

Exodus 32:1-14

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord." They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel. The Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" " The Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation." But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth"? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, "I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

### **“Lost Memories and Miracles”**

At this point in Israel’s communal life, Moses and God delayed too long! Communal memory had already forgotten God’s promises, miracles and abundant love. “When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered....” They didn’t gather to rehearse the story of God with them. They didn’t gather to seek out and question God’s whereabouts. As the story unfolds, it is hard to understand why the people didn’t simply gather and yell, “Come down the mountain Moses! God where are you? Aaron, where’d Moses go again? When’s he coming back?” They had stopped questioning and seeking, yearning and remembering. They had moved on with a faith more secure in present reality than God.

If Moses is not around then God must be gone too! God’s people are living in the moment. They chose gods they could see before them instead of living in wonder and questioning the power and mystery of God. Faith is easier when we can see the object of our belief. It doesn’t take much faith to idolize what we create for ourselves. Actually believing in God, who we often cannot perceive as with us, is what faith is all about though. Israel’s plight in our text is about remembering what God has done for them and clinging to that hope.

Israel had just been given the covenant. This is Moses' first time away since the giving of the Ten Commandments. The people are called upon to trust that God is with them even though Moses their mediator was not. Who wouldn't prefer a god to have with them all the time, a god to cart around with you over a God who takes off for 40 days? What happened 40 days ago, that Ten Commandments thing, seemed so far away after 40 days. It was a memory lost to this drifting, wandering, desert community.

40 days ago here school had just started. 40 days ago we were barely getting the news of how much devastation Katrina had caused! Imagine, 40 days without a word to or for the people as they waited for their next move. The thing that always catches me about this story is that God never called them to blind obedience. Why were they just waiting? God's call was to a relationship. The true God of the exodus is a lively subject and not an object to manipulate.<sup>1</sup>

God is angry at the people. The first two of the Ten Commandments have been broken. No other gods, broken. No idols, broken. God tells Moses "your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt"...are stiff-necked! The community that was supposed to be in partnership with the one God wanted idols to worship. Gods that could be managed and moved around as needed. But God cannot be carted around! God's ways are so different from our own survivalist mentalities.

Amazingly, to an angry God and a stiff-necked people came Moses. A mediator, a reminder. Turn, change, and remember. These are the words Moses called God to and later called Israel to as well. They are words we would do well to hear today. Turn, change, and remember. Moses clung to God's actions in the past and challenged God with what he remembered of God's word. And God accepted Moses' challenge. Moses stepped between God's righteous anger and an unrighteous people and God, changes God's mind. One scholar explains God's "change" this way, God's "justice is tempered with mercy...only the patience and mercy of God sustained the relationship, and only the patience and mercy of God permitted the people to move from doubt to faith."<sup>2</sup> Moses often sparked Israel's memory. In our text he sparks God's memory.

We need daring intercession today, calling us back to be a people of hope in God. We need reminders of God's promises to strengthen our faith. Otherwise we create our own security systems by creating false idols we worship as our hope and security when we face the unknown. For we also lose our way and our memories, both individual and communal.

The loss of individual memory is devastating for individuals, their friends, and family. We have all been saddened by the tragedy of memory loss in a loved one. The person we knew leaves us, yet is with us. Connections become harder to make, and when they are made, they are reason for rejoicing over common recognition and shared love. When an individual loses their memory, our hope becomes a future time when there will be comfort instead of pain. Our memories of the past with our loved one bless our journey toward hope again. We work to keep those memories alive in us. They sustain.

Although it is harder to see the loss of communal memory is no less tragic. When we forget or deny our shared past, we are usually heading toward a road of grief. Historians say we'll repeat mistakes we should have learned from. But we go ahead and build false idols in a sense of arrogance trying to assure ourselves our human condition has changed. Communities often forget the past because we prefer to stop talking about what we perceive as shameful stories. Israel learned through faith to be resilient in remembering and claiming their communal sins. As their partnership with God grew their trust of God overwhelmed their shame. In Psalm 106, which we used as our Confession this morning, the Psalmist goes on to claim the idolatry and sin of the golden calf incident as his own.

Just as Israel did, we confess our sin with an understanding of God's mercy. We believe God forgives. Therefore, we should not be afraid to claim memories we would rather forget along with God's promises. Claiming them shows that we expect God to work miracles of healing, hope, new life, forgiveness and maybe even reconciliation. To a stiff-necked people came God Incarnate and the Spirit with us to guide us. None of us deserves forgiveness, yet God forgives because God has chosen to be in relationship with us!

Turn, change and remember. The Bible tells us, God is dynamic; a living force to be reconciled with and forgiven by. Today during William Brian's baptism we will have an opportunity to be reminded of God's grace towards us through Jesus Christ. We'll acknowledge our past and present lives as we celebrate the miracle of God breaking into the world that we might live a new life. Look, listen, participate, and be encouraged that God is doing the same old thing and also a brand new thing today, and God promises to do so always. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus" in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1994) 931.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Bureggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa and James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 1995) 517.