Jewish or Muslim we claim God is on our side, and definitely not on the other’s. It is not good to idolize anyone or anything. God’s ways are definitely not our ways. They are higher than our ways, and we should be grateful that God is not so small as
we are or the self-serving idols we make to represent him. If we want to visualize God, visualize him as a jealous God—one who does not respond well to infidelity. Infidelity tends to continue down the generations as impressionable children are led astray by parental idols. Beware of making idols to represent the Almighty.

You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God... (Verse 7). Most of us assume this means not to use profanity that includes God’s name or Jesus’ name, which would include current manifestations such as OMG. But I think it means much more. In our culture a women often take a man’s name in marriage. How empty a gesture if she commits adultery (more on that in a moment). A man takes a country’s name when declaring himself to be an American. How empty a gesture if he commits treason. We take Christ’s name when we become Christians. How empty a gesture when we commit hypocrisy. Let us not misuse the name of the Lord when we act or pray in his name.

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy (Verse 8). This commandment, and the one that follows, are stated positively rather than You shall not…. God rested on the seventh day of creation. God knows that we need rest from the myriad demands of daily living. St. Augustine said: “Our souls are restless until they find their rest in thee.” The Sabbath provides a day for us to come to God’s house and hear his word without distraction and to translate what we hear into daily living as we go forth into the coming week. Rest from worldly pursuits on the Sabbath and fill that space with Godly pursuits.

Thus ends the first four commandments—commandments that condition our relationship with God. Have no other gods before him, do not make idols, and do not misuse the Lord’s name. Keep the Sabbath Day. The remaining six commandments condition our relationships with one another. All of them are varied ways of holding the fabric of society together, beginning with our primary relationships—those between children and their parents.

Honor your father and your mother... (Verse 12). Parents may not be perfect, but if they put the best interests of their children first they are honorable parents. Parents have had a chance to live and to learn--sometimes the hard way. Their experience can spare their children from learning the hard way, but only if their children honor their surpassing experience by heeding instruction. The family truly is the foundation of society. If it crumbles, society crumbles with it. Parents must put their children’s best interest first, and children must honor their parents.

You shall not murder (verse 13). That is one commandment most of us can safely say that we have not violated. We have not taken another’s biological life. But have we killed another’s joy in living or hope for a better day. Have we slayed another’s chances for a better life? Of this commandment Jesus once remarked: “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment” (Matthew 5:21-22). Jesus clearly expands the applicability of the commandments, and not only with this one.
You shall not commit adultery (Verse 14). Jesus once said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27-28). Most fellows would think that looking lustfully at a woman is harmless, until they find their wives looking lustfully at a man. That is definitely not cool. That hurts. We are not supposed to hurt the one whom we are to love the most, and nothing hurts more than marital unfaithfulness. And if God has blessed us with children, adultery hurts them most of all. Children require a safe, secure, stable and loving family environment to grow up healthy and whole. For the sake of those you love, do not commit adultery.

You shall not steal (Verse 15). Here is another commandment we often break unawares. There is active stealing, which is taking from others what rightfully belongs to them. But there is also passive stealing, which is withholding from others what we should rightfully give to them. What makes passive stealing most condemning is that our victim is often God. God asks through the prophet Malachi: “Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’ In tithes and offerings” (Malachi 3:8). Let us keep the eighth commandment not only in the ways we get, but in the ways we give as well.

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor (Verse 16). Like cancer cells which spread uncontrollably until they destroy their host, so false testimonies spread in destructive ways. It was such a cancer that destroyed the Son of God. It began with a few malignant voices. The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any. Many testified falsely against him, but their statements did not agree” (Mark 14:55-56).

How quickly this disease spread from the few to the many, so that those who only a week before were proclaiming: “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” were now shouting, “Crucify Him!” Perhaps we would all do well to consider the crowds we follow and the influence they exert upon our behavior toward others, in light of our Ninth Commandment obligation. Lying about ourselves for self-serving purposes is bad enough. Giving false testimony about the good name and character of others is worse still.

Finally, You shall not covet… (Verse 17). Once again we witness the Bible’s concern with inner motives. Sinful motives lead to sinful actions. It is sinful to even crave what belongs to another because it fires the temptation to wrongfully make it our own. Aside from being a sin against God and others, covetousness is a sin against ourselves. As long as our craving is for things which we do not have, we are doomed to live unfulfilled lives of discontent. Much more fulfilling is to count our blessings—to be grateful for what we have rather than to bemoan what we do not have.

Thus ends the commandments conditioning our relationships with one another. Jesus echoed the pattern of the Ten Commandments when challenged to identify the greatest commandment. He answered with two: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and
with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37-40). That concludes today’s dialogue with the Decalogue. 10 words. Wonderful words of life.