

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, rcl yr a, 2020

St. John's in-person and on-line

Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

*But Moses implored the Lord his God*

There is much to give pause in this passage from Exodus. In the absence of Moses—the one who led them out of Egypt and through the desert—the people almost immediately begin to break God's commandments. And Aaron the priest, in an action that should give pause to any religious leader, enables the people's unholy desires, and gives them what they want: an idol.

We might not see many golden calves in our time, but there are many ways we can fall into idolatry, and place things other than God above God; good things often too. Wealth perhaps, or beautiful things, or even charismatic people. All good things, but all things that are most appropriately enjoyed under the sovereignty of the God.

The “constant temptation on the journey of faith,” says Pope Benedict about this episode, the “constant temptation [is] to avoid the divine mystery by constructing a comprehensible god who corresponds with one's own plans, one's own projects.”

I'll come back 'round to idolatry and one way to avoid it—but for now I'll turn to Moses, his prayer, and his argument with God. Moses provides for us today a way to pray—and through that, we learn something not only about prayer, but something about God as well.

So, first thing, before we get to Moses: what do we notice about God here? Well, it does appear that God is indeed angry. “The people have confused *that gold calf* with me?” says the Lord. “The people are saying that it is *that gold calf* that brought them out of Egypt?” says the Lord. “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are,” God says to Moses. “Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them.”

And so Moses is given a choice here—Moses is led to ask himself, “ok ... do I now leave God alone to let his wrath burn hot against his people? Or do I stay and argue?”

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Moses stays. And Moses argues.

And as Moses argues, he reveals for us God's *ultimate* desire for his people: which is *not* their destruction, but is instead their *salvation*. Moses reveals in prayer God's desire *not* to destroy, but to *forgive*. And so we see two things at work in God here: the first is God's real anger at the sin, God's real anger at the fact that Israel has almost immediately started down the list, not of ten commandments to be followed, but of commandments to be broken.

But we also, in what comes next, see a second thing: God's desire to forgive and to save as it is revealed *in the prayer of Moses*.

The first thing Moses does, as he prays to God, is to bring to mind what God has already *done*, and what God has already *promised*. "You are the God who brought your people out of Egypt," says Moses. "Not only that," says Moses, "your commitment goes further back than Egypt. You are the God of Abraham, Isaac, AND Israel. And you *swore* to them and made a promise that their descendants would be like the stars of heaven, and that your people would see the promised land."

That is: "God, you have already saved this people. You have promised that the best is still yet to come. If you are a faithful God then you will keep your promise. You cannot destroy us. So forgive them." And God does so. God does not destroy; God forgives his stiff-necked people.

A lot of the prayers we pray in the liturgy follow this pattern. We don't typically *begin* with a petition, we don't begin by asking God to do something. Our collect today is a good example. The collect for the day begins with "Almighty God, in our baptism you adopted us for your own." The first thing we do is to remember what God has already done—adopting us, making us his own in baptism. And then, having said this, we make our petition, the petition that God keep his promise to us, the one made in baptism, that we would be given life in the spirit: "Quicken, we pray, your Spirit within us," and that as a result we would "be renewed in body and mind," and worship God "in sincerity and truth."

This is to pray like Moses, who didn't just say "God would you please be nice to us?" Nope—Nope—Moses reminds God what he has done—delivery from Egypt; and what he has promised—that Abraham would have more descendants than there are stars in heaven. And by this he reveals God's deepest desires for his people, freedom and abundance, *in prayer*. Similarly in the Collect, God's desire for us is that we be renewed in body and mind, that we would worship in sincerity and truth, fulfilling the promise made in baptism. God's greatest desire for us is not our destruction but our salvation.

And so Moses teaches us one very helpful way to pray: before we ask anything of God, we bring what God has already done, and what God has promised, to mind—and only *then* to ask, and to ask according to what God has accomplished, and what God has promised.

This really helps us as a guide to prayer, because it helps to keep us from idolatry—from praying to something other than god, or desiring something that is less than godly. It keeps us from constructing a god who corresponds more with our own plans, or our own projects, than they correspond to God's promises made to us.

To pray like Moses, makes it hard to ask for trivial things. "Almighty God you promised through your well-beloved Son that there would always be an open parking space for the cars of your chosen people ...." Doesn't quite work, does it. Or perhaps closer to home, "Almighty God you promised that life would always be easy ..." "Father in heaven you promised that your people would never suffer ..." "God in heaven, your Spirit shields us from the truth..."

These things aren't true, are they. God makes no such promises. So it becomes really hard, if we were to pray like Moses, to pray to a god that guarantees an easy life without suffering, or a life of hiding from what's difficult and true, or a life where we would always get that primo parking spot right in front of the church.

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Instead, we would pray more like this: "Almighty God you saved your people from slavery in Egypt. Set us free from what enslaves us." "Almighty God you have promised in Christ that we would be counted among the children of Abraham by adoption. Have mercy on your people and keep us safe in your love." "Almighty God in our baptism you adopted us for your own. Quicken we pray your Spirit within us. that we being renewed both in body and mind may worship you in sincerity and truth."

God, in Christ, has made real promises to us: that in Christ, and by his work for us, he would resurrect us to eternal life on the last day. This is not a promise that all would be immediately well and easy. But it is a promise though that he would be with us, and even give us a glimpse of that heavenly joy in the present, as he leads us into all life and truth—in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen.

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