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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister¹⁶
April 1, 2012.

¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER XX (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² Isaiah 52:13--53:12 (KJV).

³ St. Matthew 26:1-75 (KJV).

⁴ St. Matthew 26:59-61 (KJV).

⁵ Exodus 20:16 (KJV).

⁶ "The Decalogue may be omitted, provided it be said at least one Sunday in each month." *The Order for The Administration of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 67 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁷ Exodus 23:1 (KJV).

⁸ Leviticus 10:1.

⁹ Numbers 16:35.

¹⁰ Numbers 16:31-34.

¹¹ Psalm 37:36 (MCV).

¹² I Kings 18:4 & 13:19; II Kings 3:2, 3:13, 9:7, & 9:22.

¹³ I Kings 21:15-16.

¹⁴ I Kings 21:23; II Kings 9:6-10.

¹⁵ II Kings 9:30-37.

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SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The Sunday next before Easter,
commonly called Palm Sunday

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the thirteenth Verse of the fifty-second Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.²

"Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high. As many were astonished at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men: So shall he sprinkle many nations; the kings shall shut their mouths at him: for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider.

"Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed? For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

"Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken. And he made his grave with the wicked,

and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.

“Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-sixth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.³

“And it came to pass, when Jesus had finished all these sayings, he said unto his disciples, Ye know that after two days is the feast of the passover, and the Son of man is betrayed to be crucified. Then assembled together the chief priests, and the scribes, and the elders of the people, unto the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas [**KYE-uh-fuss**], And consulted that they might take Jesus by subtilty, and kill him. But they said, Not on the feast day, lest there be an uproar among the people.

“Now when Jesus was in Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper, There came unto him a woman having an alabaster box of very precious ointment, and poured it on his head, as he sat at meat. But when his disciples saw it, they had indignation, saying, To what purpose is this waste? For this ointment might have been sold for much, and given to the poor. When Jesus understood it, he said unto them, Why trouble ye the woman? for she hath wrought a good work upon me. For ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always. For in that she hath poured this ointment

upper window by her own servants when they saw that Ahab’s army had been defeated by Jehu’s [**DGEE-hyooz**]. And, as God had decreed, Jezebel’s corpse was eaten by the siege-starved dogs of Jezreel.

The Israelites, horrified that anyone should ever come to such a depraved and disgusting end, preserved and transmitted this account to express their revulsion and God’s disdain for anyone who would pervert the cause of justice by falsely calling God as a witness to encompass the judicial murder of an innocent man. And that is what the Ninth Commandment denounces.

Conclusion:

So when the first Christians read St. Matthew’s account of the Sanhedrin’s plot to murder Jesus, with its clearly expressed intention to employ perjury to destroy a wholly innocent man, the Jews among them at least would immediately have made the connection between the plans of the High Priest and his advisers and those of Jezebel against Naboth.

And so they would not only have inevitably been reminded of Jezebel and Naboth [**NAY-bawth**], but also of God’s condign judgment rendered upon Jezebel, and of Jezebel’s horrific end. In fact, this reference to these hired perjurers, with its resonances of that famous Old Testament incident, was one of the ways the Evangelist signals to us that the Christ Who died for us on Calvary was a wholly innocent man who was destroyed by the machinations of enemies who would stop at nothing, no matter how much they had to flout God in the process.

How ironic, then, that it was actually God whom they were trying to put to death by this underhanded means. And how sublime that, on Eastern morning, they learned how successful they had been.

are denounced in the First and Second Commandments. And the reason perjury is an offense, not just against mankind but against God, is that a false oath calls God to witness something that is not true. That is, the oath-breaker makes God a party to that sinner's own crime, and for thus dishonoring God, he or she is sure to be punished in some most unpleasant manner.

Of course, it precisely because in these cases God is being made an accessory to a crime against an innocent person that this is an especially heinous form of sacrilege. And the ancient Hebrews were careful to preserve and transmit accounts of how God dealt with those who used Him in this especially reprehensible way. Thus there is still recorded in Scripture the fate God dealt out to King Ahab's Queen, Jezebel.

Jezebel was a great sinner, and a persecutor of the worshippers of the true God, who tried to import and enforce on the Jews the worship of pagan gods,¹² for all of which she certainly deserved to be punished. But the act which brought God's quick vengeance down on her was when Jezebel stole a vineyard that Ahab coveted and did so by hiring perjurers whose false testimony was used to convict the land's owner, Naboth [**NAY-bawth**], of blasphemy.¹³

Presumably Naboth's [**NAY-bawths**] blood, like Abel's, called out from the ground to God for retribution, God declared that not only should Jezebel die, but her body would not be allowed to rest in the soil of the Promised Land. Instead, dogs, those beasts so offensive to the Semites, would eat her corpse,¹⁴ and so it proved.¹⁵

God transferred the kingship from Ahab to Jehu [**DGEE-hyoo**] as He had transferred it from Saul to David when Saul proved unworthy, and in the course of Jehu's [**DGEE-hyooz**] rebellion, both Ahab and Jezebel were slain. Ahab, at least, died in battle, but Jezebel was thrown from an

on my body, she did it for my burial. Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her.

"Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot [**DGOO-duss ISS-care-ee-ut**], went unto the chief priests, And said unto them, What will ye give me, and I will deliver him unto you? And they covenanted with him for thirty pieces of silver. And from that time he sought opportunity to betray him.

"Now the first day of the feast of unleavened bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying unto him, Where wilt thou that we prepare for thee to eat the passover? And he said, Go into the city to such a man, and say unto him, The Master saith, My time is at hand; I will keep the passover at thy house with my disciples. And the disciples did as Jesus had appointed them; and they made ready the passover. Now when the even was come, he sat down with the twelve. And as they did eat, he said, Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me. And they were exceeding sorrowful, and began every one of them to say unto him, Lord, is it I? And he answered and said, He that dippeth his hand with me in the dish, the same shall betray me. The Son of man goeth as it is written of him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! it had been good for that man if he had not been born. Then Judas, which betrayed him, answered and said, Master, is it I? He said unto him, Thou hast said.

"And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body. And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. But I say unto you, I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom. And when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the mount of Olives. Then saith Jesus unto them, All ye shall be offended

because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad. But after I am risen again, I will go before you into Galilee. Peter answered and said unto him, Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended. Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. Peter said unto him, Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee. Likewise also said all the disciples.

“Then cometh Jesus with them unto a place called Gethsemane [**Geth-SEMM-ann-ee**], and saith unto the disciples, Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder. And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee [**Zebb-uh-DEE**], and began to be sorrowful and very heavy. Then saith he unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me. And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt. And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, thy will be done. And he came and found them asleep again: for their eyes were heavy. And he left them, and went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words. Then cometh he to his disciples, and saith unto them, Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray me.

“And while he yet spake, lo, Judas [**DGOO-duss**], one of the twelve, came, and with him a great multitude with swords and staves, from the chief priests and elders of the people. Now he that betrayed him gave them a sign, saying, Whomsoever I shall kiss, that same is he: hold him fast. And forthwith he came to Jesus, and said, Hail, master; and

To answer that question, we must take a closer look at the structure and purpose of an oath. Traditionally, an oath takes a form something like this: “May God strike me dead if I am not telling the truth,” or “As God is my witness, I am telling the truth.” The concept is that if the oath-taker is lying, then he or she has acknowledged that God is justified in striking him or her down in punishment for that sin.

As is recorded in Scripture, sometimes God has done just that: He has punished, on the spot, someone who has committed some act of impiety, as when He burnt Nadab [**NAY-dabb**] and Abihu⁸ [**uh-BYE-hyoo**] (and on another occasion, two hundred fifth others⁹) for transgressing the instructions for offering incense before the Lord or when He made the earth open to swallow Korah [**KOE-ruh**], Dathan [**DAY-thun**], and Abiram¹⁰ [**uh-BYE-rum**] for defying the authority God had conferred on Moses and Aaron.

But these cataclysmic events are recorded, and given such prominence in Scripture, precisely because they were, and are, extremely rare events. As we know from our own experience, all too often the wicked seem to escape without punishment, at least in the short run, and justice frequently does not seem to be visited upon them until they face Our Lord at the Last Day. It was for this reason that the psalmist lamented, “I have seen the ungodly in great power, and flourishing like a green bay tree.”¹¹

Yes, we can be confident that at least at the end of time, God will reward perjurers appropriately, but in the meantime, how are they to be restrained? And it is for this reason that the ancient Israelites, under God’s guidance, were led to place such special emphasis on the crime of perjury and the certain damnation of the unrepentant perjurer.

For while perjury causes many evils among men and women here on earth, it does yet more. It is truly a type of sacrilege, on a par with the unfaithfulness and idolatry that

would have to avoid doing, in order to remain in a covenant relationship with Him?

Well, first think about that word, “witness”. Where do we expect to see witnesses? Where is the testimony of witnesses of the most vital importance? When we hear the word “witness”, meaning a person who has seen or heard something rather than the act of seeing or hearing, we automatically think of a trial in a court of law or a hearing before some administrative agency, don’t we?

And those are the fundamental situations to which this Ninth Commandment is addressed: situations in which someone is giving formal testimony which, of course, is customarily given on oath. This is confirmed in a second place in Exodus, when God tells the Israelites, “Thou shalt not raise a false report: put not thine hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness.”⁷

Now anyone who has ever seen a Perry Mason movie, or “LA Law”, or any other courtroom drama, knows that when someone “bears false witness” in court, having first been sworn to tell the truth, he or she commits the crime of “perjury”. And to perjure oneself means, quite simply, “to be forsworn”, that is, to have taken an oath and then to have violated it. This, in fact, is precisely the misconduct that the Ninth Commandment is aimed at preventing.

Let us stop here for a moment and ask ourselves a question. Certainly no society wishes to have its members lying on the witness stand during court or other official proceedings, but why is this particular sin of such overwhelming importance that God made its prohibition into one of the Ten Commandments? That is, why did God put so much emphasis on this one thing that it, along with only nine other acts of personal misconduct, would automatically constitute a breach of God’s Covenant with His Chosen People?

kissed him. And Jesus said unto him, Friend, wherefore art thou come? Then came they, and laid hands on Jesus, and took him. And, behold, one of them which were with Jesus stretched out his hand, and drew his sword, and struck a servant of the high priest’s, and smote off his ear. Then said Jesus unto him, Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword. Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be? In that same hour said Jesus to the multitudes, Are ye come out as against a thief with swords and staves for to take me? I sat daily with you teaching in the temple, and ye laid no hold on me. But all this was done, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled. Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled.

“And they that had laid hold on Jesus led him away to Caiaphas [**KYE-uh-fuss**] the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled. But Peter followed him afar off unto the high priest’s palace, and went in, and sat with the servants, to see the end. Now the chief priests, and elders, and all the council, sought false witness against Jesus, to put him to death; But found none: yea, though many false witnesses came, yet found they none. At the last came two false witnesses, And said, This fellow said, I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days. And the high priest arose, and said unto him, Answerest thou nothing? what is it which these witness against thee? But Jesus held his peace. And the high priest answered and said unto him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven. Then the high priest rent his clothes, saying, He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses? behold, now ye have heard his blasphemy. What think ye? They answered and said, He is guilty of death. Then did they spit in his face,

and buffeted him; and others smote him with the palms of their hands, Saying, Prophecy unto us, thou Christ, Who is he that smote thee?

“Now Peter sat without in the palace: and a damsel came unto him, saying, Thou also wast with Jesus of Galilee. But he denied before them all, saying, I know not what thou sayest. And when he was gone out into the porch, another maid saw him, and said unto them that were there, This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth. And again he denied with an oath, I do not know the man. And after a while came unto him they that stood by, and said to Peter, Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech bewrayeth [*bee-RAY-eth*] thee. Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew. And Peter remembered the word of Jesus, which said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went out, and wept bitterly.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Now the chief priests, and elders, and all the council, sought false witness against Jesus, to put him to death; But found none: yea, though many false witnesses came, yet found they none. At the last came two false witnesses, And said, This fellow said, I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days.”⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

Today’s Second Lesson depicts the Jewish leaders scheming to have the Roman authorities convict Our Lord of a capital crime so that He would be put to death. This plan required first finding Him guilty of blasphemy and, because He had never committed blasphemy, such a finding required

that witnesses be suborned to testify falsely against Him. That is, men had to be found and persuaded to stand up and, under oath, declare that Jesus had done things that these witnesses knew perfectly well He had never done. That, of course, was a direct violation of the Ninth Commandment: “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.”⁵

Theme:

These days, when we read the Ten Commandments—as we are supposed to do during the Holy Communion service on at least one Sunday a month⁶—we tend to pass quickly over the Ninth Commandment and, if we give it any thought whatever, take it to be simply an old-fashioned way of saying, “You should tell the truth.”

Certainly truth-telling is an important value and we have absolutely no evidence from Scripture that God loves a liar. But when that Commandment tells us, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor”, then God had something much more specific in mind that He was ordering—not asking, but ordering—the ancient Hebrews to refrain from doing.

Development:

Look at the key words in that Commandment and then think what they really mean: we are being told we must not “bear false witness against thy neighbor.” Now we already know who our neighbor is, for Our Lord told us that in His parable of the Good Samaritan: our neighbor is anyone whom we encounter and, especially, anyone we encounter who needs our assistance.

But what does it really mean to “bear false witness”? And why did God make such an important point of it that He included it as one of only ten points in His summary of the minimum things the ancient Hebrews would have to do, or