

Exodus 32:1-14

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.’ 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.’ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mould, 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!’ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, ‘Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.’ 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.

The Lord said to Moses, ‘Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; 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 worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”’ The Lord said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. 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.’

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? 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. 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 for ever.”’ And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Sermon

This passage is one that is close to my heart. When I was in High School, I decided that I was going to read the Bible all the way through, from start to finish. I started “In The Beginning” and I read a chapter or so each day, with a little notebook and a pen, where I would write all the questions that I had from my reading. (I guess I figured that after I finished reading I would go back and figure out all the answers.)

Anyways, I made it through Genesis and already had my notebook about halfway full. And then I started in on Exodus, and I made it as far as this passage. And I read the last verse, where it says, “And the Lord changed his mind.”

And I read it again, “The Lord changed his mind?”

I put the Bible down and I thought about that for a second.

And I wrote it down in my notebook of questions that I planned to find the answers for.

“The Lord changed his mind.”

Only this time, I didn’t pick the Bible back up.

Instead I dwelled on this question. And the more I thought on it, the more it grew in me.

How could that be? How could the one who created the universe have changed his mind? Wouldn’t that mean that what God had planned originally was wrong? That God was on the wrong side of an argument and had the wrong opinion?

How could God change anything about himself? If he’s perfect from the beginning to today and will be forever more?

This one sentence I had found in the Bible broke down the image that I had of God in my head. And the God that I thought I wanted to exist began to fade away. And I began to lose faith - in the God that I had created. The one who stood like a statue and never changed. The one whose heart must have been hard as stone if he couldn’t respond to Moses’ cry for mercy and compassion.

But, in that losing faith, I began the longer, more difficult path - toward a deeper faith in the One True God. As I let go of that false picture of a cold and stoic God, I was beginning the process of coming to know - the God of the Bible and the God who lives. The God who hears our cries and can take mercy and respond. The God who is willing to give away his power for the benefit of others. The God who can set things right and forgive, even those who haven't earned his grace and don't deserve his love.

As I read the passage again, so many years later, I'm struck by how it wasn't God's anger against the people that made me put the Bible down. And I think it's because it still seems so justified - because we just keep building these idols and letting God down. We keep breaking our promises and wandering off the good path that God has given us.

Even when I've seen the truth of God's mercy and God's grace. I'm sure that I still mis-represent Him. I'm sure there are still times when I take His name in vain, when I tell others about a God who is more like what I want God to be, than who God really is. I'm sure I still mar God's image, when I tell others that I'm made in His likeness, then continue to live in a way that serves myself. Still I lean on the idols and the half-truths I've made of God.

But, I thank God that He keeps shattering those idols that I create. I thank God that He keeps forgiving me for my rebellions and revealing His True Self to me, even when I don't want to see it. For this is the God who I still lean on today. The One who finds me when I'm lost, points me toward where I need to go, and walks with me until we get there. He's the one who enters into my stubborn and selfish heart to help me change my mind and see the need for the works of mercy and compassion that I can do in this world.

There's no wrong time to shatter our idols, so let us do it now. Because it turns out that it is holy to change your mind and think again. It is sacred when you listen to the needs of those around you when they call to you for help. To seek a deeper expression of justice. To choose to use your power, not for the destruction of those who anger you, but to grant liberation and blessing to those who need your grace. And to turn once again to the scriptures and the stories of our God, with all our questions and our doubts, so that we might be reminded, of who God really is.

Amen.