

## I

A little boy once got into a spot of trouble at church. Not serious trouble, mind you, but enough trouble that the adults in charge of the church's children's ministry found it necessary to get in touch with the boy's parents and alert them to the boy's misbehaviors.

After finishing that phone call, the father sat down with his son, relating the conversation that he'd just had with the people from the children's ministry, and ensuring that his young son understood clearly what the expectations were and how he'd failed to meet them.

"Oh, yes, I understand," said the boy. The father thought that it was a bit odd that his son was acting as if he hadn't a care in the world, but he proceeded to the next step of administering discipline.

"OK," said the father, "Then I suppose the only thing left to do is to give out your punishment."

"Dad," said the boy, incredulously. "Haven't you been listening in church? You don't have to punish me! Jesus died on the cross for our sins!"

"I'm not sure that's how that works," said the father. But not knowing what else to say or how to proceed, he said, "I'm going to give you credit for quick thinking, but stay out of trouble." And with that, the father left the room pondering things like sin and grace, order and freedom, and the craftiness of his young son.

## II

We like stories like that, don't we? We like stories where someone is able, through imagination and quick thinking, to talk their way out of a jam. We grow up learning those kind of negotiating skills – whether it's talking mom and dad into 15 more minutes before bedtime, or haggling with a sibling over the last cookie in the jar, or pleading with a professor for a different grade, or asking for a promotion and a raise.

We're used to negotiating all kinds of things with our families and neighbors and friends and colleagues. But what about God? Can we negotiate with God? Or is God "the unmoved mover," so to speak?

Those questions bring us to our story for today.

## III

As you know, this Fall we're doing a broad survey of the Old Testament, and when we left off our story last week, the people of God were about to leave the land of

Egypt, a land where they'd been living under the regime of a brutal and corrupt Pharaoh.

But when the people finally left Egypt, God did not lead them straight home to the Land of Promise. God led them into the wilderness, appearing before them as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. And soon, God led the people to a mountain called Sinai, and God instructed Moses to climb the mountain, while the people waited down below.

On the mountain, God began to lay out God's law, which would become the framework around which God would transform this group of ex-slaves and refugees into God's covenant people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. Moses was up on the mountain with God for a long time, and the people down below started to get nervous.

And that brings us to our text for this morning. Listen for a Word from God from Exodus 32:1-14.

*1 When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." 2 Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." 3 So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. 4 He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" 5 When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord." 6 They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel. 7 The Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; 8 they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" 9 The Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. 10 Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation." 11 But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth"? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and*

*all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever." 14 And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Some of you may recall that in the summer of 2019, we did a 10-week sermon series on the Ten Commandments – the first ten laws that God gave to Moses at Mt. Sinai. So here's your pop quiz. What are commandments one and two?

The first commandment is "I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before me."

And the second commandment is, "You shall not make for yourselves any graven images. You shall not bow down to them or worship them."

And that's what makes this story all the more heartbreaking. Moses hasn't even made it down the mountain yet, and the people have already broken the first two commandments. They turn to Aaron and say, "We don't know what's happened to Moses. Come, make gods for us." And Aaron obliges them, fashioning a golden calf and instructing the people to bow down and worship it.

God is not just angry. God is hurt. God is so frustrated by the people's apparent inability to simply trust God's word that God decides to start all over. God is done. And God says to Moses, "Go down at once! *Your* people, whom *you* have brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely. Let me alone, so that my wrath may burn against them, and I'll make of you a great nation."

But Moses doesn't leave God alone. In fact, he reminds God of just exactly who and whose these people are. He says, "O Lord, why does *your* wrath burn hot against *your* people, whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt?" And Moses reminds God that God promised Abraham and Sarah that God would make their descendants like the stars in the heavens.

And then something truly extraordinary happens.

The NRSV translation puts it this way, "And the Lord *changed his mind* about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people."

Other translations read, "The Lord *relented* and did not bring upon his people the disaster that he had threatened."

The King James translation uses an even more fascinating word.

It reads, "And the Lord *repented* of the evil which he thought to do unto his people."

What sort of God is this, who changes course? What sort of God is this who relents? What sort of God is this who repents – who turns 180 degrees from the original course?

I submit to you, friends, that ultimately, the Bible isn't really about Moses or the Israelites. Ultimately, the Bible isn't really about what happened to somebody else a long time ago someplace far away.

Ultimately, the Bible is about who God is, and who *we* are, and the nature of this relationship between God and us.

And here's the gospel part of this story. This God whom we worship and serve, the God of our ancestors, the God of Scripture, is not some far away stern deity who rules with an iron fist and smites our every move.

No, this is a God who is inexorably bound up with us, sometimes because of us, but more often in spite of us. This is a God who made all that is, seen and unseen, a God who is not bound by the dictates and edicts and whims of the Pharaohs and the powers and rulers of this world, but at the same time also a God who is willing to listen to us, a God who is able to be moved, a God who, as much as God might want to, as much as we might give God reason to, won't ever, ever quit us.

#### IV

And here's what that means for you, my friend. God's mercy is bigger than your sin. You and God both know what you've done. You and God both know what you've failed to do. You and God both know what you've said, and how you've kept silence when you should have spoken. You and God both know how hard it is sometimes for you to simply take God at God's Word and trust God.

But God's mercy is bigger than your sin. God's love is stronger than your idolatry. That doesn't mean that it doesn't break God's heart when you sin. That doesn't mean that it doesn't hurt God to God's very core when you turn away from God and go after false idols. But God won't ever quit you, and in Jesus Christ, God showed you that God would go the cross for you before God would live without you.

The God of Scriptures is not a God who sits of far in the heavens somewhere like some kind of divine lifeguard, just waiting to blow the whistle and pull us out of the pool. No, God took on human flesh and lived among us in Jesus Christ, which means God knows firsthand what it's like to be you. God knows what it is to deal with temptation, to fight of anxiety, to be bored, to have fear.

The God of Scripture, the God of your ancestors Abraham and Sarah, sympathizes with you in your every weakness. The God who made all that is, seen and unseen, the God who sets the stars on their courses, the God who knows how many

grains of sand are on the beach, can nevertheless be moved and persuaded by human prayers, because what God wants more than anything else in all creation is to be in relationship with you, God's chosen and holy and beloved.

## V

And I think that has some implications for us, as a community of faith. This is a time of great peril and uncertainty in our nation and in our community. The pandemic continues to upend so many aspects of daily life that we took for granted less than a year ago. As we approach next month's election, the advertising that fills our airwaves and social media feeds wants us to view candidates not just as public servants, but as living gods, and all the while rumors of potential violence and civil unrest continue to swirl through the atmosphere.

This is a time for us, as the people of God, as the church of Jesus Christ, to be in deep, bold prayer – to remember who and whose we are, to intercede on behalf of our sisters and brothers who, in this season of anxiety and upheaval, are so easily turned aside to worship false gods. This is a season for us to remind God of the promises that God has made, and to hold God to account for those promises.

For we human beings, we're not so good at the keeping of the promises. We say one thing today, and then turn around tomorrow and do something else when it's convenient or to our advantage.

But the God whom we worship and serve, the God of our ancestors Abraham and Sarah, the God of Moses and Zipporah, has never once broken a promise. Not once. Even when God wanted to break a promise, even when we've given God every reason to break a promise, God refuses to quit us.

Yes, this is a season of great upheaval. Yes, there may be yet more trouble ahead. But God is still on the throne. God is not bound by the edicts and whims of the Pharaohs and powers and principalities of this world. But God is also the God who is with us. God is the God who can be moved and persuaded by our fervent prayers.

And so I am convinced that there is nothing, neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation that can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Thanks be to God! Amen.