

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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TROUBLE IN THE CAMP

Exodus 32

Last Sunday, if you recall, we were in Exodus 19, where Moses met God on the mountain – on Mount Sinai, in fulfillment of the promise God had made to him back in Exodus 3 at the burning bush (3:12). We saw what God said to Moses and through him to the people of Israel there. We saw how God’s grace to Israel in their rescue and deliverance from slavery in Egypt, how His carrying them “on eagles’ wings” (19:4) preceded the giving of the law and the call to obey the covenant He was making with them. We saw God’s plan for Israel to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (19:5), set apart by God, for God, and to serve God as His specially chosen people. And we saw how the people of Israel responded with a unified voice, saying: “What the Lord has said, we will do” (19:8), even though subsequent history shows that they would fail miserably – abysmally – to keep their word.

Between Exodus 19 and our Scripture reading today in Exodus 32, here is what takes place: God gives the ten commandments to the people in Exodus 20:1-17, followed by further laws and regulations to govern the life of the nation in the remainder of Exodus 20 and 21-23. The people of Israel confirm the covenant with God in Exodus 24. Moses then spends 40 days and 40 nights on the mountain with God (24:18), during which God gives Moses detailed instructions for the construction of the tabernacle and the consecration of Aaron and his sons as priests in chapters 25-31. At the end of this time, it says in Exodus 31:18: “When the Lord finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, He gave him the two tablets of the Testimony” – in other words, the ten commandments – “the tablets of stone inscribed by the finger of God.” The tablets, as we are told in 32:16, “were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.”

All of this brings us to today’s Scripture reading from Exodus 32, beginning with the verse numbered 1. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word.

(Read Exodus 32:1-20.)

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In the history of the American people, there have been numerous shining moments:

- The Declaration of Independence, for example, that we commemorate and celebrate every year on July 4.
- The adoption of the U. S. Constitution in 1787.
- The end of slavery in 1865.
- The Allied triumphs over German and Japanese aggression in World War II.
- The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.
- The first moon landing in 1969.

There have been some spiritual high points, too, such as:

- The first Great Awakening that spread through the American colonies in the 1730s and 40s, led by George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards.
- The second Great Awakening in the first half of the 19th century.
- The post-World War II “revivals” in which Billy Graham played a key role.

In my own life, like Minnesota Vikings QB Case Keenum, I would point to my experience of coming to faith in Jesus Christ, when I was savingly wrought upon by the Holy Spirit, as the best or most significant moment in my life, followed by the blessing of marrying the love of my life, Mary Sue. To these I would add the births and marriages of our children, the births of our grandchildren, and the honor of becoming the pastor of this church in 1997. Oh, and there was the time in the ninth grade when I scored the game-winning basket against Titusville Junior High. I know it doesn’t compare with the “Minnesota Miracle” or the “Immaculate Reception,” but it was still a big deal for me!

What happened in Exodus 32 was not a high point in the history of the people of Israel. It was anything but a bright and shining moment. There were high points for Israel, of course, the exodus from Egypt and their miraculous escape from Pharaoh’s army through the Red Sea being chief among them, along with their entry into and conquest of the Promised Land. This, however, was not one of the high points.

In brief, here is what happened: After hearing the Lord speak from Mount Sinai (20:22) in the giving of the Ten Commandments (20:1-17) and agreeing to keep the covenant (24:3-7), the people of Israel become impatient with the length of time Moses remains up on the mountain, and they break the covenant by making an idol in the form of a golden calf or bull and worship it with offerings and a feast that turns into an orgy of immorality (32:1-6). After pleading with God not to destroy the people (32:11-14), Moses comes down from the mountain with the stone tablets (32:15), smashes the tablets in anger (32:19), destroys the golden calf (32:20), and receives a lame explanation from Aaron (32:21-24). Moses then executes judgment against the people for their apostasy and immorality (32:25-29), before going back up on the mountain again to intercede with God for the people (32:30-34).

It is astonishing but all too human that the people of Israel would break the covenant God has established with them – and to which they have given their wholehearted assent – as soon after receiving the Ten Commandments directly from the mouth of God. The actions and reactions of the people, God, Moses, and Aaron all contain spiritual lessons for us.

WHAT THE PEOPLE DID: THE GOLDEN CALF

Notice first what the people did. Whatever their motive, whether impatience with Moses (and thus with God), or insecurity or panic over Moses’ extended absence, or the desire for a god or gods they could see, what they did was a direct act of rebellion against God and a violation of both #1 and #2 of the Ten Commandments God had just given them (Exodus 20). Both commandments are crystal clear. The first is: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (20:2-3). And the second: “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above

or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them” (20:4-5a).

The Israelites may or may not have intended the idol to be an actual “god.” If not intended to be a god other than the Lord, at the very least (and bad enough), it was a pagan representation of God, who had already made it clear they were to do nothing of the kind. The choice of a calf or bull was not out-of-the-blue. It was a common idol image in the ancient Near East, most often connected with Baal, the pagan god of fertility. Whatever the Israelites were thinking, what they did was no substitute for obedience to God and no excuse for disobedience.

Bottom line: God knew what they were doing. He saw the corruption, both moral and spiritual, in their hearts. The Lord seethed with anger over their rebellion. And, no doubt, He was deeply saddened by it.

The people’s foray into idolatry led to indulgence in immorality, which is often the case. Their rebellion against God and His law turned into revelry. The Hebrew word for revelry in verse 6 (*sadaq*) means “drunken orgies and sexual play” (Walter Kaiser, *Exodus: NIV Expository Commentary*, 478). It means they let go of all restraints and gave in to their desires, with no thought to the consequences. As Moses saw for himself when he came down from the mountain, the people were running wild and making fools of themselves (32:25).

While Moses was still up on the mountain, the Lord spoke of the Israelites as “a stiff-necked people” (32:9). He didn’t mean it in a literal sense. I have suffered from a chronically stiff neck for years. I have limited mobility in my neck. The same is probably true for some of you. God did not mean that the Israelites had stiff necks in a literal, physical sense. “Stiff-necked” was a farmer’s metaphor for an ox or horse that would not respond to the reins when tugged. As the Lord uses it here, it has to do with being strong-willed or self-willed and unwilling to yield to the Lord’s instruction or correction. In other words, to be stiff-necked is to be stubborn in one’s refusal to do what God wants in God’s way in God’s time. Even if you do what God wants, but you don’t do it the way God tells you to do it, or you don’t do it when God tells you to do it, you are being stiff-necked.

In case you’re wondering, though I doubt that you are, to be called stiff-necked is not a compliment 😊. Throughout the Old Testament, it is used almost exclusively in speaking of the people of Israel as a whole or as a warning to them not to be stiff-necked as their ancestors were. Proverbs 29:1 warns that “a man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will be suddenly destroyed – without remedy.” Not a happy ending.

To be stiff-necked is analogous to being hard-hearted or hard-headed. The Bible’s warning against being hard-hearted is so relevant because we are so prone in our rebellious human nature to harden our hearts or stiffen our necks against God. But the Holy Spirit calls to us, saying:

Today if you hear (God's) voice,
do not harden your hearts
as you did in the rebellion,
during the time of testing in the desert.
(Hebrews 2:7-8; cf. Psalm 95:7-8)

In other words, do not be like the people of Israel in the wilderness. Do not be like them as they camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. Do not harden your hearts against God. Do not think that you can turn away from God, follow the ways of the world around you, and seek to gratify your selfish, sinful desires without consequences. As the people of Israel would find out in both the short term and the longer term, the consequences of sin are both unavoidable and painful.

GOD'S ANGER AND MOSES' APPEAL

Second, let's look a little more closely at God's reaction to the people's stiff-necked rebellion and Moses' appeal to God on their behalf. God was, in a word, angry, so angry that He contemplated wiping out the whole nation and starting over with Moses. What we have to understand, first of all, is that God's anger is always a just, justified, and righteous anger. There is nothing unrighteous in the Lord's anger or in His threat to destroy the people. If He had done so, it would have been an expression of His perfect justice, because God is perfectly just.

Sin of any kind, in any form, angers and grieves God. Sin is serious business. But while sin angers God and arouses His wrath, He has provided a way in the Lord Jesus for His righteous wrath to be satisfied while at the same time being merciful and gracious to sinners like us. More on that later.

God's anger toward His people was real. He was as angry with them as you have ever been with anyone who has ever made you angry. He was as mad as a hornet whose nest has been invaded. His anger burned against the people (32:10). He was not pretending.

Moses knew God was serious. So he pleads with God on behalf of the people (32:11-13). Even though the Lord has threatened to disown the people (speaking of them to Moses in verse 7 as "your people, whom you [Moses] brought up out of Egypt"), Moses reminds the Lord that they are *His* people, whom *He – the Lord* – "brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand" (32:11). Moses will not let God forget that the people of Israel are God's chosen people.

In addition, Moses argues that it will do damage to the name, honor, and reputation of the Lord when the Egyptians (or others) hear that He has brought the Israelites out of Egypt only to destroy them in the wilderness (32:12).

And then, last but not least, Moses reminds God of the promises He made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to make their descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and to give them the land of Canaan as their inheritance (32:13). Do you remember what I said last week about the promises of God? When God gives you a promise, He will keep it. Just as He kept His promise to bring Moses and the people of Israel back to the mountain where Moses first met God in the burning bush (3:12). Not a single promise that God has made will go unfulfilled. God is not only the divine Promise-Maker, He is the eternal Promise-Keeper.

Moses reminds the Lord of the promises He has made, and boldly – think about this – asks the Lord to “turn from (His) fierce anger, [to] relent and ... not bring disaster on (His) people” (32:12).

PRAYER MATTERS

Do you see what Moses was doing? He was *praying*. He was talking with God. Granted, he was in a unique position, up there on the mountain with God at God’s invitation. But God invites and welcomes *us* into His presence in prayer. He urges us by prayer and petition, with praise and thanksgiving, to bring our requests to Him (Philippians 4:6). That is what Moses was doing. He was presenting his petition, his request, his appeal to God on behalf of the whole Israelite nation. What the whole nation deserved was the righteous anger of God. Moses pleaded for mercy, and God responded by showing mercy. As verse 14 says: “Then the Lord relented and did not bring on His people the disaster He had threatened.”

There are some aspects of this that I can’t explain to my own satisfaction. It does not cause me to question the sovereignty or faithfulness or trustworthiness of God. God is sovereign. And faithful. And trustworthy. But Moses’ experience with God on the mountain also shows that prayer does matter. In some way, in some cases at least, prayer does move or stay the hand of God. And prayer is, in some cases at least, the means through which God chooses to carry out His will.

Prayer makes a difference. It is not like a scientific equation. It is not a chemical formula. It is not an incantation that produces magical results. It is not a means by which you can control or manipulate God. No one can control or manipulate God. But God responds to the heartfelt appeals of His people in prayer.

In response to the preaching of Jonah, the king of Nineveh calls for the people to repent of their sins and turn to God. He says: "Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from His fierce anger so that we will not perish" (Jonah 3:9). You know what? God did relent. When He saw what the people of Nineveh did and how they turned from their evil ways, He had compassion on them and did not bring on them the destruction He had threatened (3:10).

What we see throughout the Bible is that when people repent, God relents. And when people pray, God responds. So, as the Bible says again and again: "Devote yourselves to prayer" (Colossians 4:2). Don't give up on prayer. Don't be afraid to "wrestle" with God in prayer, like Epaphras in Colossians 4:12. The prayers of the righteous – meaning, those who are rightly-related to God – are powerful and effective, as it says in James 5:16.

As Moses bears witness, prayer really does matter. Don't be afraid to plead with God on behalf of others, on behalf of loved ones for whose spiritual, emotional, relational, physical, and material well-being you are burdened. But do it always with a humble heart, a heart yielded to the Lord and His sometimes inscrutable will, a heart content to let God be God.

There are more spiritual treasures in this passage for us to mine, so we will return to it next Sunday. Let me just point out in closing that though the Lord refused Moses' offer of himself in verse 32 as a substitute to make atonement for the sin of the people, it was not because God was unwilling to show mercy to His people. It was, rather, because Moses was not qualified to make atonement for the people. There is only One who could. And He – Jesus, the Son of God – willingly came to do for us what we could not do for ourselves, and what even Moses could not do for the people of Israel.

God did not abandon His people to their sins. And He has not abandoned us to ours. Such wondrous love! Such amazing love! Love divine, all loves excelling! In response to such love, may we glory in His perfect love and cast our crowns before Him, filled with wonder, love, and praise.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.