

It appears that we soon shall be engaged in a new local mission project at this church, and I want to give credit where it is due for the idea to one of our newer members, and soon to be one of the newest members of your Session, that governs this church and tells me what to do and where to go, Denise Kollert. Denise came to the Session not quite four weeks ago and described the plight of those who are on what we have long called “food stamps,” how many of them also seek help from the food pantry at the First Baptist Church some blocks west of us, and how neither food stamps nor that food pantry are able to provide personal care and related products, such as toothpaste, soap and shampoo, laundry detergent, and the like. Denise asked whether this church might step into that void.

We have had proposals that we, too, have food available, but both because the Baptist Church has a very extensive operation and because we might have neither adequate space nor enough people available to permit such an operation, no such plans have progressed. But the Session thought, and I whole-heartedly agreed, that this project would be complementary to the food pantry, serve a real need, and require much less space, and, I think, fewer human hours than would a food pantry. So Denise, Sandra Saunders, and Vera Schell have since been working to flesh out details on how we might proceed.

I also felt that this plan would be rather enthusiastically supported by all of you, who have proven yourselves generous of heart and, frankly, of wallet when there is human need, so that within a few months of asking for either specific goods or money to buy them, we could start up.

But, maybe Denise is the pushy sort, I don't know, but she had a further item in her proposal: she felt that we could apply for a grant to fund the initial inventory of goods from the owner of the Florence Copper Project, which is making charitable and civic contributions in the interest of developing good will for its presence and project, which is a rather fascinating technical approach to mining copper. But Florence Copper — and indeed several other copper mining proposals in Arizona — are all controversial: everyone wants what mining produces, so long as the production is “not in my backyard,” which gives rise to the term, “NIMBY.”

It is human and there is no reason for me to enter the fray over Florence Copper, so I won't. I will point out, however, that the deserts in Arizona have yielded a lot of copper and other minerals over the last 150 or so years. If you doubt me, there is an incredible hole to be seen if you ever drive to the interesting-and-worth-the-drive town of Bisbee, and there is one colorful — though the colors do not come through in these photos I took in 2002, just after my first speeding ticket in Arizona six years before moving here — there is one colorful eyesore mountain of mine tailings just south of Ajo.

Yes, there are lots of rocks in the desert.

I have been taking the liberty of translating as *desert*, not incorrectly but mine is not the only acceptable translation of the Greek word *eremos* describing where Jesus spent the forty days he spent almost alone following his baptism and before he began his ministry, rather than to follow the more common translation

of “wilderness.” *Desert* gives what I feel is a more accurate sense of Jesus’ isolation during those forty days — and makes his sojourn more visible through our own physical surroundings. Forty days in the desert.

Of course, the would-be theologian and scholar in me cannot avoid that Jesus’ forty days bears a relation to the *forty* days we read of before God made the covenant with Noah, which we described two weeks ago, the sign of which was the rainbow, and to the *forty years* that the Israelites wandered after leaving Egypt on their way to the promised land of Canaan, the *Forty years Exodus* which we normally think of as “in the *wilderness*,” but, especially since that wandering was in the Sinai Peninsula, we know it can geologically and meteorologically be described as forty years “in the *desert*.”

And it was quite near the start of that forty years but most assuredly in that desert, that they encountered not copper, which, useful as it is still oxidizes and can with time turn into powder, but gold! Gold, chemically stable, non-oxidizable, and incorruptible! They found *gold* in the desert.

And, “no,” it was not the gold they took with them from Egypt and melted to form the golden calf, it was the gold delivered to Moses while he was on the mountain as they cast that calf; the gold they found was *The Law*, very specifically what became known as *The Decalogue*, *The Ten Commandments*.

What? A list of things which is largely, “don’t you dare’s,” is “gold”? Well, saying it three times, which I may have done over the past several weeks, might not make it so, but it does help me in advancing my argument. The Ten Commandments break down into two groupings, commonly called “tablets” with the assumption that when Moses carried them down — and this is very figurative: Hebrew writing did not even exist when the Exodus would have occurred, so let me say — when, figuratively, Moses carried them down. One grouping of commandments was on the first tablet, dealing with humans’ relation with God, and on the second tablet were commandments dealing with humans’ relations with one another. While what we know as “The Golden Rule” appears not in Exodus but in Leviticus 19:18, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” the commandments on that second tablet can be viewed as specific ways in which The Golden Rule is lived out — not stealing or killing or coveting or committing adultery or bearing false witness.

I listed those out of order because when I do Bible Study on Exodus, I love to look at some of the chapters immediately following the story of The Ten Commandments in which there are detailed rules about matters we would describe as civil law — the extent of damages if a neighbor’s ox falls into a hole in your property, — including some *legal procedure*, such as the importance of a statement and hence the importance of truth, relevant *reasons* for not bearing false witness, and, I believe also, for not taking the Lord’s name in vain.

In other words, the idea of God’s Law is not to tell people what not to do in that old sense of “Presbyterians are united in the concern that someone, somewhere, might be having a good time,” but

rather that God does not want anyone necessarily to have a bad time because of the acts — or failure to act — of another . . . or at least, of me . . . or you!

And that is why, I say, that The Law is *gold*; God's Law is intended to help us live together, to live together in peace and harmony and, I believe, *joy*; *joy* does not mean the absence of sorrow or hurt, but I do think it means that when sorrow or hurt come, it is not the end . . . but that is a message that truly awaits when Jesus emerges from a different desert.

Why should we *not* find joy in knowing God's Law? Recall the psalm from which we read together:

*The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.*

I am glad that I am a Christian, for I fear that if I were a Jew I would be as I was when I was quite a few years younger, thinking that not only must I, but that I could, flawlessly follow God's laws. I could not, I did not, I cannot, and as sincerely as I labor, I know I do not flawlessly follow God's laws — and while I will readily acknowledge inferiority in that regard to each and every one of you, I suspect that none of you has lived and does live flawlessly following God's Law. That we cannot and fool ourselves when we think we do live flawlessly following God's Law is one of the subjects Jesus addressed in the famous "Sermon on the Mount," where, as an example, he says that when we look hatefully at another we violate the command, "Thou shalt not kill."

But that we do not flawlessly follow God's Law does not mean that we are not richer than those who are ignorant of it and have no interest in following it!

Third time: the chosen-ness of the Jews refers to the idea that they were *chosen* to receive God's Law — to receive it as they walked in the desert. Let me parse my own words here: *as they walked in the desert*. I stated earlier that they were *near the start of their journey* when what we know as Moses going up Mt. Horeb and receiving the Law occurred. *Near the start of their journey*.

Friends, let me suggest this, and those of you who have shared studying Bible with me will attest, the Jews did not become perfect after receiving God's Law! Boy, they sure . . . uh, moaned and *complained* a lot, really complained a lot, and questioned about God a lot, yet as a nation, they hung together for another almost forty years in the desert, and they arrived at their intended destination. I believe that without God's Law and the desire, the desire, not necessarily the ability,

the desire to follow it, they would have wandered aimlessly in all different directions in that desert, perhaps never arriving at their intended destination.

We are always wandering, wandering through life, through what at times seems to be the desert of life, and I truly believe that seeking to follow God's Law keeps us returning to the right path to reach the destination that is intended for us. And that Law, that Gold not really "found," but *given* in the desert, is embodied in the person of Jesus Christ, calling us to follow him, for by following him we are following what God sought through The Law as best humans are able. Later in the Gospel from which I read today's lesson, Jesus says, "I am the way," "the way, the truth and the life."

Jesus, finer than gold, even much finer gold. With us in the desert of life, Jesus, the way in which we seek to follow God's Law so that not only we, but all, might be able to live together in peace and justice and freedom — and joy.

And in his name,  
Amen.