

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, 859 5th St., Hancock, MN 56244
www.hancocklutheran.org
Pastor Gregg Bitter (320) 392-5313 - GreggBitter@gmail.com
Lent 3b
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Rejoice in God's Commandments Exodus 20:1-3

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen. The word from God through which the Holy Spirit draws us to Jesus is Exodus 20.

God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the LORD, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:1-3)

This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear friends in Christ, fellow saints washed clean in the blood of our risen Savior:

Aunt Polly had set Tom Sawyer to painting the fence with whitewash. Oh how he wanted to be down by the creek instead! Even trading jobs with Jim, who was sent to fetch a bucket of water from the town pump, seemed as if it would be so much better. But no, Aunt Polly insisted that he whitewash this fence. That was his punishment. Then as young Ben Rogers comes down the street pretending he's a steamboat, Tom lays upon a plan. He pretends this whitewashing is important work, a job he wants to do well and won't just let anyone mess it up. The more Tom seemed to like what he was doing, the more Ben wanted to do it. Finally, Ben offered to give Tom his apple in exchange for the privilege of painting. So as Ben labored away in the hot sun, Tom sat on a barrel in the shade munching on a fresh apple, looking for other boys who might pay him for the privilege of whitewashing the fence. How we look at something can determine whether we consider it work or play, a burden or a delight.

How do you look at the Ten Commandments? Are they a burden God has imposed on us, a burden too heavy for anyone to carry? Do they sap the fun out of life reminding us that what we want doesn't always match what God wants? Do they drive us like a taskmaster forcing us to toil away at doing the right thing and beating us when we mess up? Do they drive us down with their threats and punishments? Even the slightest mistakes triggers our conscience to accuse us: You've broken God's commandments!

Or are his commandments your delight and joy?

An honest answer of what actually goes on inside of us Christians is more complicated than an either-or question. And we don't simply want to pull a con job on ourselves like Tom did with the other boys. How can we rejoice in his commandments—not pretending but with genuine joy? Well, God does not pull a con job on us either. He has worked a real change in us and continues to work in us so that more and more his commandments become our joy and delight. Yes, dear Christian, rejoice in God's commandments. Let's think about that today.

A. A slave no more!

Stand with the Israelites at the foot of Mt. Sinai. The Lord came down in fire.

Smoke swirled up. Can you smell it? The mountain shook violently. Thunder, lightening, and thick cloud shrouded it. A trumpet blast filled the air, growing louder and louder. Then the Lord God himself spoke. What a powerful, majestic, thundering voice! The people trembled. God gave his Ten Commandments.

How can we not tremble in terror? We are lawbreakers. The Ten Commandments expose our hearts. Have you loved God above all? Have you loved your neighbor as yourself? And remember “your neighbor” includes people you do not like, people who have been mean and nasty to you.

The Ten Commandments condemn us for our lack of trust in God, for our failures to pray and give him thanks in all occasions, and for every time we’ve neglected to gladly hear and learn his word. The Ten commandments condemn us for our disobedience to authority, for our malice, lust, and greed, for words that hurt our neighbor’s good name, and for hearts that have coveted, desiring what God does not want to give us.

The commandments show how powerful sin is. Sin enslaved us. We might have thought we were doing as we pleased, but we were actually slaving away for sin. That’s a bigger con job than Tom Sawyer ever played. Sin convinces the human race, each one of us, that we were born free and that God and his commandments are the burden that wants to enslave us. But no! We were born into slavery to sin and even now we still feel how powerful and enticing that sin within us is. We can’t do the good we want to do because our sinfulness and selfishness infect and pollute everything. Who can rescue us from this body of death?

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you ... out of the land of a slavery” (Exodus 20:2 NIV11). He had rescued his people from years of slavery in Egypt. They were slaves no more. They were his people and he was their God, their God who set them free, slaves no more.

He has rescued you and me, dear friends, from our slavery to sin. He says to you and me, “I am the LORD your God.” (Exodus 20:2). With that word “your” he claims us as his people. Why? Why would the holy God claim us lawbreakers as his own? Because he has paid the price for you. He has ransomed you with the blood of his own dear Son. The Lord’s Supper brings that ransom price into your mouth. He did this for you. Jesus Christ is your Redeemer. He has purchased you to be his own. He has set you free from slavery to sin. A slave no more! Believe this Good News.

Keep on believing, for the Son of God himself came down from heaven to set us free. He became our Brother to break our chains by his death and resurrection. In Baptism you died with him and were raised to life with him. You, dear Christian, were reborn as God’s child, his own dear son or daughter. A slave no more!

How this changes the way we look at God and his commandments. They become our joy and delight. Rejoice in God’s commandments. Yes, it is a joy to serve him, for he has set us free. Let’s think about that.

B. A joy to serve!

It’s a joy to serve our God, but we don’t always feel that way. Are his commandments a burden or a delight? As I said earlier, that’s not an either-or question for us Christians. We feel both at the same time. For you see, we are both old self and

new self.

The old self that once filled and controlled us is no longer in charge. Through Baptism, the Holy Spirit created a new self in you and me, and he continues to strengthen that new self as we follow Jesus, listening to his words. Don't let your new self die. For the old self is still inside each of us as well, at war against the new. My old self kicks against the commandments and rebels against them. My new self rejoices in the commandments and eagerly obeys them. And both go on at the same time.

Why does my new self delight in the commandments and find it a joy to serve God? Here are a few thoughts to ponder:

1) Although the commandments do not show me my Savior (the Gospel does that), the commandments do show me how much I need my Savior. My old self wants to camouflage Christ's cross so that it blends into the background, and one way it does that is by making the background not look so bad. If my sins aren't that big of a deal, how much do I really need Jesus? The commandments show the true darkness of my sins. The commandments reveal how powerless I am to make myself right with God. Do you see how that prepares us to rejoice in the Gospel? For the Gospel shows us Jesus, the innocent Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, who brings us his righteousness to cover our sins. And this just wasn't something I needed before I was Christian. Every day I need to see how much I need Jesus because of my sins. The commandments help me do that, so I rejoice in the commandments.

2) What's more, my old self refuses to do what God wants. My old self is a stubborn donkey. It will only move under the threat of a stick. I can use God's commandments, with their threat of punishment, death, and hell, like club to beat my old self into submission. Then despite the old self living in me, I can still strive to do the good God has prepared for me to do. And this brings me joy to use the commandments to keep my old self in check.

3) I also rejoice in the commandments because they reveal to me what is actually and truly pleasing to my God. You know when someone has been good to you and you want to give them a gift but you just don't know what to give? How frustrating that is! Wouldn't that be nice if we had a list of what they wanted? No one has done more for us than God. If we only had a list of what we wanted, we could thank him rightly! But we do! His commandments tell us what he wants. They reveal his will. I don't have to go and invent what I think will be god-pleasing or pious. His commandments give me that direction and guidance. What a joy to have his commandments!

4) And finally, as I ponder his holy commandments, I look forward to that time when I'll put off this sinful nature and in heaven give him that perfect obedience I want to. Then I'll be fully able to rejoice in his commandments. But until then, dear friends, don't let your old self trip you up. Keep your eyes on Jesus. He alone has set you free. He is your God, your Redeemer. You are a slave no more, so rejoice in his commandments. Amen.

The peace of God that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.