

## *Disturbing God*

A sermon preached at  
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(Disciples of Christ)  
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God is seeking to create a holy people, a different kind of people to serve this different God, so that the world will sit up and pay attention (Leviticus 19:1-2). God wants a people whose behavior as well as their beliefs sets them apart. Don't steal, cheat, or lie. Don't make a promise in my name if you don't intend to keep it. Be honest in your business and just in your dealings with others. Care for the people at life's edges: children, widows, the disabled, the poor, the foreigner among you. Settle your differences fairly, don't take revenge, and don't hold a grudge. Love your neighbor and your enemy. You really want a God who doesn't care about these things? Who doesn't get passionate about the health and wholeness of creation? Who sits passively by when things don't go well in the world?

Text: Exodus 32-34

(Read Exodus 32:1-6) Moses must have been up on Mt. Sinai for quite some time, getting the Ten Commandments from God, because when he didn't show back in camp right away the people gave up on him. They actually gave up on God. They asked Aaron, second in charge, to create a new god for them. Aaron was quick to cave. He instructed the people to bring all the gold they had brought with them from Egypt. Their Egyptian masters, suffering from the many plagues and eager to get rid of the Israelites, had given them their gold as encouragement to leave quickly. The Israelites gathered the gold and gave it to Aaron. He formed the gold into the image of a calf. The people then bowed down and declared, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

You wonder what they were thinking! Really. Can you imagine what the cast of Saturday Night Live would make of this? It had to have been satire on Aaron's part – surely Aaron knew better – or maybe it was his fear of the people, his making a calf out of gold and calling it God. After everything that had transpired – the people crying out to the Living God to deliver them from their slavery in Egypt, the plagues, the miracle-in-the-night escape, water from rock, manna from heaven. It's difficult to imagine how the Israelites could have been so fickle, turned so quickly to another god, much less one made out of gold in the form of a calf. But that's another sermon – how you and I, like the Israelites, make just about anything into a false god; worship it, too, with obedience and praise.

If it were parody on Aaron's part, God doesn't find any humor in it. God is angry, very angry. After all that God has done for the Israelites, God goes incommunicado –

for what, a week, a month there on the mountain? – and they make a graven image and throw an orgy? God's mad. You can hear it in his voice when he speaks to Moses. Their conversation is recorded in Chapters 32-34 of *Exodus*. You can read it for yourself. I'm going to paraphrase it this morning.

God begins the conversation. He says to Moses, "Go down at once. Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt have acted perversely... How stiff-necked they are. I'm done with them. Go. Leave me alone in my anger, that my wrath may consume them." Israel's in trouble. Did you catch the "*your people*" part when God was talking to Moses. Not *my* people, but *your* people. You know how when you get home late and your spouse has had a bad day, everything's gone wrong and the kids have acted like, well, kids, and your spouse says, "Your children have been terrible today"?

This is where Moses takes up the conversation. "*My people?! God, they're your people. You're the one who brought them up from Egypt!*" "Moses, leave," God says, "I'm done with them. Not you, but them. You've found favor in my site. But I'm sick of them." Moses implores the Lord. "You're the one who chose to rescue us out of our slavery. You're the one who promised to bring us through the desert to a land flowing with milk and honey. How can you decide now to destroy your people? God, this is your anger talking. Don't bring this disaster! What do you think the Egyptians are gonna think? They'll laugh and say, 'See, their God just took them out of Egypt to slaughter them.' Listen, God. You have to change your mind. You have to repent of this evil you're contemplating."

Then it gets real quiet there on Mt. Sinai. You can't see it in the text, but it's here: a long pause in the conversation. *Moses has just told God what to do.* Moses speaks again to break the silence. If the shame thing won't work on God – asking God to consider what the Egyptians will think – Moses reminds God of the promise that God had made. "God, Moses says, "you've a lot invested in these people. You remember Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." I hope you're getting the gist of what's happening here. *Moses is lecturing God.* "God," he says, "you remember how you swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, your servants, how you swore by your own self, saying, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven and they'll inherit the land I'm giving to you.'"

Every few years, we offer a class on prayer, a kind of second level course, Prayer 201. Not just how to talk with God; how to listen, too. How to carry on a conversation with God. But the stuff we're reading here – Moses setting aside any sense of decorum, any measure of humility before the Holy One; Moses telling God what to do, reminding God as if God's memory needs a little stirring every now and then; Moses lecturing God – this is way beyond graduate level stuff. There aren't any classes in this kind of prayer. Truth is, you don't need a class in this kind of prayer. You don't study or practice this kind of conversation with God. You just have to be desperate. It may help to have established a relationship with God, to know that even though you may not understand God you can trust the Holy One. But I think all you

really need is the desperation, and the willingness to risk yourself, putting yourself out there, like Moses.

After his lecture in which he tells God to change his mind, God finally speaks. “Okay. Okay, I’ll change my mind. I’ll not destroy the people. But I’m still angry. Tell them how very angry I am. And tell them that there will be consequences for their sin.”

Moses returns to the camp. When he sees what the people have done, how fickle and unfaithful and stupid and easily distracted we are, he gets angry too. He throws the tablets of the Ten Commandments, breaking them at the foot of Mt. Sinai, as if to say, “The deal’s off, you guys. You have no idea how bad you’ve blown it.” The next day, Moses says to the people. “Pray for me. Pray for yourselves. Because I’m going back up the mountain to try to work something out with God. Maybe I can make atonement for your sins.”

Moses goes back up the mountain. “God,” he says, “there’s no question, we blew it, blew it big. I can understand why you’re angry. You offer us a life of freedom and health and prosperity and then we go and do a stupid thing like this. But you’ve got to forgive the people. It’s just who you are, what you’re about in the world, forgiveness.” Then Moses says — I can’t believe that Moses says this; he says — “God, if you’re not willing to forgive, if you’re still thinking about wiping your people from the face of the earth, if you’re this angry and going to do something this short-sighted, then take me out, too. Just write me out of the book you’ve written.” God replies, “I’ll write into and blot out of my book whomever I decide. I’m not taking you out. You have found favor in my sight. I won’t destroy them, either. But there’ll be a price to pay for their unfaithfulness.”

“Now go,” God says to Moses, “take the people, *your* people whom you brought up from Egypt and go on to the land which I swore to their ancestors, a land flowing with milk and honey, you and your people. But I’m not going with you. It’s not going to work. These people are so stiff-necked, I’d destroy them along the way for sure (33:3).”

You know what Moses says to that? He says, “God, you said that I have found favor in your sight. I’m grateful for this, believe me. But if I’ve found favor in your sight, show me. Show me your true ways that I might know you and always find favor in your sight (33:13). Show me who you really are, behind the anger. If not, if you’re really deciding not to accompany us on into the Promised Land, if you’re going to abandon us to make a way on our own, then just leave us to ourselves – me included – and we’ll decide what to do next (33:15). Let the Egyptians laugh at us, and at you. But I know it’s not just me you love. You love these people, too; they’re your people (33:13). Go with us, see this thing through, and the whole world will know how incredible you are (33:16).” Another long pause. “All right,” God says, “I’ll do the very thing you have asked (33:17), because you have found favor in my sight.”

Remarkable. God changes his mind (32:14). Twice, God changes his mind. I don’t know what this does to your theology, your understanding of God and your notion of prayer, but this is what it says in the text: God changed God’s mind. God goes on to

tell Moses to cut another two tablets of stone. Then God writes the Law again, on these new stones, and God says, *as if it took Moses to remind him*, “The Lord, Yahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...” This is the Good News, everything we proclaim about God. Here’s the core of our faith, our understanding of what God’s all about in the world: steadfast love and forgiveness.

End of sermon. I wish.

The mountain conversation’s not over. God continues: “...yet [I] will by no means clear the guilty, but visit the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and fourth generations.” Whew! Steadfast love to the thousandth generation, meaning for all eternity. Consequences to the third and fourth generation, meaning limited in their scope. But consequences never-the-less. This is a harsh word.

We’ve tried throughout the centuries to avoid this harsh word, to take words like *guilty* and *visiting iniquity* out of our faith vocabulary. But we’ve haven’t been able to remove them from the text, from the Biblical account of who God is and how life unfolds, from the text of our lives’ experience that there really are consequences to our actions. Sometimes great and terrible consequences. Listen, before we talk about the nature of God’s anger, let’s acknowledge that God went on with Israel. God’s anger goes away. God takes *his* people into the land of milk and honey. Steadfast love endures, for the Israelites, for each of us, for the world.

But this difficult truth endures, too, these two experiences of God. God’s love. And God’s anger. God’s grace, forgiveness, love and steadfast mercy to the thousandth generation. And God’s judgment – God’s demand that we take life seriously, that God has ordained a right way and a wrong way to live life, and that there are consequences for choosing either, to the third and fourth generations at least.

Awhile back, one of you came up to me, recalling my talking to our children during the Children’s Time about rules, how one of our kids, when I asked for examples, said, “No running in the sanctuary,” and I said, “Well, I don’t think that’s a rule around here.” She asked, “Did you get a hard time from anybody about that, about your saying that there’s no rule about running in the sanctuary?” You know why she asked. It wasn’t a matter of kids running, it was a matter of their running *in here!* Because she senses what we all sense: that there is *Something* sacred in life, something completely other that is above and beyond us and to which, to Whom, we are accountable. This is what “no running in the sanctuary” is all about. It’s why they’re still using the King James translation in some churches, why some Catholics are still angry that they aren’t using Latin in their liturgy, why some folks still use a Red Letter Edition of the Bible, and why some have a hard time worshipping in a sanctuary without stained glass windows and an organ. It’s about our need to have some places, some occasions, some experiences that remind us of this Other, because we’re dealing with something very

different here, not your run-of-the-mill, gold-formed calf kind of god, but the Creator of the Universe.

You know what the word *holy* means? It means *different*. To be holy is to be different, set apart, unlike anything else. Holiness is what makes this God of the Bible the true God! There is none other like him. Through the prophet Isaiah, God put it like this (55:8-9), “My ways are not your ways. My thoughts are not your thoughts,” which means among other things that there is something absolutely unique about this God who refuses to be domesticated, controlled, taken for granted, or dismissed, and who, having made everything that is and having brought each of us up out of the land of our own slavery, has the self-appointed right to say how everything will be. God cares about life, cares about you and me, our health and wholeness, cares about creation itself, the whole of it. When we *don't* care, or live as if God's vision for life doesn't matter, well, God gets angry. Because God loves us. God's anger is an expression of God's love.

Around this church from week to week, we celebrate the God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love to the thousandth generation. It's our experience of and our trust in this steadfast love that keeps us coming back, that transforms us, heals us, shapes our relationships with each other and the world around us. We do a terrible disservice to ourselves and to our children, out to the third and fourth generations, when we act as if these relationships are not a matter of life and death, ours, and our community's and the planet's. Thank God, that God is slow to anger. Thank God, too, that life matters to God, matters enough that when things aren't right, God can get angry about it.

— Jeff Wright  
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