

A Sermon for Covenant

Exodus 32:1-14

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It was November of 2007, the day after Thanksgiving, when Andrew died. Our friend, our 19 year-old friend, Andrew. Thanksgiving Day had been his best day. He had woken up from his coma—for the first time in two weeks, he could look you in the eye. We felt relief at the visible signs of improvement, gratitude for answered prayers.

And the next day he was gone. Just like that. One of the things that got to me the most about Andrew's passing was how hard we prayed. If anyone had ever pleaded with God, it had been us. And even still, Andrew was dead.

Prayer is one of the most powerful tools we have—the most intimate connection to the power of God. But prayer is also exceedingly painful, as everyone who's been on the receiving end of an unanswered prayer knows keenly. The child who didn't live. The relationship that didn't heal. The question that didn't get answered. The problem that didn't get solved. The tragedy that did *not* get stopped in its tracks but rather seemed to run over everyone in its path.

Our text today is about a prayer that *did* work—when Moses prayed to God to spare the Israelites after their disastrous affair with the Golden Calf. So did Moses know the secret trick? Did God like Moses more than us, or at least, like Moses' prayers better than our prayers? Did Moses' prayer actually change what God was going to do or was God really planning to spare the Israelites all along, and Moses' request just happened to match God's predetermined will? How do our prayers work exactly? Do they affect God's decision-making, do they really help shape the future? Or does prayer only change us, not our circumstances, and that's the point? But if our prayers don't change the circumstances, then why do we bother praying with such fervency? Does God listen, or is this all just make-believe so I can *feel* like I'm doing *something* even when a situation seems hopeless?

Good morning, and welcome to church. I've just opened a theological can of worms, but I figure, we might as well get our hands a little messy while we worship. Exodus 32 is chalked full of insight about prayer, if you ask me. To begin, we need to hear the whole story . . .

Biblical scholar, Terrence Fretheim, calls Exodus chapter 32 a “sudden, sharp blast of cold air.” He likens this story to the Fall story, with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Fretheim says, “It is Genesis 3 all over again. The garden scene becomes a tangled mess. Harmony turns to dissonance, rest to disturbance, preparedness to confusion, and *the future with God becomes a highly uncertain matter.*” We have witnessed the Israelites doubt and complain in the wilderness, but that was nothing compared to this—the erecting of the Golden Calf. The calf represents pure disloyalty. Like Israel just handed God the divorce papers. God had intended this relationship would be of the forever-kind—Israel would be His people and He would their God for as long as time went on.

On the one hand, God knows the hearts of men, but on the other hand, I really think God was kind of blindsided by the Golden Calf event. It was all rather sudden, you know. Sure, Moses has been gone forty days, but he was gone receiving a word from the Lord *for* the people. He's up on the mountain *solidifying* this covenant between God and God's people. But the people suddenly act like they don't know what's become of Moses. So we've got God and Moses, hard at work writing up exactly what this relationship is going to look like, while the people forget all about their sacred ties.

Just imagine that you went on a long retreat with the sole purpose of writing fresh vows to your spouse while you were away. You are intent and focused on this next step in your relationship, but as you are writing, you get wind of some news—that your Beloved was found in the arms of another in your absence. Blindsided. Like a sudden, sharp blast of cold air. The rapid ruin of your Garden of Eden, the Fall of what once was.

Moses is stuck on the mountain, so he remains unaware. God has a bit more freedom of travel, so he sees the sickening sight first, and he brings the news to Moses with a fury. “*Your* people, whom *you* brought out of Egypt have become corrupt.” God sounds like an angry parent complaining to the other parent, “*Your* son sure is causing problems . . .” Up to this point, it's always been an intimate, “*My* people, whom *I* brought out of Egypt.” But now God creates distance, calling them “*Your* people . . .”

Now the way the Hebrew reads between verse 8 and verse 9 suggests that Moses was first rendered speechless by the news. God announces the behavior of the Israelites in verse 8, and Moses is so shocked, it's like the wind was knocked out of him. He doesn't say anything at all, so God fills the silence with an idea: he's going to let them all die. Although Moses has yet to say anything, God warns, “Now leave me be so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them.”

I think God says “Leave me be,” because that is, in effect, what the people have said to God. “Leave us be, we'll find our own gods.” And the Lord refuses to be a slave-driver like Pharaoh. If they ask to go, God says yes the first time. Of course, they'll die in the wilderness all alone without God's help and without God's provision, but that's what they're asking for. The Israelites have filed for divorce, and if it's what they really want, God will bear the agony and sign the papers. Without warning, they've left their first love in the dust, and when God looks down on them, he doesn't find a people grieving as if they've lost a marriage. Instead he sees partying—eating, drinking, indulging in revelry. It is too much for the wounded heart of God to bear, and so he tells Moses his plan to give them over to destruction.

Suddenly, Moses finds his voice. “No! No, you can't do that.”

Well, that was a my paraphrase—Moses' real speech is much longer, including reason after reason why God should not kill the Israelites. He reminds God that these are *your* people whom *you* brought of Egypt. He demands that God change his mind, turn from his anger, and remember his promises. This is audacious. This is brave! Moses' boldness on the mountaintop with God stands in direct contrast to the actions of Aaron down in the valley with the people. The people demanded Aaron to make gods, and he gives in to the pressure without hesitation.

Then after the calf is already molded, Aaron tries to kind-a-sort-a compromise by tacking a “Festival to YHWH” piece onto the Calf Worship. Aaron is afraid of upsetting the people, so he welcomes the idolatry and then pays a little lip service to YHWH too, hoping God might not notice the duplicity. By contrast, Moses is facing the demands of God, yet he takes a side and stands his ground. Moses stands up *to God!* Talk about guts. Not only that, he stands up to God *while* God is angry, taking the chance of upsetting God more. Walter Brueggemann calls Moses a “daring intercessor,” who, “at great risk to himself . . . throws himself against the wrath of YHWH.”

While Moses’ speech is lengthy, God’s reaction to Moses is brief. No speech is even recorded—just God’s action. One sentence: “Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had planned.” I think the shortness of this line points to how powerfully Moses moved God to action—no more discussion was needed.

Some people will try to argue that God never planned to destroy the Israelites—God was just testing Moses to see how Moses would respond. So what, God was pretending? Acting? Lying? Just to get a rise out of Moses? The way the Bible words it, God changed his mind, changed his course of action, after hearing from Moses. Sometimes we like to think of God as someone who has it all planned out ahead of time, and there’s no messing with what God has ordained. I think that perspective of the future can help us feel safe. But God’s will *cannot* be static and unchanging, otherwise this thing called we call a relationship is more like a puppet show. We are the puppets and God is the puppeteer. We’re acting out a script, and we have no choice in the matter. But what we find in Scripture is a God who interacts with us, who responds to our choices and to our prayers, who keeps creating new opportunities and new solutions and new paths. In Scripture we see a Creator who respects his own creation, a God who lets *us* have a hand in the shaping of the future.

What would have happened, if Moses hadn’t spoke up? We have no way of knowing. All we know is that Moses was permitted to affect the outcome. Moses mattered enough to God that God let him in on the decision process, and it is reported in Scripture that Moses’ input made a difference.

This hints powerfully that prayer indeed is effective. But of course, it doesn’t answer the question of unanswered prayers. Why there are other times that we beg and plead and cry, and God is not moved, or so it seems.

Prayer is complex, and it would take a lot more than one sermon to even begin to explore it in totality. I admit, it probably wasn’t fair of me to start a sermon with more questions than we’d be able to answer. I really think what we do glean from this text helps put the whole thing in perspective. It shows us the character of God to whom we voice our prayers. We see a God who responds to the choices of humanity, such that in this story God is truly torn. Does he respond to the Israelites, who have chosen to reject him, or does he respond to Moses, who begs God not to allow the separation? We watch God wrestle in this text with how to respond. We see that our choices and our voices matter to God in profound ways. We see a God who allows us free will, even when our free decisions lead us into sticky situations and God is left with a mess to sort out. We see a God who invites, rather than rebukes, Moses’ decision to stand up to him.

These things don't answer all our questions about prayer, and this story doesn't answer why God didn't seem to come through in your particular case about that one particular thing. What this story does is show us Who is it we pray to, and what He's really like. That no matter what the circumstance, your prayers are not just about changing you. (That seems like a narcissist's perspective of prayer to me anyway.) God is not just testing you, toying with you. God is listening to you. Hearing you. Responding to you. Inviting you to participate in God's activity in the world—giving you a role, offering you the mantle of creator in your own small way, handing you the authority to help shape the future. It doesn't mean you get the final say, or that God is at your beck and call, or that God's choices in response to your choices will always make sense to your human brain. God is still God, and the mystery of the divine is still intact, but you have access and influence you've barely even begun to tap. So you can choose—the spineless lip service of Aaron, who speaks of God and holds God-festivals but meanwhile molds idols of compromise, thinking God not attentive enough to care or to notice OR the audacious intercession of Moses, who brings everything he is and everything he believes to the table, not holding anything back, trusting that this is a God who can handle the unadorned truth, who does take notice, and who will love you—not smite you—for your courageous confrontation.

May you believe with all your heart that your voice matters and that your choices hold power. You can never control or manipulate God, but he could control you, only instead he's asked you to partner *with him* in the redemption of the world. May you have the audacity to accept his offer. It will make all the difference. Amen.