

CHANGEABLE AND UNCHANGING

For the past few weeks we've been following the Israelites as they've traveled through the wilderness, at times grumbling for lack of food and drink, and yet, all the while being reminded of God's presence. Last week we spent some time with the Ten Commandments, God's direct instructions for how to shape their life in relation to God and to one another. This morning we jump ahead 14 chapters in Exodus. In between these two literary units Moses received additional instructions from God including the Covenant Code (more specific instructions on how the people are to shape their community).

Moses is away speaking with God for quite some time. For forty days and nights, Moses remained on the mountain, receiving instructions from Yahweh about the construction of the tabernacle as well as the vestments for and procedures for the ordination of the priesthood. God and Moses are deep into the details when the scene suddenly shifts away from the mountaintop and we come to our passage this morning. Despite this time away, it is amazing how quickly the crowd turns on Moses. Perhaps this is one reason pastors are so reluctant to take sabbaticals.

The people's lack of trust in Moses, and therefore in God, is a bit astounding. I mean after a burning bush, a walking stick that turns into a snake and then back into a stick again, ten plagues, release from captivity, the Red Sea parted and Pharaoh's army destroyed, daily food and water provided in the wilderness, and all the respect that Moses can command from the people is "... we do not know what has become of him." As one Christian Century author notes: "Tough crowd."

Meanwhile, while Moses is away, Aaron, his second in command, remains at the camp with the people. Perhaps we can imagine the murmuring: "How long are we going to hang out here?" "Let's move on and get out of this wilderness and to our final destination." "Maybe a wild beast got Moses, let's just have the funeral and move on." In scripture, Aaron's leadership does not get a rave review but what was the poor guy to do. Folks were getting restless, factions were forming, and we've already seen how impatient this gang can be at times. One interpreter has suggested that perhaps all Aaron was doing with the golden calf was buying some time in the hopes Moses would soon return putting it this way:

So he stalls for a bit, makes the people pay up for what they want, provides them with something to focus their anxiety on, and gives them a reason to have a huge party to take their mind off of things. It's a great idea.

(Kathryn Johnson)

Or, so it seems. Things quickly take on a life of their own and before you know it the people are directly violating commandment number 1 "You shall have no other gods before me." They create an alternate liturgy to suit this new bovine god and sit down to eat and drink and "revel" which has connotations more akin to something out of the movie "Animal House" than polite dinner party.

At some point, all this wild behavior catches God's attention. And God says, "Go down at once! *Your* people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely..." Which is an odd way of putting things. I thought these were *God's* people that *God* brought out of Egypt. I imagine many of us can remember a time when we were growing up when one of our parents said to the other: "Now, just look at what *your* son did" So, are they only God's people when they're doing what God asks of them?

What follows is a very angry God preparing to wipe out the community God has called and the very real threat of starting this whole project over with Moses in charge of a new bunch of people. Thankfully, Moses intervenes and persuades God otherwise.

There are many lessons that can be learned from this story of the Golden Calf: lessons about leadership; lessons about idolatry; lessons about how fear and anxiety can separate us from the God in whom we live and breathe and have our being; lessons about the siren song to trust only in ourselves and our creations. Today, I invite us to look at the concluding line of this passage: "And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on the people."

The danger of believing in an immutable, never changing God is that we entrap God in ways of behaving that while perhaps predictable, are not necessarily in the best interests of either us or God. Sure, it can be comforting to have a God whose actions we can foresee, whose reasoning we can plumb, whose outcomes we can forecast but in the end, our attempts at domesticating God leave us with a rather small and petty deity that looks remarkable like some of our politicians and world leaders. If we are truly in a full, honest, and loving relationship with God, God needs some room to maneuver. God needs space and freedom to be and become the God needed to shape us into the people God has called and claimed.

This may seem like a radical idea, although various theologians have proposed it for quite some time. In creation's ongoing relationship with the God who birthed it, both the creation and the Creator are subject to change not in spite of but because of the closeness of their relationship. Rather than some distant "unmoved Mover" we have a God who listens to our cries, who fully enters into our lives, who adapts approaches in order to bind us ever more closely together to one another and the God we worship in order to move us, step by step, to the good God intends for all creation.

In these uncertain times, when every new day seems to bring additional harbingers of change, may we take comfort that change need not be a bad thing. In fact, many things need to change in our world for the health and well-being of all of us: Our economy needs to change in order to work for greater equity instead of massive wealth inequality; our distorted vision that lead us to segregate people needlessly by race, gender, education, sexual orientation, status needs to be corrected so that we can embrace one another as sisters and brothers – all God's beloved children; our misguided trust in "might makes right" needs to be surrendered for a world fully at peace.

These changes are too large for us to affect or manage alone. And they cannot be accomplished by simply doing the same things over and over and hoping for a different result. That, as we know, is the definition of insanity. Change will come when we ourselves are willing to change. Change will come when we learn to fully trust our God who while unchanging in commitment to us is remarkably changeable in altering approach in order to draw us into the world God is busy refashioning – changing – for the well-being of all God's creation.

AMEN.