

Sermon – October 17, 2021  
“And the Lord changed His mind”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Exodus 32:1-14

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

Good morning. It is great to be in the house of the LORD on this beautiful fall Sunday morning. Welcome to everyone here and to those who are joining us online.

Let me catch us up to where our scripture reading brings us in our journey through Exodus. Moses has shared with the people the instructions given to him by God for the building of the tabernacle and has gone up on the mountain again to be with God. He has gone to receive more of God's laws, God's directions for His people. Moses will hear God's voice and speak God's words to God's people, the people who have agreed to obey whatever God requests. The people who God brought out of Egypt with His mighty hand are waiting at the base of the mountain where they have heard God speak the Ten Commandments.

Moses is gone for a long time. We are not sure how long, but it is long enough for the people to grow restless. They are longing to be in the land God has promised them and out of the

wilderness. At some point a number of the people (the text does not say all) surround Aaron and request that he make gods to go before them. They don't know what has happened to "this man" Moses whom they no longer regard as a prophet of God, and they want action. The Hebrew words they use in making their request include the idea of a threat. This may well not be a friendly request that Aaron receives. It seems strange to us as we look back at this event, but for some reason, Aaron decides to comply with their request. Aaron may comply because he agrees with them, because of their threats, or to try to steer the people towards God. His motivation is difficult to determine from the text. It does seem that through much of this ordeal, he is trying to pull them and their demands back to a focus on the LORD. Aaron commands that they bring him their golden earrings and they do. Aaron takes the gold and fashions a calf, an idol. When the people see the idol, they declare it their gods that will go before them. Aaron builds an altar before the calf and calls for a festival of the LORD. The people come early in the morning and offer sacrifices to their gods (worship), they sit down to eat, and then get up to revel.

There are many parallels here between the actions of the people with the golden calf and the tabernacle for God that we do not want to miss. They use gold for their idol and we should recall the ark in the tabernacle is to be made of gold, the place for God's presence to dwell. The people sit down and eat as the elders did with God on the mountain. Then they get up to revel. This word in Hebrew has a strong sexual context. The people are running wild in their desires and passions and are not following God's commands. The people in the valley have become chaotic and the covenant they made with God is broken by their actions. One final parallel we should notice here is a parallel with creation. The building of the tabernacle represents God re-creating His relationship with His people that once existed at creation. The golden calf is the fall from re-creation even before the tabernacle is built. The new covenant is broken before God is present with His people. The people have placed themselves in the place of God and the re-creation with God again present with them is in jeopardy.

During this sequence of events in the valley, Moses is on the mountain top with God. He is above the chaos, separated from the people, and aware only of the presence of God as the details of the law are being given to him. We should realize there is a contrast between the chaos that has developed in the valley and the peaceful presence Moses is enjoying with God. Moses is the only one from the camp that moves between the people in the valley and God on the mountain top. Moses is the only one to experience both of these worlds. In the midst of Moses'

communion with God, God suddenly and decisively breaks off their communion. God is aware of what has happened in the valley. God is aware that the people have broken the covenant. God tells Moses this news and then announces judgement on the people. They will receive the wrath of God. There is no ambiguity in what God is telling Moses; the people have broken the covenant and the consequences are judgement by a righteous God. God's plan for redemption for a blessing to all of the people of the nations of the world through Israel is about to end because they are guilty of great sin.

Notice the wording of God's announcement to Moses. God does not call those in the valley His people, but Moses' people who Moses brought out of Egypt. Notice in verse 10—in fact, this is one of those verses we should mark in our Bibles—in verse 10, God tells Moses two very important things. The first is Moses is told “to let God alone.” These three words, let God alone, are an opening to Moses that God's judgement is not yet final. They are an invitation for Moses to decide what he is willing to do for the people. And the second important item in this verse that we should notice is that God offers to make of Moses a great nation as God had promised to do for Abraham. God is offering for Moses to become the path to redemption that once was planned for Israel. God's plan for redemption of His people will no longer be through Israel as they are about to be judged and bear God's wrath. God's plan seems to be to now pour out God's wrath on Israel and start over with Moses.

It is not clear if Moses hears the second part of God's offer as he doesn't respond to it. Perhaps Moses' love for the people of Israel has grown to reflect God's love for them. What is clear is that there now exists a gap between God and His people, and Moses alone has the opportunity to either step into that gap and plead for mercy for the Hebrews, or Moses can leave God alone and accept God's offer to become a great nation, allowing God's wrath to go forth and close the gap between God and Israel. Moses does not waiver at all but immediately steps into the gap between heaven and earth, between God on the mountain and the sinful people in chaos in the valley. Moses stands before God and intercedes for the people. Moses does not try to excuse their behavior. He simply asks God for mercy for the people. He reminds God of how God will be perceived by Egypt if He does not deliver the people. Moses reminds God of all that God has done for His people with God's mighty hand. Moses reminds God of the promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses reminds God of God's promise that this people, this nation promised to Abraham, are to be as numerous as the stars of heaven. And finally, Moses reminds

God of the promise of land for the people forever. Moses does not cover up their sins, but pleads for mercy from God on their behalf. Moses dares to step forward and remind God of who he understands God is and God's nature. That is intercession for sinful people.

And then we get to verse 14, another verse I would encourage us to mark in our Bibles: "and God changed His mind." In response to Moses' intercession, God moves from righteous anger to mercy for God's people. Guilt will have its consequences and God will make another way to deal with the sins and sin nature of His people, but for now, God stays His hand and spares His people. Don't get lost in the seeming theological issues that a changing God might bring to our understanding of God. Instead, we should focus on the paradox of the Old Testament, the message that prevails throughout all of the Old Testament, that God is merciful and gracious, God is a God of steadfast love, yet God does not clear the guilty. There must be a reckoning for the guilty. The sins of the guilty must be addressed. We all yearn for God's steadfast love and shrink from the consequences from the guilt of our sinful natures. Yet here, in response to Moses' willingness to step into the gap between heaven and earth, we see God change His mind about an immediate, wrathful response to the breaking of the covenant and the beginning of the emergence of another way for the sin of the people to be addressed. That new plan will become apparent as the story of the Old and New Testaments unfolds. God is faithful to His covenant and will bear the cost of the sins of the guilty. We as those who follow Jesus should also seek to follow in Moses' example and be those who are willing to step into this gap between heaven and earth when we become aware of sin in the lives of those we love. We should be those interceding for people who are to face the wrath of God.

We might be thinking, "How can I intercede for those I love? How do I learn to intercede for others? How do I step into a gap that may exist between those I love and God?" This morning, I want to quickly lay out for us a method for intercessory prayer. I want to encourage us as followers of Jesus to stand in the gap between heaven and earth as friends of both, to become those who willing to plead to God on behalf of the people and to the people on behalf of God. We should understand that Moses' prayer here on the mountain top before God foreshadows Jesus' prayers. Jesus is our intercessor, one who intercedes for us with infinite love. Let me remind us all that Jesus has ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. As believers in Jesus, we are invited into the relationship Jesus has with the Father. We are invited to join Jesus at the right hand of the Father, a place of intercession, a place where the

King of Kings has invited us to join him and be intercessors before God for the people in our lives. When Oswald Chambers in his comments on intercessory prayer speaks of this type of prayer, he shares that “Prayer does not fit us for the greater works; prayer is the greater work.” (*My Utmost for His Highest*) What I would like to do is to encourage and enable us to venture into intercessory prayers. We might be uncomfortable with taking this step, and so aside from encouraging us, I want to equip us with four simple steps for intercessory prayer. These four steps come from Peter Greig’s book, “*How to Pray: A simple guide for normal people.*” Greig’s four simple steps for growing into intercessory prayer are get informed, get inspired, get indignant, and get in sync.

Let’s look at these briefly this morning. To get informed is to dig out the facts about the situation we are praying about. If we are going to pray for Kenya, as example, then we need to learn what we can about the struggle in Kenya to spread the Gospel. If we are going to pray for family members, we need to understand what issues there are that are keeping them from God so that we can focus our prayers on those chains that bind them.

Next, we need to know the promises of God found in the scripture so we understand the possibilities that are available for us to request. To move beyond just praying the promises over a person in this step, we ask God to help us understand what He wants in the lives of those for whom we are interceding. In the case of Israel, Moses knows they are about to face the wrath of God and that there are promises of a great nation numbering more than the stars in heaven and there is a promise of a land for them forever, and Moses asks God to honor those promises.

Next, we are to get indignant and let our hearts guide us to boldly speak to God. Moses does not hold back his requests to God. Notice that his prayer is a stream of words that come spilling out. They are direct, to the point, and from his heart for the people of God. Let me use a quote from Martin Luther, the great reformer, where he is talking about his intercessory prayers to God. He writes, “I attacked him with his own weapons, quoting from Scripture all the promises I could remember, that prayer should be granted, and said that he must grant my prayer, if I was henceforth to put faith in his promises.” There is no shrinking back in this description of prayer from Luther, and we also should learn to intercede in prayer in this manner. Luther is not disrespectful or mean spirited but direct and to the point, engaging God from the heart. Think of this as a time to pray until our voice gives out and we can speak no more and can only groan in prayer. It is a time when we dig in deep and are before God with our cries as if we are on the

throne where we sit with Jesus. We are asking as Moses did for the people that our loved ones be spared the wrath of God and instead receive the promises of God. We are not disregarding their sin; we are asking for mercy for them.

Intercessory prayer may not sound easy, but it draws us closer to God as we intercede for others. One of the speakers at the New Room conference Kay and I attended a couple of weeks ago made the point that at a minimum we as the people of God should be collectively praying for our family members who are not saved on a regular basis. His comment struck a chord with me because I have family members who are not saved, who are not following Jesus. His statement seemed like a good first step for us to intercede for our family members who are not yet following God. So, on November 18th at 7:00 pm in the sanctuary at Fairfields, we are going to have a time of intercessory prayer for our family members. I hope that you will come and join in a time of prayer for our family members. If you are not able to come, then I ask that you give me the names of your family members you would like to have included in that time of prayer. and those who gather will pray for them.

Another opportunity for each of us that is always available is to come forward to the altar and offer intercessory prayers for people or situations each Sunday as I pray for the joys and concerns and intercede for others during that time. You are welcomed and encouraged to come and engage in a time of prayer for those God puts on your heart. Moses dared to step into the gap between heaven and earth, Jesus died for us bearing the wrath of God that we might be reconciled to God and through Jesus' intercession be invited to join with him before the throne of God, interceding for others. We have Moses' example of intercession and we have guidance; now all we need is practice. Let the Holy Spirit stir your hearts and come and pray for mercy to be extended to those we love.

*Pray with me: Come, Holy Spirit. Bring to mind those in our families who are still seeking the love of Jesus. Holy Spirit, guide us into an opportunity to step into the gap between them and heaven and to intercede for them. Lord, teach us to pray and guide our intercession for others. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen*