

Lent 3, Year B – Exodus 20
All Saints' Episcopal Church
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Growing up I had a fascination with curses. I remember watching a TV movie about the Hope Diamond, a beautiful 45 carat blue diamond that now resides at the Smithsonian. The movie was a largely-fabricated tale of all the tragedies that accompanied the diamond over the course of its history – from the person who steals the diamond from a Hindu temple and dies shortly thereafter, to the downfall of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI, to the insanity and suicide of a jeweler who handles the diamond, to an actress shot on-stage while wearing it. In the movie, any evil and misfortune in the lives of the owners was explained by this diamond.

In the 1988 movie *The Red Violin*, we see a curse that spans generations, with hardship and tragedy passed along in succession. Following the violin through the course of its life, the movie outlines the painful stories of loss and death that begin in 1681 when the violin-maker loses his wife in childbirth. Her blood is mixed with the varnish used to stain the wood of this violin, and so her death marks those who will eventually play it. From the young boy who dies while auditioning for the Prussian monarchy, to the suicide of an English violinist who obtains the instrument from a group of Roma, to the havoc and betrayal in a Chinese family during the Communist revolution – all the sadness and tragedies of these lives are projected onto this red violin.

And then there's the 1970's three-part *Brady Bunch* episode where the family accompanies Mr. Brady on his business trip to Hawaii. The boys find a Tiki idol that's been taken from an ancient burial ground, and bad things start to happen right away – Greg has a surfing accident, a giant tarantula crawls on Peter, and the boys are captured by a group of crazy archeologists when they try to return the idol to its proper resting place.

Human beings sometimes explain the bad things that happen to us by creating stories about curses. It makes difficult events in our lives seem less random. The truth of the matter, though, is that many of the painful, sad events in our lives *are* random – many of the illnesses that befall us, the natural disasters like hurricanes and earthquakes, the car accidents that happen every day. These things can be difficult to explain in terms of our own actions, and it's theologically unsound to see such events as retribution for one sin or another. But to relegate the ills of this world to the category of "things that are *always* beyond our control" would be a mistake too, as we see in our reading from Exodus.

The fifth verse of Exodus 20 sounds foreign to our modern ears: "I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me." This sounds harsh. Later God will tell the prophet Ezekiel something entirely different: "A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child" (18:20).

Still, the idea that sin is passed down from generation to generation has some truth to it – the things we do have effects that last far beyond us in time. What we do matters to those around us and to those who will come after us. None of us acts in a vacuum, and the commandments given on Mount Sinai acknowledge this. They aren't just moral imperatives handed down from on high to protect individual souls; they are the rules for a life together with God and with one another. They tell us what it looks like to be the people of God.

The fact that what we do now will affect others and the earth for years to come isn't foreign to us. Global warming is due in large part to deforestation, agricultural activities such as raising cattle, and the use of fossil fuel. We know that children exposed to violence in their home, school, or neighborhood are significantly more likely to commit acts of violence when they are older – setting in motion a cycle that repeats itself. Acts of aggression between nations breed wars that will go on for decades, even centuries. And parental trauma may result in biological changes in offspring for generations to come. Yes, some evil and pain in the world are the result of human action, and that pain cascades down through the years, almost like a curse.

But read further in our passage from Exodus, and we see the reverse stated even more strongly. God promises to show “steadfast love to the *thousandth* generation of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Exodus 20:6). Even more enduring than the pain we bring to the world is the power of good. What a grace-filled word from God! What hope that brings!

These commandments in Exodus were meant to structure a community and build relationships that would not only bless Israel, but would also bless the whole world through her presence. To live in right relationship with the earth, one another, and God brings good that will last throughout time. Perhaps that's one reason a truly physical (and not only spiritual) resurrection is so important to some Christians. Bishop N. T. Wright puts it this way:

*...the resurrection of Jesus means that the present time is shot through with great significance. What is done to the glory of God in the present is genuinely building for God's future. Acts of justice and mercy, the creation of beauty and the celebration of truth, deeds of love and the creation of communities of kindness and forgiveness--these all matter, and they matter forever.*¹

We in the Church are called to bless the earth. We do the work that we do in this place not because we think that it makes a difference for only one second, one minute, one day. We do the work that we do out of our love for God, knowing that participating in the kingdom of God leaves the world forever changed. Like a mustard seed that grows into a huge bush, like seed that falls on good soil and brings forth grain a hundredfold, like a little yeast that leavens 50 pounds of flour. So what will be the legacy of our lives, of All Saints', of the Episcopal Church, of the Church universal? The world needs God's reconciling, healing love. How will we live in ways that will bless the world for generations to come?

¹ N.T. Wright and Marcus Borg, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 126-127.