

Sermon for Sunday, October 6, 2024

Exodus 32:1-14

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today we are going to seek understanding of the Scripture text and the message that it carries for us by thinking about three characters in this story. The first character is the Israelite people as a group. The second character is Moses. And the third is God.

We begin with the Israelite people. To do so, it's helpful to have a little background information. We don't know exactly how much time has passed since God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt; an act that also included the parting of the Red Sea. It is safe to assume that the vast majority of the Israelites present were witnesses to God's saving action. The vast majority of these people had grown up knowing nothing but enslavement. As slaves they were generally ordered about and had very little opportunity to make decisions for themselves. Their mindset was defined by being enslaved. As a result they needed leadership....they felt most comfortable when there was someone telling them what to do. Since they were only recently freed from slavery their old habits of submission were deeply ingrained and died hard. These folks needed a human leader: they needed Moses.

Knowing this, it doesn't come as much of a surprise that when Moses goes up the mountain and stays away for a long time the Israelites start getting anxious. To be clear, there is a "second in command" Moses' brother Aaron. But Aaron doesn't appear to have the authority of Moses. And when in their anxiety the people start gathering around him, he must have felt threatened. His response is to convince the people to give up their jewelry so that he can make a golden calf—an idol. We can ask the question, "What was Aaron thinking?" After all he was a part of the team that led the people out of Egypt. We don't have an answer. One way to put a more positive spin on this tactic is that it buys Aaron some time. Maybe he hopes that while he is busy crafting the golden calf Moses will return and exert his authority.

We come now to our second character: Moses. When God discovers what the Israelites are doing in the camp at the base of Mt Sinai, God and Moses have a conversation. God's pretty angry. God doesn't claim the Israelites, he calls them "Your people" meaning

that they belong to Moses. God is so angry that he wants to wipe the Israelites from the face of the earth as was done in the story of Noah and the ark. God offers to begin again with Moses and create a new group of chosen people, much as God had done twice before with Noah and his family and again later with Abraham and Sarah. Moses could have been named as the patriarch of a powerful and faithful people. He could have had power, and status, and likely riches. But in another place the Bible tells us (Numbers 12:3) "Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth." Because of his innate humility Moses has no interest in God's offer; no interest in the power or status that God could confer upon him.

Instead he opts to intervene for the Israelites. He crafts some pretty sound arguments in his conversation with God and strives to convince God not to destroy the Israelites. He reminds God that destruction of the Israelites would tarnish God's reputation; make God look bad in the eyes of the Egyptians. (After all God's larger plan is to encourage relationship with all the peoples of the earth and not just the Israelites.) Moses also reminds God that God made a covenant with the Israelites that they would be God's people *forever*. God doesn't get to revoke the promise just because things get difficult. A couple of weeks ago we heard the story of how God took Abraham outside and pointed to the stars telling him that his descendants would be as vast in number as the stars. In today's text Moses reminds God of those words and refers to the God's promise. Moses' powers of persuasion are in top form in the closing verses of today's reading.

God describes the Israelites as "stiff-necked." With the use of that word, I want to change focus for a bit. Here's why. Have you ever literally had a stiff neck? If so, then you know that you have a limited range of motion. You can't turn your head without turning your entire body. It requires more effort, perhaps more than you are willing to make. Now let's take that idea and expand it. Have you ever settled on a position and said, "this is what I believe and that's final."? In doing so you are drawing a line in the sand and indicating that you are unwilling to consider other information that might change your perspective. Could you be described in that moment as being stiff-necked? I dare to say that all of us have had an occasion or two like that in our life. But what if our stiff necked position is wrong? What if God came to you and said, "My child you are absolutely, 100% wrong on this?" Then what?

The short answer is that in that moment we are called to repent. Repentance is a change in a person's behavior that follows a recognition of having sinned. It usually describes a lifechanging about-face. It means that we recognize that we were wrong, that our stiff-necked nature has caused us to stray away from the path that God intends for us.

Think for a moment about the word "sin." The central letter in that word is "I." Sin is all about focusing on me, myself, and I. It's about focusing on my needs and my wants. Oswald Chambers said, "The nature of sin is not immorality and wrongdoing, but the nature of self-realization which leads us to say, 'I am my own god.' This nature may exhibit itself in [several ways] but it always has a common basis—my claim to my right to myself." Recognizing that our stiff-necks cause us to narrow our focus down to only ourselves is important. We can't seem to turn our heads to consider other people, other needs, or other information. Once again, that's when a call to repentance; a call to make a lifechanging about-face is so very necessary.

Today's Scripture reading paints a graphic picture of the failings of people....not just the Israelites of that place and time but rather a picture of humans in general....a picture of all of us. We have short attention spans, we forget God quickly and tend to focus on ourselves.

We've talked about the people and about Moses. Let's turn now to our third character: God. There is good news in this story and we hear it in the very last verse: "And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people." The Lord changed his mind. Thank goodness! We need a God who is willing to relent, to turn away from the plan for punishment that had been crafted. And that's this God....that's our God.

I return now for a moment to Numbers 12:3 Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth. Let's replace Moses' name with another Bible character. "Now the man [Jesus] was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth." Jesus humbled himself and came to earth in human form so that our relationship with God might be "reset." In our sinfulness, in our tendency to make everything *but* God an idol; a false god, we become deeply separated from God. God desires to restore that relationship and used Jesus' time on earth to achieve the restoration. God sent Jesus to be our redeemer.

So what does this text bring to us today?

1. It reminds us of how quickly we humans begin to doubt God, God's power, and God's salvific acts. And this is sin.
2. It reminds us that we have a God who relents—a God who might be absolutely justified in punishing humanity due to sin, but who can be convinced to turn aside from anger and turn toward a more compassionate and caring course of action.

Quoting Oswald Chambers again, "sin is something I am born with and cannot touch—only God touches sin through redemption. It is through the Cross of Christ that God redeemed the entire human race from the possibility of damnation through the heredity of sin."

3. We can use the humble example of Moses to remind us of our redeemer: the savior of all humanity: of Jesus. And that my friends is perhaps the most important lesson that we can glean from today's Scripture reading. Moses was the savior of the Israelites in a variety of ways. We don't need a Moses. We need Jesus. Amen.