

First Presbyterian Church, McMinnville
Exodus 32:1-14, Idolatry and Intercession
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 11/19/2023

This fall we have journeyed with Moses and Israel through the book of Exodus.
We have two weeks left before we land in the season of Advent.

All along we've seen God's immense love, power, purpose, and grace
at work to bring the Hebrew people out of slavery
and make them a new creation with a mutual commitment
in their unique connection between Yahweh the creator
and Israel the representative of creation.

Things weren't always great,
but Yahweh was patient and provided manna and quail
when the people grumbled. They were still learning the way of faith.

The last two weeks we were with Moses up on Mt. Sinai
while God spoke of the 10 Commandments and the tabernacle
which would convey God's presence with the people.

In today's passage, all of that will be severely tested.

Many times we have heard:

*This is how you will know I am the LORD, Yahweh, the One who Is:
I am the one who brought you out of Egypt.*
That statement is severely tested.

Many times we have heard Israel declare their trust in Yahweh alone
stepping out in faith and trust.
That faith is severely tested.

There are times in our lives when we act in ways we regret.
We get scared, we get worn down, we get angry, and something snaps...
we get reactive and impulsive or even compulsive.

We don't rely on what we know about God,
we rely on what we want in the moment,
we do what everyone else seems to be doing. We go for it and then ...
the toothpaste is out of the tube and there's no putting it back.

Have you had that experience?

Have you ever acted as though you didn't really know God at all?

That's what this passage is about.

There are also times in our lives when everything we think we know about God
is thrown up into the air.

We learned that God is love and always there for us
and now all we feel is emptiness and abandonment.

We learned that God is powerful and able to save
but now we aren't sure God's ever
going to take action in our world again.

Maybe what we've done is simply too much for God.

Maybe God's had it with us.

Maybe there's no hope after all, and the faith we had earlier in life
was just naïve.

Have you ever felt like God disappointed you? Or abandoned you?

Or frowned upon you?

Well, that's *also* what this passage is about.

It's about those things but ... what we learn about God's response to our
failures *and* God's invitation of our prayers
is more complicated than what we may think at first.

So...while Moses and Yahweh were talking from Chapter 20 through 31,
the people were waiting at the bottom of the mountain.

But they weren't there on their own:

They had Moses' older brother Aaron to watch out for them.

Moses heads up into the cloud and fire atop Mt. Sinai, and Aaron says,

"Don't worry, little brother. I've got everything under control down here."

Well, Moses and Yahweh were taking their time,
and we don't know how long it took, but the people started getting squirmy.

They gather around Aaron and say, "Come make us *elohim*, [gods or a god] who will go before us."

The implication is that Yahweh is no longer going before them,
that Yahweh is parked up on top of the mountain and failing to deliver
on the promises they have heard from Moses.

But it is interesting that they don't mention Yahweh,
they just mention the more generic *elohim*.

But they remember Moses: "As for this fellow Moses *who brought us up out of Egypt* we don't know what has happened to him."

Oh ... is that who brought you up out of Egypt? MOSES?

This old sheep herder from Midian

who ran away from Pharaoh decades ago did all that?

They have conveniently written out Yahweh from the narrative
and pinned the whole thing on Moses, who is apparently no longer around.

Be careful when you start retelling your story in ways
that no longer include God's presence and activity.

And Aaron says, "You foolish people,
by no means shall we depart from faith in the Almighty God!"

Uh ... no. They say, "Make us gods" and Aaron says,
"Okey-dokey, no problem folk, give me your gold earrings and jewelry!"

Now – these people were slaves. Where did they get all this gold?

It was Egyptian gold. It was gold they plundered from the Egyptians
after Yahweh had decimated the so-called gods of Egypt
with 10 plagues.

It was gold that stood as a sign of what *Yahweh*
had done in bringing them up out of Egypt.

Aaron makes them into a calf, which symbolizes strength and fertility,
and the people say (not Aaron, but the people):
“**This is your *Elohim*, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.**”

They took the good gift of God and turned it into an idol.

How foolish. Would you ever do something like that?
Would I ever do something like that?
No...not us! But yes. In fact, all human beings are idol factories.
We instinctively create things to worship.

Theologian Lewis Smedes reveals how. He writes,
“The easiest way to make an idol is to take a slice of created reality
and expect miracles out of it.” [REPEAT]

A family is a slice of created reality. If you look to your spouse or family
to provide the center of your identity, purpose, security, and fulfillment,
you’re asking your family to do what only God can do.
You’re asking your family to do the impossible –
to perform a miracle in your life
by giving you everything you need to thrive.
That’s making an idol out of the good gift of family.

Your money is a slice of created reality.
If you look to money to provide joy, happiness, comfort,
and a reliable aid through life’s ups and downs,
you’re looking to money to do what only God can do.
That’s making an idol out of the good gift of financial resources.

Technology is a slice of created reality.
If you look to technology to fix the world’s problems, end climate change,
resolve inequities, extend life longer and longer ... seemingly forever,
you’re asking technology and medicine to do
what only God can do.
That’s making an idol out of the good gift of accumulated skills and knowledge.

We don’t come out and say it, but we feel it in our hearts:

Behold! The family, the money, the technology, the work ethic,
the American dream, the personal accomplishments:
these are our gods that brought me out of the pit of despair ...

We are so sophisticated in our idolatry that we often don't even see it ourselves.
We rationalize it and make stories about it. Just like Israel did.

But our idolatry is never a secret to God.

Once our eyes are open to something we are making an idol of,
we should repent. We should return God to the center
of our relationship with that area of creation.

God spills the beans to Moses atop Mt. Sinai in v. 7.

Yahweh says, "Moses! Your people, whom *you* brought up out of Egypt,
have become corrupt and worshipped an idol of a golden calf."

Then in v. 10, "**Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them
and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.**"

All of God's plans and words have been for the good of Israel
as a special possession for the sake of Yahweh's name.

But they have so desecrated that relationship, so disrespected the way of faith,
that one way of moving forward is to simply *eliminate* Israel
from the face of the earth and begin again with Moses. *What?!?*

This is the angry, petty, vengeful God of the Old Testament
that we often hear people caricature.

This is the God who is out to get us and catch us in our sins
that we dread and fear and hide from.

But there's more happening here than you might think.

Yahweh shares this vision of divine wrath with Moses and says,
"Now leave me alone."

But Moses does not leave Yahweh alone! (And when facing a crisis of our own sin
or a crisis of feeling God's absence, we shouldn't leave God alone, either.)

Moses appeals instead to two factors
that reason against eliminating Israel.

1) Destroying Israel would diminish Yahweh's reputation in the world.
The Egyptians would say, "Oh, the God of Israel is a terrible monster who only saved Israel in order to slaughter them in the desert!"

2) Destroying Israel would cancel out the promises of God made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (here called Israel) back in the book of Genesis.

So Moses appeals for forgiveness on the basis of Yahweh's own reputation and for the sake of Yahweh's own promise and plan.

And what happens? *Yahweh relents.*

Moses wins an argument with GOD! How can this be.

How is it possible that God's mind was changed through the prayers and intercession of a mere human like Moses?

Did God really want to be left alone?

Here I'm going to quote extensively from a biblical scholar names Christopher JH Wright. (*Deuteronomy*, adapted quote from pages 78-79).

"The real paradox is that in appealing to God to change, Moses was actually appealing to God to be consistent — which may be a significant clue to the dynamic of all genuine intercessory prayer. Yet perhaps there is a hint of the divine intention in God's fascinating words, "Leave me alone..."

After all, God need not have spoken such words, or indeed any words at all, to Moses. In wrath God could have acted "immediately" without informing or consulting Moses in any way. God pauses and makes the divine will "vulnerable" to human challenge. The fact is that, far from human intercession being an irritating but occasionally successful intrusion upon divinely prefabricated blueprints for history, Moses' prayer becomes an integral part of the way God's sovereignty in history is exercised.

The implication of this is that while our idolatry is never a secret, it's also true that our prayers are never an intrusion.

We might hear God saying “leave me alone,”
we might feel God’s absence or abandonment in some seasons of life,
but the prayers of God’s partners on earth
are never rejected or ignored.
And our prayers are never *pointless*. [REPEAT]

Here’s the closing portion of this quote from Christopher JH Wright:

God not only allows human intercession, God invites it and builds it into the decision-making processes of the heavenly council in ways we can never fathom. Intercessory prayer, then, flows primarily not from human anxiety about God but from God’s commitment to covenant relationship with human beings.... Moses was not so much arguing against God, as participating in an argument within God. Such prayer, therefore, not only participates in the pain of God in history but is actually invited to do so for God’s sake as well as ours. This is a measure of the infinite value to God of commitment to persons in covenant relationship.

In other words, this story shows that God invites human partners
to struggle through the difficulty of human sin and rebellion
because *God relies our participation* through prayer,
through pleading, through crying out to stay consistent
to God’s own character and to God’s own promises.

This isn’t the only time this kind of thing happens –
Abraham appeals to God to preserve the city of Sodom and it is.
It is prophesied that Hezekiah’s father will soon die.
Hezekiah prays for his father’s to be delayed,
and God grants him 15 more years.

In each case God agrees with the impulse of these human partners
rather than the initially stated course of divine action.

Now, these situations are not the norm within scripture.
But they offer up the potential that God has sovereignly decided
to create the universe in such a way that our engagement, our prayer,
our calling out to God is an integral part of God’s own activity.

I have never heard a more compelling reason to pray.

I've long held that we pray primarily because of what prayer changes in us. That God knows what we need before we pray, but when we pray we humble ourselves, submit to God's will, and are changed as a result of intentional time attending to God Spirit.

I still think that's all true.

But this passage and the others like it offer a glimpse into the inner life of God that we otherwise have no access to.

This interpretation strongly challenges the caricature of God who is seemingly vengeful, impulsive, and rash.

In these passages the biblical authors reveal God's holiness and justice without including God's longsuffering grace and love in order to later point out the wonderful truth that God ultimately *is* worthy of being called merciful, and ultimately *does* honor promises to us even when we have gone astray.

Have you expected miracles from created things?

This is a great time to return God to the center of your relationship.

Are there things you want to intercede to God for?

What do you want to argue with God about today?

Let's take some time to pray together.