

BRICK BY BRICK

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Exodus 24:12-18

In 1932, the Great Depression was crippling the industrialized world. In Denmark, a man named Ole Kirk Christiansen was finding it hard to stay employed. So, he started his own company, a company that manufactured items out of wood—which made sense given that Christiansen was a master carpenter. The company produced stepladders, ironing boards, and wooden toys. The toys were simple—trucks, yo-yos, and ducks on wheels. As the toy business began to grow, Christiansen decided to name his company Playwell. Actually, he took the Danish word for ‘play’ and the Danish word for ‘well’ and snapped them together to create the company name. Those Danish words were ‘leg’ and ‘godt’. The company name became LEGO.¹

The early days of the company were rough and chaotic. Christiansen was a widow and raising four sons by himself. There was the Great Depression to contend with as well as the German invasion of Denmark in 1940. In 1942, a fire destroyed all the company's inventory plus its plans and blueprints for new toys. The company almost folded but Christiansen soldiered on.

Lego, of course, was not the only company making toys. In 1939, a British inventor had patented a toy known as Kiddiecraft Self-Locking Bricks. These plastic bricks were made from cellulose acetate and were small and square with rounded edges and four interlocking studs on top of each brick. They were meant to be used like the wooden blocks that kids played with.

In Denmark, Christiansen learned about these bricks from one of his vendors. In 1949, Lego began producing a version of the Kiddiecraft idea with bricks that were larger and had sharper edges. They were called “automatic binding bricks.” These bricks did not work so well. The blocks were not very sturdy, the plastic would break easily, and they didn't snap and hold together.

After years of research and development, in 1958, the Lego company patented a new brick with a stud-and-tube design that allowed the bricks to snap together without coming apart. These bricks were created using a more durable type of plastic known as ABS. These are the modern Lego bricks that we all know and love.

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/09/15/legos-plastic-bricks-transformed-childhood-are-they-sturdy-enough-to-survive-screens/>

The Lego company designers continued to build the Lego line. In the 1960s, they invented the wheel—a round brick with a rubber tire. They make over 300 million tires each year—that is more than Goodyear produces. In the 1970s, they introduced miniature figures to populate the towns that kids were building. In the 1990s, they entered into a partnership with LucasFilm to create Star Wars-themed toys. Later, they partnered with the Harry Potter films. Lego is recognized as one of the top brands in the world.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. It is the last Sunday before the start of the season of Lent. Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and the imposition of ashes.

The Transfiguration story, as we find it in the gospels, tells of Jesus leaving the crowds behind and retreating up a mountain. He takes with him Peter, James, and John. At the top of the mountain, Jesus is transfigured—his face shines like the sun, his clothes dazzle. Then, suddenly, appearing next to him are two heroes of the faith—Moses and Elijah. Moses represents the Law; Elijah the prophets. Seeing these three, Peter proposes making three dwellings—one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. But before he can finish his proposal, a voice from a cloud commands, *This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him.* The disciples fall to the ground in fear, but Jesus reassures them, and when they look up, they are once again alone with Jesus.

Our reading for today is from another account of someone meeting God on a mountain. This time it is Moses. About 1300 years before Jesus' transfiguration, something similar happened to Moses. Moses had led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Our reading finds them in the wilderness on their prolonged journey to the land God had promised them. Although they had cried out to God while in Egypt and God had delivered them, these Israelites really didn't know God very well. It had been generations since the days of Joseph and the knowledge of the Lord had evaporated from the people. The people did not know what this God expected of them or how to co-exist with this God.

So, it came time for God to take action. God called Moses to approach the slope of Mount Sinai and wait. God would deliver to him tablets of stone containing the laws and commandment. Moses does as God commands and journeys up the mountain. A cloud covers the mountain. The glory of God settles on Mount Sinai and remains there for six days. The people at the base of the mountain can witness the magnificence of God's glory. It appears to them like a great fire consuming the mountain top. Moses waits six days. On the seventh day, God calls to Moses from out of the cloud. Moses then enters the cloud and remains there with God for forty days. When Moses exits the presence of God, he too is transfigured—his face glows.

The tablets of stone which God bestows to Moses contain God's holy law—the commandments. These are God's instructions for living in relationship with God and with one another. As I've said many times before, these commandments are not

intended to be restrictive. It is not a list of ‘don’ts’. They are guides for living lives that lead to salvation. Killing, stealing, lying, adultery—these are actions that come between us and God. For example, being consumed with jealousy towards a neighbor—coveting—does not leave room in our heart to fully love God. God’s commandments and God’s laws are God’s instructions on how we might worship and love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. The Commandments invite us into a perfect relationship with God.

Our Holy Scriptures starts with the word of creation in Genesis: *In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.* In other words, there was chaos. The parts were there, but there was no order. God brought order by putting the pieces into place—separating the water from the land, the heavens from the earth, the light from the darkness.

Throughout history, some have argued that God created all things. And then, God stepped back and set the world to run on its own without any interference. Our faith disputes this. We know that God is continually with us, watching over us, guiding us, bringing order to the chaos. In the wilderness, Moses and the Israelites lived in chaos. God's commands were given to provide order to their existence.

Imagine that I am holding a bag. This bag is full of Legos—bricks of all shapes and sizes. I shake the bag and those Legos exist in chaos. There is no order, just bricks bouncing around. I pour them out on the table but they are still in chaos. I sit down and begin to assemble them, snapping them together, and I introduce order. I can form them into shapes. I can build things. I can bring order to this chaos.

One of the appeals of Legos is their versatility. Bricks can be snapped together in so many configurations. A mathematician has gone so far as to calculate the number of ways that Legos can be arranged. Take six standard Lego bricks—the ones with eight studs on top. How many ways can you arrange these six blocks? A hundred ways? A thousand? A hundred thousand? A million? A hundred million? How about 915 million ways. Six Legos can be arranged in 915 million configurations.

Human beings are like that. We exist in a seemingly infinite number of configurations. Take those of us in this room. Think about the ways that we connect with one another. I could be kind to you and harsh to you. And you could share with me and take from him. Or I could be forgiving to you and harsh to you.

When Legos were first introduced, they were just interlocking bricks. Kids could snap them together to make shapes. But the genius of Lego was not simply to sell bricks, they sold realities. Lego has dozens of playsets or kits with all the pieces needed to build something very specific. You can build a space shuttle, the Titanic, a fire truck, Hogwarts Castle, a pirate ship. These kits are their own little worlds

with all the necessary pieces and instructions on how to fit everything together. A kid might snap all the parts together at random. It is doubtful that they will end up with a fire truck. Or, they can follow the guide. And then, brick by brick, a kid can bring order to this chaos and create something special.

Of all the possibilities and permutations about how we as humans can interact with one another, there is one way established by God. God has provided the commands, the guide, the instructions. When we follow the guide, we can construct a kingdom.

But as we know, we are not very good at following instructions. And we sin and parts end up in the wrong places. But God is patient and kind and continues with us, forgiving our mistakes, helping us undo the wrong. As we read in scripture later in the book of Exodus God's covenant with the people: *I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them: I am the Lord their God* (Exodus 29:45).

God first gave us the Law and the Prophets to guide us. And finally, God sent someone to be with us, walk with us, play with us. God sent a son, a carpenter. If we do desire to build a kingdom, we must do as God commands and *listen to him*.