

Sermon – October 24, 2021
“This people has sinned a great sin”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Exodus 32:30-35

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 abundant life and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning. Welcome to everyone here in this place and to those joining us online. For those online, please send us your own good morning response by typing “good morning” into the comment line. I want to take a few minutes this morning and celebrate a couple of items from last week. Those who came to the healing prayer service on Thursday received many blessings as we prayed for one another and had our requests for healing lifted up to Jesus. The Bible studies at both churches continue to be a source of great blessings to those in attendance. If you are not participating in a study, I hope you will join one and let God’s word astonish and bless you.

Let me provide some background for this morning’s scripture reading from Exodus as we have jumped over some difficult material about life for Israel after the worship of the golden calf. Hopefully, we recall that Moses has interceded for the people and God changed His mind about pouring out His wrath on Israel and consuming them. Moses has successfully stood in the gap between heaven and earth and interceded, asking for and receiving God’s mercy in spite of the great sin of the people. After his intercession for the people, Moses descended the mountain and returned to the people. It is Moses whose anger burns hot over the sin of the people, and Moses has broken the stone tablets in the sight of the people. This clearly communicates to the people of Israel that the covenant with God is broken and they no longer will enjoy the special status with God the covenant secured. Moses calls those in the camp who are the Lord’s to come to him, and the tribe of Levite alone has come. Through the Levites and their actions, Moses has regained control of the camp. And Moses now has a growing concern that while God will not immediately consume the people, God will punish them for their great sin. Moses decides to go back up the mountain to atone for the sin of the people. Moses is seeking to keep God from punishing the people. As Moses goes back up

the mountain, we expect that we will be given another revelation about God. Our anticipation is that Moses will come before God and atone for the people and God will again change His mind and not punish the people. That Moses does not tarry in the camp, that he immediately goes back up the mountain, speaks to his concern about the coming of God's hand of punishment. Recall some of the great things that have already happened on the mountain: God has descended in smoke and fire, God has spoken to the people, God's law has been given, God has allowed Moses to intercede for the people, God has changed His mind about consuming them in His wrath. Surely, Moses will be successful with this new request, so our expectations are great as we go up on the mountain top with Moses to God. God's nature is one of mercy, God is a God of steadfast love, and God is slow to anger. Our expectations are for God to extend this great love to His people at Moses' request. The people will be forgiven of the guilt from this great sin and their punishment will be removed. I see this same expectation in my heart and in the hearts of people in our culture today. We commit great sin and our expectation is that a loving God will forgive us and not punish us for our sin. Let's look at what we can learn about God as Moses goes up the mountain to again be with God.

Moses repeats to God what God already knows about the sin of the people. Moses tells God why he has come up the mountain, to atone for the people's great sin. And then Moses does something that I find astonishing. In this language of being wiped out of the book of life, Moses is offering his life for the lives of the people. Moses offers himself as the atonement for the great sin of the people. Moses, who did not want to go to Pharaoh because he could not speak well, stands before God and asks that God accept Moses' life in place of the lives of the people. Moses is saying to God, punish me in the place of the people. Our expectation is that just as God listened to Moses and accepted Moses' intercession on behalf of the people, God will again listen to Moses and accept this astonishing offer of one's life for the lives of a sinful people. God does not accept Moses' offer. Instead, God tells Moses, "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my book." God tells Moses that he is to go back down the mountain and lead the people to the Promised Land and that God will send an angel with them to guard them on the way. But when the day for punishment comes, God will punish the people for their sin. A day for punishment will come, God may delay that day until His purposes are met, but a day of punishment is coming for the guilty. Before, when Moses pleaded on the part of the people for mercy, God changed His mind and extended mercy. Now with the punishment for sin in question, God tells Moses, "No." And as if to make the point clear, God sends a plague on the people for the god that Aaron has made. Notice that there is no

mention of anyone dying in this plague. It seems to be more of a warning than a punishment for sin. Moses goes back down the mountain to the people and we are left wondering what has happened. Why were our expectations for Moses' success for atonement not met? Why does God say no to this request? Does this mean God will punish his people for their sin? Does this mean God will punish us for our sin?

Notice that God does not tell Moses that there is no place for this idea of atonement. God tells Moses that Moses cannot atone for the sin of the people. God stresses to Moses that those who sin will be punished for the guilt of their sin. God does agree that He will honor His promise of land for the people and will guard them with an angel's presence, but when it comes time to punish for the guilt of sin, God will punish.

Punishment for sin seems inconsistent to us from a God who listened to Moses' request for mercy and withheld His wrath to now tell Moses He will punish people for sin. This news should unsettle us as we learn that God does not leave our sin unpunished. I cannot imagine how this news is received by the people when Moses comes back down the mountain to the camp and tells them that God did not accept him as atonement for their sin, that God will punish them for the sin of the golden calf on the coming day of punishment. This news must bring great fear of a coming day of punishment on Israel. It is as if the hand of God waits over them to bring punishment on them, even as they are led to the Promised Land. We, like the people of Israel, are left wondering, "Why does God say no to Moses' request for him as atonement for the people?"

In light of this news, the people will obey God's directions and build the tabernacle and set up the animal sacrifice system that God gives them. Central to that sacrificial system is the day of atonement, a day that comes once a year when the high priest takes the blood of a perfect animal into the holy of holies to make atonement for the sin of the people. Moses' offer, that God declines on the mountain top, is not a failure of Moses to change God's mind, but a glimpse into the true atonement that is yet to come. At the initiation of the sacrificial system given in God's Law there is a glimpse given in Exodus 32 as to what true atonement will look like. This glimpse gives us a sense of what the sacrificial system in heaven is actually like. God does not leave sin unpunished. Atonement will require a perfect sacrifice to take the place of or be punished in place of the people who sin. God's nature does not allow sin to be overlooked.

Moses seems to fail in his attempt to atone for the people not because God does not like the idea of atonement, but because Moses cannot be the atonement for the people. Moses is not without

sin. Remember the past of Moses and why he fled Egypt and lived in Midian. And, remember his disobedience at the rock when he was to bring forth water and give glory to God. Moses is a great leader, a great prophet of God, one whom God knows by name and speaks to face to face, but Moses is not a perfect, sinless person who can bear the punishment for the sin of the people. Moses cannot atone for the sin of the people. Moses cannot bear the punishment that will be required by God's plan. What Moses cannot do, Jesus can. Let me say that again, what Moses cannot do there is one who can. His name is Jesus. Jesus comes to earth to bear the punishment for the sin of all humanity, not just the people of Israel who worshiped the golden calf. God's plan for atonement goes far beyond the sin of Israel in the wilderness. Jesus comes to bear the punishment that I deserve for my sin, to bear the punishment we deserve for our sin, and to bear the punishment for the sin of all humanity. The substitute in the atonement sacrifice must be one without blemish or fault. We see this criterion for the animals of the sacrificial system; they must be perfect animals. The one who will bear the punishment for all humanity must be worthy. Is Jesus Christ worthy? He is.

When God tells Moses that the guilty will be punished, the atonement of Christ does not mean that God has changed His plan to punish the guilty for sin. God will still punish the guilty, but we need to realize that when Christ hangs in our place on the cross, God sees our guilt placed on Jesus. This is the great mystery of the cross, that Jesus, though without sin, was made sin that we might be forgiven. Jesus alone is worthy of bearing our guilt because he is without guilt. Jesus is sinless. Jesus is the perfect lamb and the perfect sacrifice. Jesus is God in the flesh. Moses goes up the mountain, a place of revelation, to make his plea to God because of his love for the people. Jesus is placed on the cross outside the city, stays on the cross, allows all of the sins of humanity to be piled upon him, and then bears the punishment for all of us, for all of humanity. God's wrath is poured out in full upon Jesus. God punishes Jesus in our place. The suffering that Jesus experiences in our place is beyond our comprehension. What he endures is more than the physical pain and shame of the cross. Onto Jesus, God places all of the sin of humanity, all of it, so that our guilt may be removed. Jesus bears the punishment that we should have received. Jesus dies in our place so that our guilt before God may be taken away, not removed and forgotten, but the price is paid in full. God's wrath is poured out onto Jesus, and Jesus in the power of love for us bears our punishment. Jesus is able and does make complete atonement for the people. We have an awesome savior who dies for our sin in our place that we might be reconciled to God. God does not accept

Moses' offer of atonement; instead, God gives His only Son that there might be a worthy sacrifice who can, will, and does bear the punishment for sin of all people.

Think of the people of the Exodus who have sinned this great sin and how they might now be thinking of the coming punishment of God. Moses is not successful with his request for atonement. When he returns from this attempt of atonement for the people, the news will spread throughout the camp that God has said no to Moses' offer. Think about the dread that comes when God sends a plague among them. There is no indication that any died from this plague, but it may serve as a reminder to them that there is a coming punishment for the guilt they carry. God is angry with them for their sin, and they live each day with fear of God's hand being released against them. Think about that fear and then stop and realize that Jesus has atoned for our sins. What that means for the church, those who believe and follow Jesus, is that God is not angry with the church. We do not face the wrath of God in our future because God's anger, God's righteous wrath for our sin, has been spent on Jesus. The punishment that we should have received from God, Jesus has borne in our place. Don't think of this as God being soft on our sin. Think of this as one who is worthy chose to atone for us, to take our punishment, that we might be seen as sinless before God. We as believers in Jesus Christ now have no fear of the punishment for our sin. When we come to final judgment before God, God will not see us but Jesus, and will welcome us into a new relationship with Him. If we are approaching final judgement hoping we have done enough "good" things to be reconciled to God, let me take away our doubt. We have not. We can never do enough to escape the punishment for our guilt. But Jesus can and did. If we are a believer in Jesus Christ, our punishment is complete through his atonement.

We are not in the same situation as the people of Israel were after their sin with the golden calf. We are not to worry that God will at some distant time punish the church for our sin. Jesus Christ has taken our punishment in full. This is part of the great Good News of the Gospel. In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul states this idea of atonement as "for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." God does not ignore our sin, but one who is worthy has come to mediate for us. When God looks at us, he does not see our clothing of sin, but the sinlessness of Jesus. We have put on Christ, we have been washed in his blood, we have been atoned for by one who loved us enough to take our punishment and was worthy to be that sacrifice. Moses' offer to atone for the people of Israel is rejected by God, but that offer points us to Jesus Christ, one who makes complete the atonement for all of humanity's

sin, past, present, and future. God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life. God's rejection of Moses' offer does not point to God's rejection of the idea of atonement. It points to one who is worthy of dying for the sins of all so that all might be reconciled to God. It goes beyond what Moses had in mind. Not only does God's love provide His Son as a substitute for us, God sends the Holy Spirit to free us from our sin nature. The system of animal sacrifice in the Old Testament to atone for sin is only a shadow of God's plan. God does not change His nature to not punish sinful people. God's love for His people is so great that He makes a way through Jesus Christ for all of the world to be reconciled to Him.

What is our response to the lack of fear of punishment from God for our guilt? Freedom not to sin and to love others. Pastors were considered non-essential by the government as people died from COVID, most often alone with their fear and uncertainty of their sin burden and their coming meeting with God. Part of the essential work of a minister is to share this Good News, that Jesus has atoned for our sins, a way to God has been made through belief in Jesus Christ. As ministers of this Good News, we are essential, not just pastors, but all who through baptism are now ministers of this Good News. We are essential for the sharing of this Good News that releases us from our sin debt and removes the fear of God's punishment through confidence in our mediator, Jesus Christ. We are freed from fear of punishment from God to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Our question becomes not if we will be punished by God, but if we will love our neighbor enough to share this Good News through actions of love and telling others about Jesus Christ. May we all awake from our slumber and go out into our communities sharing the Good News through actions of love and by telling others this Good News.

Pray with me: Almighty God, we come before you this morning without fear of punishment for our sin. We come as those who believe in Jesus Christ and have been reconciled to you through Jesus' atonement. Jesus, awaken us to the depth of love you have for us that we may fearlessly love others and spread this Good News right here and right now. Come, Lord Jesus, and guide us to those whose fears keep them from your love. We surrender our lives to you that we might be used as ministers of this great Good News. Amen