

Moses Gets in the LORD's Face

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
Columbus, Ohio
September 21, 2008*

Exodus 32:1-14; 30-35

After crossing the Red Sea, the children of Israel journeyed to Mt. Sinai. There the LORD entered into a covenant with them in a ceremony punctuated by fire and smoke, by thunder and lightning. Moses had led them to the mountain. Then he himself went up onto the mountain, into the presence of the LORD, where he lingered for forty days and forty nights, while the children of Israel waited down below, not sure what was next . . .

The people saw that Moses was a long time coming down from the mountain. And the people gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make a god for us, who will go before us. As for this man Moses, who brought us up from 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." And all the people took off the gold rings that were on their ears, and brought them to Aaron. And he took them from their hand, formed [the gold] in a mold, and cast an image of a calf. And they said, "Here is your god, Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt." Aaron saw this, and he built an altar before it and proclaimed, "Tomorrow is a festival to the Lord." The next day the people rose early. They sacrificed burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. The people sat down to eat and drink. And they got up to indulge their lusts.

The Lord said to Moses, "Hurry down! Your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have been quick to leave the way I ordered them to follow. They have made a cast image of a calf for themselves. They have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'Here is your god, Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.'" And the Lord said to Moses, "I see this people, what a stiff-necked people they are. Now, leave me alone that my anger may burn against them, that I may destroy them and make you a great nation."

But Moses sought favor from the Lord his God. He said, "Lord, why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought from the land of Egypt with great power and a strong hand? Why should Egypt say, 'He brought them out with an evil intention, to kill them off in the mountains and wipe them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger. Change your mind. Do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of the sky, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants to possess forever.'" And the Lord changed his mind. He did not bring the disaster he had threatened on his people.

The next day Moses said to the people, "You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord. Perhaps I will be able to atone for your sin." And Moses went back to the Lord and said, "Ahh! What a great sin these people have committed! They have made a god of gold for themselves. And yet, if you will forgive their sin . . . But if not, then erase me from the book you have written." But the Lord said to Moses, "I will erase from my book the one who has sinned against me. Now go, lead the people where I told you. See, my angel will go before you. Nevertheless, when the day for punishment comes, I will punish them for their sin."

And the Lord sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf—the one that Aaron made.

Sermon

At some point in our lives, most of us start feeling nostalgic. There's something about the "good old days." Maybe it's childhood memories: the sky is blue, the sun is kind, hope and possibility are straight ahead. I was telling Jan just the other day that the squawk of a blue jay puts me there instantly; I'm a kid again in 1969. Maybe the "good old days" were before our time. But we hear something – something now lost, something hauntingly beautiful even – in the stories that our parents and grandparents tell us. And we can see ourselves there. We want to be there. That's nostalgia.

Nostalgia tends to peak during difficult days, in uncertain times. When financial markets are falling apart, we console ourselves with misty-eyed remembrances of what has been called "the greatest generation" – how they weathered the Great Depression and were the better for it. But when times are tough, we had better be careful. Pining for the "good old days" has little help to offer us when all we want really is to live well in these days.

Actually, to believe the Bible, there were no "good old days." The first two chapters of the Bible tell the story of a very good creation. God finishes up his work, sits back, and smiles with satisfaction. Everything is in place; everything is as it should be. Then human beings start thinking and acting. In a moment, they wipe the smile off God's face. From the start, the human story is one of rebellion and murder. The stink of corruption twists God's nose; it breaks God's heart. Everything is out of place; everything is not the way it's supposed to be.

This general, human story is matched, in numbing detail, by Israel's story. Finally free after four hundred years of slavery, finally free at great cost, Israel stood at the base of Mt. Sinai, listened to God's commandments, and pledged itself forever to the LORD, the God "who brought [them] out of the land of Egypt." Forty days later, the LORD has been forgotten. "This man Moses," the people say, "the one who brought us up from the land of Egypt, now that he's nowhere to be seen, we want to trade in the LORD, his god. We want a new god . . . something in gold." That's gratitude for you.

So, according to the Bible, there were no "good old days" for Israel, and no "good old days" for humanity in general. In each case, from the start the news was bad, very bad.

Also according to the Bible, God's response to this bad news was consistently severe. In the first instance, God wasted no time. He threw Adam and Eve out of the garden right away. He posted a squad of Marines with flame-throwers at the door. And, of course, he told those first human beings that they and their descendants would be paying for a long, long time.

Not that God waited a long time. When the human stink became overwhelming, with violence and murder and lust and disregard for every limit, God killed them all. He wiped the slate clean – except for Noah and his family. But even that fresh start turned into a bad news story. The first thing Noah did on dry land was to get stinking drunk. Then one of his sons embarrassed him. Then Noah pronounced a curse that rippled across the ages, spreading hatred and more violence.

But God's consistent severity with human corruption is clear, especially in Exodus 32. The children of Israel molded a prize-winning calf. And in its honor they held a gold-plated orgy. God's response was swift and decisive. "Outta my way, Moses! I'm heating up the furnace of my anger. I'm through with them, Moses. It's the fire for them. It's your turn to be Noah. I'll start over with you." A volcanic eruption of anger was about to sweep Israel away.

But Moses . . . but Moses got in the LORD's face. Moses argued with the LORD, first about who was responsible for Israel. The LORD echoes Israel's own words when he says to Moses, "Your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt." Israel had disregarded the LORD and credited Moses with their deliverance. The LORD, in turn, was using the same words to blame Moses. But Moses refused to accept the switch. He came right back at God: "Your people, whom you brought from the land of Egypt."

It was only the LORD's "great power and strong hand" that had set Israel free. Moses reminded the LORD of this.

Moses also reminded the LORD of his reputation. The LORD had said again and again that his faithfulness to Israel would be a testimony to Egypt. "In this way, they will know that I am the LORD." But what would Egypt think if the LORD destroyed Israel? Would that be seen as an act of faithfulness? And Moses reminded the LORD of his promises. "Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. Remember your promises to them. You can only be true to yourself by keeping faith with Israel."

Beyond this, Moses also interceded for Israel. He tried to atone for their sin. A faithful priest, he begged the LORD to forgive them. He even went so far as to offer himself as a sacrifice for his people. "Erase me," he said, "but save my people, save your people." God's anger was boiling over. The fire was ready to erupt. But Moses stood in the way. He stretched out his arms and said, "No! No! Take me, but forgive your people." Moses, the mediator, was in the LORD's face to save his people Israel. This is both a picture of and a preparation for a larger story.

And so, when a rebel world incites God's anger, when a rebel world prepares its own doom, Jesus Christ gets in the way, stretches out his arms, and says, "No! No! Take me, but forgive them." This world has been in trouble from the start. The human story, pictured in the Bible, is the world's story. No one is innocent. Our tradition speaks of *total depravity*. By that we mean that no person, no group, no institution, no nation is pure. There is an ever-present corruption in everything human.

We in the United States like to think that somehow we're different, that we are the exceptional nation. We've been told that story again and again. It has been repeated by politicians and pundits. And we tell that story ourselves. Such noble ideals we have as a nation! What founding dreams we had as a nation! But there was a contradictory corruption in us from the start. That corruption erupted four score and some years later into ghastly carnage and uncivil terror. We paid a heavy price for that corruption through our Civil War. That war looked like judgment from God upon us. And perhaps it was. But the corruption has lingered. Racism remains our essential national sin.

There is, of course, no nation without similar or even worse corruption. That's why, at the end, the nations will be judged (see Matthew 25:31ff). And it's not just nations. What family doesn't have its share of hatred, meanness, and spite? You don't have to be the Soprano family to have a problem with evil.

Families have no "good old days." Nations have no "good old days." The human race has no "good old days." There never has been a period of purity or innocence, not for any of us. That's a dream, an illusion. And over this world, with its hateful, hurtful ways, God's wrath is ignited. God is steamed. "Outta my way!" says God. "I've had enough!"

But Jesus Christ gets in the way. He stretches out his arms, and the long shadow of his cross stretches over and marks the surface of the world. Everyone may rally to that cross, everyone may huddle in its shadow, and so be saved. Individuals, families, nations – whoever hides in the cross, whoever follows the crossbearer, whoever carries a cross will not perish in the heat. The fire will come. It plagued Israel, God's chosen people. But in the cross, there is shelter. In the cross, there is safety.

In difficult days, in uncertain times, there are no "good old days" to yearn for. There is no old-fashioned age of innocence to secure our future, if only we could recover it. There were no "good old days." There was but one "good old day." It was a Friday. And on that day, Jesus stood in the way, stretched out his arms, and said, "Father, forgive them."