

“Moses the Advocate”

Today we have the story of the golden calf in Exodus 32:1-14. The text stands by itself as a model of sin, punishment, intercession and forgiveness. Its rich themes present drama in the life of faith. We read of a decision of mercy that forgives and sovereignty that will not be mocked. It is a decision that we know in our most intimate and treasured relations.

As parents, we can relate to this story. We have done all we can to teach our children right and wrong. Yet, they do something to disappoint us. They come up with some great idea to get our attention. But it's not our idea. Pardon the pun, but it's full of bull. It really makes us mad. It makes us want to correct them. We have had enough. This tension is what makes Moses' intercession so dangerous, so urgent, so future producing.

The Israelites once again become impatient. They have been without Moses for forty days as he is on Mt. Sinai. They come up with an idea to seize their own initiative to have access to God, without reference to Moses or his demands. How quickly the crowd turns on Moses. Their lack of trust in him and therefore, in God, continues to astound. A burning bush, a walking stick that turns into a snake and then back into a stick again, 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 gets from the people is “we do not know what has become of him.” Tough crowd.

Aaron is the next source of theological authority, so they turn to him. He is Moses’ brother and aid. The people go to him and say “Make for us gods.” This is a crude and frontal assault on the first and second commandments. They know better. Yet, in the interest of religious survival, Israel proposes to have Gods which are the product of their own innovation. Aaron takes up an offering of wealth and jewelry. He casts the image of a calf. The calf may have been a powerful symbol of some form of Canaanite fertility religion. In that case, it symbolizes a way to secure one’s own existence, to govern fertility, without recourse to the commands of Yahweh.

It’s fairly amazing that Aaron does this act. He was to be Moses’ right-hand man. Yet, by doing this he, the priest, becomes Moses’ competitor. The fickle ways of the people aren’t news to Aaron. He’s been there the entire time. So, either he’s chomping at the bit to finally have his chance to lead or he’s doing what he can to appease the masses because he doesn’t want them to turn on him next.

Aaron probably thought he had a great idea. Even the best of us can forget to aim before we fire, especially when people are clamoring for decisions to be made and a job to get done. Sometimes the results of quick, high-pressure decisions are

full of affirmation. But Aaron failed to consider the long-term consequences. The failure of Aaron in the newly authorized worship he creates is distorted because the God of the Exodus cannot be “produced” by either the whim of the people or the innovation of the priest. And the worship quickly deteriorates. The text says the people “rose up to revel.” This means that began to party. They acted in self-indulgent behavior, not directed at God.

We next read of the actions of Yahweh. Yahweh is a jealous God and he is really upset. He has a right to be upset. After all he has done for these people, they have once again showed a lack of faith by turning to another God, a fake god, a golden calf. Yahweh wants the people’s full devotion. But his decisive role in the life of Israel has been disregarded.

Yahweh has a discussion with Moses. In referring to the Israelites, He says they are no longer “my people” but “your people.” Yahweh brings what is referred by commentators as a prophetic lawsuit. Yahweh will be both accuser and judge. Yahweh is so disgusted he proposes to burn Israel with wrath, to nullify the covenant with Abraham and to eradicate Israel. It was about time for lightning bolts to come from the sky.

Give credit to Moses for quick thinking. Despite the way the people have mistreated him, he essentially acts as their lawyer advocate to save them from

Yahweh's anger. Moses throws himself against the wrath of Yahweh. He gives a speech which has two parts. The first is in the form of two questions which are designed to motivate Yahweh to have a change of heart. First. "Why does your fury burn against your 'own people' who you went to the trouble to bring out of the land of Egypt with such great power and amazing force?" Second, if you kill them, what will the Egyptians say, "He laid an evil plan to take the people out and kill them in the mountains and wipe them off the earth."

I must say, as a former trial lawyer, that Moses makes a really good argument. He takes a chance, though, that God will take his wrath out on him. I remember that I sometimes had to tell judges they had made the wrong decision. That was not unusual. But there was this one judge who really got upset with lawyers who told her she was wrong. Many feared her.

I had a case when I needed to strongly tell her she was wrong. I represented a woman in a social services case who had many problems. She was addicted to drugs and kept having children she could not support. When we appeared before the judge, she made a ruling that my client could not date or get married to anyone. Although the judge ultimately had the authority to rule whether my client got to keep her children, under the First Amendment to the Constitution, she could not determine with whom my client could associate.

I filed a motion to have the Judge's ruling overturned. I knew I was taking a chance, but I also knew a few things. First, my legal argument was sound. Second, the judge liked me, so I figured she would not get too upset at me (Moses knew God liked him; Yahweh had even suggested that he start over with Moses). Finally, I knew it was critical that my client be fully represented.

I had the hearing before the judge. It went fine. She acknowledged she had made an improper ruling and granted my motion. She didn't even yell at me. She did admonish my client to clean up her act, which we agreed she would do.

The second thing that Moses does in his conversation with Yahweh is to deal with God's anger. He issues three demanding imperatives to Yahweh. First, turn off your anger. Second, change your mind. Third, remember your promises. Yahweh, your promises are critical. It was on the basis of these promises that the Exodus was undertaken at all. Remember your promises to Abraham. Are you going to throw it all away now?

Moses' argument is convincing. Yahweh changes his mind. He would not do all those terrible things to his people. Despite some scholastic belief that God is immutable (unchanging), this biblical presentation in Exodus 32 shows that God changes. God has freedom to change.

We must be thankful that God changes. God decided in his plan of salvation that He needed to offer something better than obeying the law for us to be in right relationship with Yahweh and all others. It is clear from the story today that not all are going to be able to follow the commandments. The suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ allows for us to experience God's grace and forgiveness in spite of the sins we continue to commit. In 1 John 2:1, we read that if anyone does sin, we have an advocate (an attorney) who will plead our case with the Father. That advocate is Jesus Christ, the righteous one.

Despite our assurance in Jesus Christ, let us not take lightly our obligations to Yahweh. The "great sin" in this story today is to substitute an available, produced God for the sovereign one who is not immediately available and who is not made with our hands. Christians have made mistakes in the past when they have made decisions without reflection and without focusing on God. How many times have we built great cathedrals and buildings which we think we satisfy our religious needs? How many times have we succumbed to simple theologies which we think give us what we want without requiring any faith in God? How many times have we traded God for faith in some charismatic hero who promises us all in exchange for faith to him or her? If we are honest, we do this more than we realize.

Sometimes what really feels like the right decision---one that may have been made for all of the earthly kingdom right reasons---is the wrong one in God's eyes. This is the challenge to the "ready, fire, aim" strategy. A godly decision, more often than not, requires time and thought, prayer, and discernment---and a willingness to let go of our great ideas to make room for God's ideas.

Rev. Kathryn Johnson, in this week's issue of *Christian Century* magazine, relates an interesting story about Lin-Manuel Miranda, creator of the successful musical *Hamilton*. Miranda talks about the time that Stephen Sondheim, the famous American composer, visited his high school classroom and told the story about creating the opening of *West Side Story*. Sondheim talked about the lyrics that Miranda knew did not appear in the show. Then he revealed that they had done weeks and weeks of work on lyrics to this one song, only for the choreographer to say, "I can dance all of that better." So, they threw out all those lyrics, all of those weeks of work, and they started over.

So, as Rev. Johnston puts it, sometimes you throw out your great stuff so you can get to God's best stuff. We have to stop worshipping the idol in the mirror and trust in God's promises. And sometimes, as Moses says to Aaron, we've gotta let go of the bull.