

God is Slow to Anger and Abounding in Love

Exodus 32:1-20; 33:18-34:8

Fall Old Testament Sermon Series on Exodus

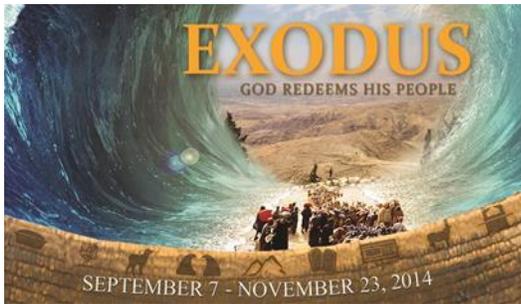
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

November 23 , 2014

TEXTS: Exodus 32:1-20; 33:18-34:8

This morning we conclude our fall Old Testament series on the Book of Exodus. I must confess that I miss it already. This portion of Exodus is so important; it is the climax of the Book of



Exodus. As we saw this fall, Exodus is the Gospel of the Old Testament, the announcement of God's great saving actions; it is the center of gravity; it is that which is referred to more than any other event in the Old Testament; it is the place where God chooses to reveal His identity, His name, and, as we will see this morning, His character is made known in a way that is

unlike any other. Exodus defines our identity as a redeemed people brought into Covenant, a people among whom God chooses to dwell.

This morning we look at the narrative of the golden calf and its implications. We discover in this portion that God is a God who is slow to anger and abounding in love. The narrative of Exodus



25 to 31, with which we concerned ourselves the past two Sundays, is the beautiful and peaceful heavenly vantage point of the description of the sanctuary that is to be constructed, and the garments of glory in which Aaron is to be clad and minister before God's presence. This narrative is radically interrupted. It is interrupted with a blast of cold air. It is a heartbreaking scene in the middle of this narrative, and yet the placement of this narrative, of the sin of the golden calf, is so important for the message of all of Exodus because it breaks in at this point and manifests our sinfulness and begs the question of

what happens to a sinful people in the presence of a holy God. What happens is not what you expect, and so this morning, what we want to pursue together is the sin itself. One of my great hopes this morning is for you to see a concrete picture of the heinousness of sin. I want sin to seem ugly to you as it appears in this text, and then I want us to see together the response of

God to our sinfulness. Lastly, we'll see how Exodus concludes with our response in return to God's response to our sin.

Let's look first of all at the golden calf. In Exodus 32, we read that the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain. He has been on the mountain for 40 days, and they don't know everything that we know by reading Exodus. They don't know about the description of the sanctuary; they don't know about the beautiful garments that God has described for Aaron to wear. They know nothing of this. It is a profound lesson about the precondition of sin, that of not waiting for what God is giving you. The people have no idea what God is about to give them, and so they rush to fill the void. It's a sin to which we are all prone: the sin of immediate gratification. In Exodus 32:1, the people, unable to wait for what God is giving them, say to Aaron:

"Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him."

Aaron crumbles in response to the people's request and says in Exodus 32:2:

"Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me."

The Hebrew is very powerful here. It's not just remove, it's *rip it off*. Rip off the gold from your wives and your children and bring it to me. Aaron takes the gold and in Exodus 32:4:

"He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool."

The text goes out of its way to say that he even fashions it with a tool. It is a sad, pathetic image of a family being stripped of their valuables and then just scraping out the characteristics of this calf. At every point, the construction of the calf contrasts the narrative of the tabernacle:

- 1) The people seek to create what God has already provided;
- 2) they, rather than God, take the initiative;
- 3) offerings are demanded rather than willingly presented;
- 4) the elaborate preparations are missing altogether;
- 5) the painstaking length of time needed for building becomes an overnight rush job;
- 6) the careful provision for guarding the Holy One turns into an open-air object of immediate accessibility;
- 7) the invisible, intangible God becomes a visible, tangible image; and
- 8) the personal, active God becomes an impersonal object that cannot see speak or act.

The worship of the calf leads to unrestrained revelry, immorality, and degradation of Israel as the covenant partner rather than holy imitation of the living God. In the end, the people forfeit

the very divine presence they had hoped to bind more closely to themselves.

They make an image of a calf. It probably looked something like this. The Apis bull calf was worshiped in Egypt. You see Pharaoh here holding up the three feathers, the feathers of *ma'at*,

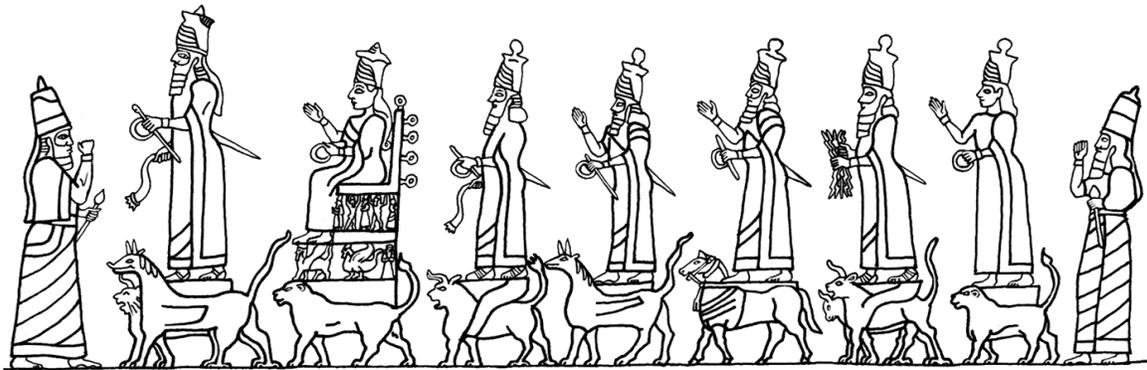


of truth and justice, and the calf as a symbol of strength is paid homage. The golden calf was probably fashioned on this model, and we have examples of golden calves from antiquity. Here's one. I want you to notice, though, that the text makes an important distinction. It is not that



the people are worshiping the calf itself; the calf functions as a pedestal base to secure the missing presence of God.

In Mesopotamia, we see many examples of calves, and they function sort of like mobile god-carriers. This scene (below) from a rock relief at Malatia is a procession of the gods of Mesopotamia, and they are all riding on these animals. The calf functions to



provide what the tabernacle is supposed to provide. The tabernacle provides the place of God's dwelling. They don't know about it, and so they rush to construct something that is of their own creation and their manipulation on which the living God, they say, will ride: "He will be here; His presence will be confirmed among us."

It is important to recognize that they are not worshiping the calf, but they still think that they are worshiping the Lord. Aaron, after he built an altar in front of the calf, says in Exodus 32:5:

"Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD."

The calf functions as the place where Yahweh, the invisible God, should be dwelling or riding. Yet, God jealously guards His image and prohibited this in the Covenant. Idolatry in

any form always brings with it immorality, and likewise in the case here.

Notice the tragedy of Exodus 32:6:

“So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.”

They were acting in just the same way that the people were told to act in Exodus 24, offering the offerings at the base of the mountain: burnt offerings, fellowship offerings, and they do that in front of a calf. There is, however, one important distinction: after they offer these offerings, they eat and drink, just like eating and drinking with God in Exodus 24, except with the calf, there is one additional statement which tells us that they eat and drink and then they got up, and this is a pretty kind translation, and they indulge in revelry. The image is of the people just going loose in immorality at the base of the mountain. It is a picture of sin. I want you to feel a gag reflex at the golden calf.

One of the shining moments of the Palmer family video history viewing is this: we discovered some family videos from early on, ones that we hadn't seen in a long time. Somehow the camera got left on, just pointed at a wall. Whatever was happening in the house was being recorded. Jonathan as a young boy, not yet even five, comes running by, and you can hear Christine in the background washing dishes, and they are dialoguing, young son and the mom, seizing every moment to instruct. Jonathan moves by; he's playing, and all the sudden you hear Christine's voice. You cannot see her, but you can hear her voice. She says: “Jonathan, what are you going to do someday if someone says: ‘Hey, you want to worship the golden calf?’” This little five-year-old boy, just playing along with his activity shouts back: “I'm going to say ‘no,’ Mom!” and that was it. I thought: “You know, that's early catechizing. You need to seize those opportunities young.”

The golden calf is a disturbing scene of disobedience, and it is in one swoop that this act actually shatters all ten of the Ten Commandments:

I AM the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt:

No other gods before me – is shattered.

You shall not make an idol – is shattered.

You shall not lift up the name of the Lord to vanity/falsehood – is shattered as the people say this is a festival to the Lord.

Remember the Sabbath as the sacred rhythm for worship – is shattered as Aaron just says: “Get ready tomorrow,” whatever day it is.

Honor your Father – is shattered as our appearance is to be a microcosm of the honor to

our heavenly Father, and this is shattered in disobedience.

You shall not murder – is shattered because this disobedience will cost the lives of 3000 people as a plague will break out and destroy thousands.

You shall not commit adultery – is shattered in the revelry of the people, and adultery is used in Scripture as an image of unfaithfulness to God.

You shall not steal – is shattered as the gold is just stripped off from the people's person.

You shall not bear false witness – is shattered in the lie that "this is your God who came and brought you out of Egypt."

You shall not covet – is shattered by the desire to worship in a form like the nations.

I can't think of another way that you can break all 10 Commandments in one swoop. The Covenant is shattered, and Moses comes down the mountain with the tablets in his hands, the tablets written with the very finger of God, and that the people have broken. He comes down to the camp and there is a party going down at the base of the mountain. Joshua comes down, and he says to Moses in Exodus 32:17:

"There is the sound of war in the camp."

Moses says in Exodus 32:18:

"It is not the sound of victory, it is not the sound of defeat; it is the sound of singing that I hear."

Moses said: "It's the sound of boisterous, drunken singing that I hear. That's what I hear." Moses comes to the camp; he sees the calf; he sees the dancing. This is not line dancing with ethnic costumes, this is a bad kind of eating, drinking, revelry, and dancing. He sees the calf, and in his rage he burns the calf, grinds it into powder, scatters it in the water, and makes the people drink. The calf is ultimately reduced to human waste. The Covenant is broken, the tablets are shattered, and it seems the story is over. God would have every right for it to be over, and yet that is not what happens next. What happens next is Moses' intercession before God, his plea to God that the people not be destroyed, and God promises to Moses in Exodus 33:14:

"My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

God promises He will go with Moses and with the people. He says in Exodus 33:17:

"I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name."

God promises to go with Moses, and Moses says to God in Exodus 33:18:

"Now show me your glory."

Moses asks to see God's presence and be assured that God really will dwell among the people

in His fullness without destroying them. God promises to Moses in Exodus 33:19:

“I will cause all My goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim My name, the LORD, in your presence.”

Then the Lord says to Moses in Exodus 34:21-22:

“There is a place near Me where you may stand on a rock. When My glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by.”

The Lord invites Moses back up to the mountain for a repeat of Mount Sinai. The Lord tells Moses in Exodus 34:1:

“Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke.”

God says in Exodus 23:2:

“Be ready in the morning, and then come up on Mount Sinai. Present yourself to Me there on top of the mountain.”

Then the living God comes in glory, and the revelation of God's glory is this: He comes down in glory, visible glory just like in Exodus 19, and just like in Exodus 3. He comes down in glory in the cloud, and He stands before Moses and proclaims His name and His identity. Just as in Exodus 3 God revealed the name of God to Moses, now He reveals His character. Everything is hanging on the balance of God's character. God would have every right to destroy us in His holiness, and what we discover is that when the Lord appears in glory and announces who He is and what He is like. This is what He proclaimed in Exodus 34:6-7 as He passed in front of Moses:

“The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.”

God is a God of compassion and forgiveness. In the moment in when we are expecting to be destroyed, we find that our sin actually manifests a revelation of the character of God as merciful. He does not treat us as our sins deserve. The Bible is the only place you can go to learn that the God who is all-powerful and all glorious is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, that He is compassionate and merciful, and this revelation of God's name and Person in glory marks the Scripture. Exodus 34:6 was John Calvin's favorite verse in the Bible, because we see God revealed here. The language of Exodus 34:6-7 is rehearsed throughout the Scriptures.

Numbers 14:18 says:

“The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished.”

In Psalm 103:8-10 we read:

“The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will He harbor His anger forever; He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.”

Do you believe that? If that is true, you cannot be unaffected by it. He has not treated us as our sins deserve. Do believe that? If that is true, then it opens a torrent of gratitude in our hearts. Thanksgiving is a day to remember that God has kept us alive with another harvest. But you know, the greatest danger we face in this life is not famine; the greatest danger we face is the holiness of a holy God and our sinfulness. If God in His holiness has forgiven and not treated us as our sins deserve, it opens for us floodgates of thanksgiving.

Exodus 34 was given a prime place in the worship service of Jesus' day. It was included in the daily readings from Scripture. There are 13 attributes of God, all related to mercy, derived from this portion. Exodus 34 is the portion that is read in synagogues today on days of repentance, and it is the portion read on the holiest day, the Day of Atonement, that God is merciful. God in His mercy restores us to Himself. He gives the tablets back, another copy. He forgives our sins. What should be our response to God's forgiveness?

The narrative of Exodus goes out of its way to display in a very concrete way what happens to those who have received God's mercy. Moses comes back down the mountain with the tablets. He speaks to the people all that the Lord has commanded them to do, and they *do* it. The whole retelling of the tabernacle is told from the vantage point of obedience, of a glad obedience. I counted this week that in Exodus 35-40, the text goes out of its way 100 times to say the people did what God said; they made what He asked them to make. Eighteen times in five chapters it says: “and they did just as the Lord had commanded through Moses.” Exodus 25 to 31 tells the narrative of the tabernacle from the inside out, beginning with the ark and moving out. Exodus 35 to 40 tells the story of the construction from the outside in. Doing what God has told us to do is the resolution of a people who are forgiven. They actually do it. The Apostle Paul said the great objective of his ministry was the obedience of faith. That is what he was striving to see in lives who had received God's forgiveness in Christ.

When the work for the tabernacle is carried out and the obedience of the people is displayed, Moses blesses them. In Exodus 39:42, it says:

“The Israelites had done all the work just as the LORD had commanded Moses.”

When they had done all the work that God had commanded, and Moses looked at it and saw it, he blessed them. Then in chapter 40, they set the tabernacle up, the dwelling place. They set it up on the first day of the first month. This is the one year anniversary of their coming out of



Egypt. What a year they spent! They set up the sanctuary, and Moses finishes everything that God has told him to do. When the sanctuary is set up, then God actually comes in glory. The glory of the Lord fills the tabernacle, and God dwells among the people, and they are poised and positioned in the world to move forward under His leading. The Exodus narrative is immense, so vital for us to know who God is and who we are.

Let me apply this epic narrative in three ways.

Number one: I want you to **know your enemy**. We misdiagnose what is wrong with the world. We say it's this political problem; it's this environmental problem; it's this sociological problem. No, what's wrong with the world is our proclivity to disobey God. That's wrong, start to finish. I want you to retain in your imagination the golden calf as the paradigm of sin: it's ugly. It would be like having a bachelor party at a strip club the night before your wedding. Why would you ever do that? Why you ever do that if God was about to give you something wonderful and beautiful and holy? Just wait for it.

Number two: I want you to **risk your eternal life on the mercy of God**. Blaise Pascal said that is the ultimate wager. The ultimate wager is if God is going to be merciful. I think this is a good wager. You can risk eternal life on the mercy of the living God. There is none like Him.

Number three: I pray for all of us, this church family, myself included, to **be characterized by glad obedience**, not begrudging, not extracted with pressure or force or manipulation or emotion or even wrong incentives. The Christian life is about a glad obedience, about maximizing the glory of God in our lives. It's an obedience that comes from being redeemed and brought into covenant and forgiven.

This is Thanksgiving week, and I pray that our thanksgiving would rise before God with such gratitude that He has not dealt with us as our sins deserve. Let's pray.

Lord God, we thank You for this morning. Lord, this portion of Your Word finishes with a rush. It's a rush were all seems to be lost by our disobedience, and yet, Lord, You choose the dark background of our sinfulness to set forward the brilliance of Your glory and holiness as a God who forgiveness. I pray this morning that You would help us to wait for Your provision. Father, we live in a society that is constantly goading us to seek our own satisfaction immediately, and yet what we often end up with is lifeless, inanimate, man-made things that disappoint us, and in the end degrade us. Help us to wait for You, for what You are giving us so far superior. Lord

God, if there are some here this morning who have stumbled and are unsure of the scope of Your forgiveness, I pray that You would reveal Yourself to them right now, that You are slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Father, for all of us here who have experienced Your forgiveness, I pray with all my heart that we would be a thankful people, and that we would return back to You an offering of praise, and that we would live with humility and gratitude as a forgiven people among whom You dwell. Help us, Lord, to live in the light of Your glory and Your love, we pray.

Hallelujah, Amen.