

Exodus 32:1-14

“Holding Off and Holding On”

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Roslindale Congregational Church (UCC), Boston MA
All Saints Communion Sunday
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The Paraphrase Version of the Scripture Reading: Exodus 32:1-14

Introductory Piece:

Children, please gather around for the Bible story. This fall, we are listening to the stories from the book of Exodus about how God freed the Hebrew people from slavery. Today the story tells us what happened when the people broke the rules they had made with God.

The Story:

Moses was spending time with God on the mountaintop while the people waited for him at the bottom. When he didn't come back soon, they got afraid and acted foolishly. They asked Moses' brother, Aaron, to create another god for them, like the ones they had worshipped in Egypt. He agreed!

Aaron asked them all for their gold earrings and melted them down. Then, he constructed a mold in the shape of a calf and filled it with the liquid gold. The Israelites broke the second commandment by making this image and then bowing down to worship it. They also declared: “*This* is our god who brought us out of the land of Egypt!” which, of course, was a lie. Aaron then commanded the people to make offerings to the calf, and they all partied.

God was very upset at their stubbornness and their sins. They had broken their sacred covenant! Hurt and angry, God was ready to go down, get rid of them, and start over. But Moses begged God to reconsider: “You have brought the Israelites so far, and you wouldn't want the Egyptians to say that you had actually intended to hurt them all along! Remember your promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the land of freedom you are going to give them.” The Lord changed direction and did *not* bring disaster upon them after all.

There are two things in this Bible story that I wish were not in it: 1) How foolish, bad, and let's say it, *sinful* were God's people! And 2) How angry God was with them!

It reminds me of a situation when I was in 8th grade. It was the year of the controversial movie, *Love Story*, in which the couple lived together without being married. My Sunday school teacher was discussing the question, and I reported that my mother had liked the movie – thought it was okay. This quickly got back to her, and she chastised me: “Jean, you *don't* have to tell everything!” She would have preferred that her opinion had not come out.

In *this* case, in the case of the biblical story, the people, who were adults and knew better, behaved outrageously! As I said in the Friday email: They succumbed to

temptation and trashed the commandments, but more significantly, they shamelessly wounded their relationship with God. Aaron also turned out to be an abysmal substitute for his brother, a *misleading* second-in-command. These characters are not alone, of course; we also sin by disregarding the true God and creating our own.

I don't know which is worse, but the second aspect of this story that makes me cringe is the picture it paints of the Almighty. It looks like the 'god' who lurks in our fears like a Halloween boogey man. We don't see here our preferred god – unchanging, peaceful, reasonable, and celestial. Here on display is an anthropomorphized god like the Roman Thor or the Egyptian Horus, the god of vengeance. This biblical description is also probably what the “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” sermon saw when Jonathan Edwards tried to motivate New Englanders to good through terror – a transactional, fickle god, without mercy, just waiting to catch us messing up.

Why not just cover all this up? Deny, deflect, defend and double-down? It seems to work for a lot of politicians in our culture today. Just call this story a “hoax.” “You don't have to tell everything, Jean!”

But the tellers told it, the writers wrote it, and both Jews and Christians kept this unflattering episode in the settled canon of sacred scripture. **Why, do you think? Because it conveys to us something absolutely essential about the only God, our God, something necessary for our relationship with God to grow and for us to thrive in this life!**

Ultimately, you see, the good news in verse 14 is that God *cannot* bring God's self to break the covenant and give us up to our own destruction! God does not go against God's own character even when we do, or when God is tempted to! God doesn't let it all hang out in retribution.

There are a few scenes in the movie *To Kill A Mockingbird*, where Jem has to pull his fighting sister Scout off one and another boy at school with whom she was angry. In one of them, she was pounding the boy into the schoolyard, and the narrator opines that Scout would be better off once she learned how and when to reign in.

God listens to Moses and exercises restraint. God changes mind. In other words, our **God *holds off* for the sake of God's own identity and integrity.** “When they go low; we go high.”

And this enables God to *hold on* to Self, hold on to character, hold on to the covenant and the people, hold on to *us*: to you and to me; to hold on to Love.