***CHANGING MINDS***

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Texts: Exodus 32:1-14 and 1 Timothy 1:12-17

The Lord was ticked – chuck them all into the divine trash can and start over again kind of ticked, fire and brimstone raining down on their heads kind of ticked, reboot the unmitigated disaster that the people of Israel had proven themselves to be kind of ticked. After all God had done for them – delivering them from bondage in Egypt, parting the Red Sea so they could cross safely ahead of the Egyptian army, leading them through the desert to the foot of Mt. Sinai, feeding them with manna and quail each day when there was no food in sight, patiently claiming them as God’s people despite their chronic whining, squabbling and disobedience – despite all those blessings, the people still were as fickle as a March wind or a Vladimir Putin promise. Seated with Moses on Mt. Sinai with the etchings of commandments still fresh on the stone tablets, the Lord watched the people mold a calf of gold from their own jewelry and declare it their god. It was the last straw for the Lord who had borne a barn’s worth of last straws for Israel, and so 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.*

Would anyone have blamed God for doing just that – wiping the unfaithful people of Israel from the face of the earth and starting again with the descendants of Moses who might prove to be more faithful people?

I suspect the Israelites would have objected. After reading the parable of the Prodigal Son to her young Sunday School class, the teacher asked, “Was there anyone who was unhappy about the festive celebration for the younger son who returned home?” One lad was quick to respond, “Yes, the fatted calf.” Israel might have felt like the fatted calf in that scenario – unhappy with how the story was ending there at the foot of Mt. Sinai. And they may have had a point. After all, they did not choose God; God chose them and claimed them as God’s people. If God wanted a more reliable people, a less stiff-necked, whiny, unfaithful people with whom to enter into a covenant relationship, then God should have chosen someone else. But in divine wisdom, God chose Israel, and so if things did not turn out the way God wanted, was it really Israel’s fault, or did the fault lie with the Lord who chose so poorly? Did God not know that they were weak, fickle, frustrating people to deal with? God could have left them in Egypt rather than bring them out in the desert to end their miserable existence. So, if the fault lay with anyone, it was with the Lord – at least that may have been the people’s self-righteous argument had they known what God was planning on the mountaintop as they danced around the golden calf at the foot of that mountain.

The problem with that argument was that while the Lord had chosen them, they had chosen the Lord as their God. It happened when Abram pulled up his tent pegs to follow where God led him, not knowing where that might be. And it was confirmed again and again through the lives of their early ancestors in faith – Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and Moses. The people had not hesitated to cry out to the Lord for deliverance when things went wrong, had begged God to take them out of bondage in Egypt, had pleaded for the Lord to save them at the shore of the Red Sea, had proudly declared themselves God’s chosen people, but when the going got tough, when Moses delayed his return from the peak of Mt. Sinai for a few days – okay, forty days – but even then, they had quickly turned their backs on the Lord and worshiped a god of their own making, a golden calf who was no god at all. With Israel having broken the covenant with the Lord, was the Lord not entitled to break the covenant with Israel and vent divine wrath upon them for their unfaithfulness?

Fortunately for Israel they had an able advocate in Moses who saved them from God’s wrath. One might think that given his experience with those stubborn, stiff-necked people and God’s offer to start all over with him and his descendants, Moses might have stepped back and said, “Go to it, Lord!” But instead, Moses countered God’s violent intent with a twofold argument that did not excuse Israel’s unfaithful actions. First, he argued that if God should wipe out the Israelites there in the wilderness, the Egyptians would say that was God’s real plan for their deliverance from bondage – not to free them, but to kill them in the desert. It would make God, not a divine savior intent on freeing God’s people, but an evil deity who could not be trusted. It would destroy any possibility of a relationship God might hope to have with the other people of the earth.

And secondly, Moses reminded the Lord of the covenant promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: “*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 forever.*” How could God keep that promise if the people were all dead? There would be no descendants to inherit the land and God’s promise – God’s word – would prove worthless. It would impugn the integrity of God!

One might imagine that, God being God, such reasoned arguments would carry little weight. God is free to do whatever God chooses to do, and it seemed that God had freely chosen to wipe out the unfaithful people of Israel. But then an odd thing happened. In the words of the text: “*The LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people*.” When you think of the Lord our God, the Creator of all things and all people, the One who scattered stars in space and knit you together in your mother’s womb as the psalmist describes it, do you think of a God who changes his mind from time to time or a God whose mind would never need to change because by nature God is perfect, omniscient, and unchanging? This is not the only instance of a divine change of mind:

* Abraham lobbies God to spare the people of Sodom when God is determined to destroy them until God finally agrees that if there are just ten righteous men in the city it will be spared.
* Jonah proclaims God’s intent to destroy the city of Nineveh, “Forty days and you all gonna’ die?” he shouts throughout the city. And surprisingly the people repent of their evil ways, and the text says, “*God changed his mind -* literally *was sorry* – *about the calamity God had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.”*
* In the Noah story, God hangs a rainbow in the sky as a reminder not to destroy the earth by flood again – as if God needed that reminder to check God’s worst impulses.

The divine mind is perhaps not as resolutely fixed upon a course of action as we sometimes think, for occasionally God changes God’s mind and does not do the thing God intended to do. And for that we, along with the Israelites there at the foot of Mt. Sinai, should be glad!

What is it then that might change God’s mind? Moses and Abraham seem to have the ear of God to present a successful reasoned argument, but are you really counting on them to change God’s mind on your behalf? A really bad outcome – the flood – seems to have convinced God to put the rainbow in the sky in the Noah story, but most of us would rather not have to experience such a disaster in order to change God’s mind after-the-fact. True repentance seems to have changed God’s mind in the Jonah story, and perhaps that leads us a little closer to what moves the mind of God. Notably most of these accounts come to us in stories that say more about who God is than what God does in history. And what they tell us about God is this: it is God’s experience with humankind, that sometimes changes God’s mind. For while the Lord is powerful and just, the Lord is also compassionate and loving, like a parent. Those attributes of God - steadfast love, faithfulness, justice, and righteousness - do not change, but sometimes God - like us who are created in the image of God – reconsiders a decision and has a change of mind about what to do when justice and steadfast love, law and grace, collide and force God to make a choice. So sometimes God changes God’s mind about what to do, but never about who to be.

Who knows how many times God’s mind has been changed across the ages! When Christians slaughtered Muslims in the Crusades and burned witches at the stake, did God say, “Enough!” and prepare to vent divine fury? When white Christians tried to justify slavery with biblical proof-texting and abused their slaves as chattel in this nation, was God tempted to rain fire and brimstone upon them? When Nazi Christians persecuted Jews in Germany and American Christians turned away ships of Jewish refugees, was the Lord tempted to start the whole project over again? The people of Israel knew nothing of Moses’ advocacy for them as they danced at the foot of Mt. Sinai. We don’t know and may never know when we have pushed God beyond the pale, only to have God relent from giving us what we deserve and choosing to persevere with us instead. But we do know that we have what John describes as “an advocate” with God, Jesus Christ who intercedes for us in some divine way that makes little sense to our human minds but makes sense to the One who sent him to us in the first place.

And so we pray and ask for God’s mercy, knowing that our forgiveness is not dependent upon our persuasive skills. We aren’t Moses or Abraham, and sometimes we have no good argument or excuse to offer anyway. But God promises to hear our prayers, feeble as they may be, and to hear also the intercessions made for us by the Son of God who came to save us. We would do well to ask for God’s grace and mercy for our failings, for God longs for that repentance. But in order for us to take even that small step, another change of mind is in order – ours!

If we are willing to change our minds and be open to the possibility that God is God and we are not, and what our ancestors in the faith have told us is true – that we are not alone, that God loves us without end, that there is purpose in our living and hope in our dying – then maybe, just maybe we may find a life worth living, strength to face the challenges of each new day, and hope for the future, not only for ourselves but for generations to come. That was Paul’s experience as you heard in his letter to Timothy – a change of heart and mind from persecutor of Christians, “a man of violence” he calls himself, to become a pillar of the faith and ambassador for Christ. If God could use Paul with all his baggage, then surely God can use us. For none of us, not one, is beyond redemption, beyond hope, beyond the all-embracing love of God.

W.E.B. Du Bois puts it this way: “*The most important thing to remember is this: to be ready at any moment to give up what you are for what you might become.*”[[1]](#endnote-1) In other words, just as we hope that God is ready to change God’s mind about us when divine frustration sets in, we must be willing to change our minds and our ways in order to become who God wants us to be, who God created us to be – faithful, joyful, loving children of God and disciples of the risen Christ. Are you willing to embrace that kind of change – in you? Amen

1. W.E.B. Du Bois quoted by Cory Booker, *United*, Ballantine Books: New York, 2016, p.22 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)