

Leave Me Alone

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
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- Exodus 32:1-14 (New International Version) When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "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." ² Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." ... ⁴He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." ⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD." ⁶So 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. ⁷Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. ⁸They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.' ⁹"I have seen these people," the LORD said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation." ¹¹But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God. "LORD," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky....'" ¹⁴Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.
- 1 John 1:8-2:2 Good News Translation ⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us. ⁹ But if we confess our sins to God, he will keep his promise and do what is right: he will forgive us our sins and purify us from all our wrongdoing. ¹⁰ If we say that we have not sinned, we make a liar out of God, and his word is not in us. ^{2:1} I am writing this to you, my children, so that you will not sin; but if anyone does sin, we have someone who pleads with the Father on our behalf — Jesus Christ, the righteous one. ² And Christ himself is the means by which our sins are forgiven, and not our sins only, but also the sins of everyone.

I'm glad that Major League Baseball has figured out a way to be able to play America's game during this pandemic, because this scene may be fresh in your memory. Picture this:

A batter has had a miserable day at the plate. When the umpire calls yet another strike that the hitter was convinced was outside the strike zone, the hitter mutters something as he turns his back to the umpire. But of course, he meant for the umpire to hear it, and the umpire warns the batter to cool it. Still outside the batter's box, the hitter takes a few practice swings as he mutters some things he doesn't want the umpire to hear.

Reading the lips of his batter, the manager springs out of the dugout, calling to the umpire to ask a question. Of course, he doesn't really have a question for the umpire. He just wants to give his batter an extra moment to cool down. Simply by coming to the plate, the manager is signaling to the batter to let it go. And by speaking

to the umpire, he's taking the umpire's attention away from the disgruntled hitter, offering some calming words of understanding, and of course, quite possibly sparing the player from being thrown out of the game. In this moment the manager is filling the role of an intercessor. He's stepping in to resolve a dispute. He's trying to satisfy a powerful demand for justice while protecting the vulnerable party. In that moment the manager is saving the player.

Moses was for the Israelite people what the baseball manager was for his disgruntled batter. You'll see what I mean as I wrap up this summer sermon series on the stories of Moses. Today we consider another of the famous (or infamous) stories of the Israelites on their forty-year wilderness pilgrimage.

As we heard, God had called Moses to the summit of Mt. Sinai. There over an extended period – forty days, the Bible says – there God gave Moses instructions about creating a portable worship tent and everything that it should contain. God also gave Moses two stone tablets containing the laws that God had issued for the people – the Ten Commandments.

But Moses was gone so long that the Israelite people at the foot of the mountain grew restless. They wondered if they'd been abandoned – by Moses and by God. They cornered Aaron, the brother of Moses. They convinced Aaron to make for them something they could worship – a calf made of gold. When he did, they pledged their allegiance to the golden calf. Then they celebrated. According to the Bible they partied with reckless abandon. When I read that verse I picture the images we saw earlier this year of COVID-19 Spring Break parties on the beaches of Florida and elsewhere: partying with reckless abandon.

God noticed. And was not pleased. God told Moses, "Leave me alone. I'm so angry with them. After all I've done for them...! Leave me alone. Let me fume and burn to work out my anger before I destroy them."

"Remarkably, Moses does not [abide by] God's request; he does not leave God alone."¹ Instead, Moses attempted to intercede. "Yes, after all you've done for them, are you sure you want to destroy them? That would just give other nations reason to doubt your power and trustworthiness. Remember your promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to make their descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky? These are some of those stars."

And because Moses interceded, because Moses appealed to God's reasonableness and reputation, because Moses reminded God of God's own promise, the Bible says God "relented." God's compassion overcame God's anger; God's spirit of mercy overcame God's desire for justice.

An Old Testament scholar has written this: "The God of Israel is revealed as one who is open to change.... God treats the relationship with the people with an integrity that is responsive to what they do and say. Hence, human prayer (in this case, intercession) is honored by God as a contribution to a conversation that has the capacity to change future directions for God, people and world."²

¹ Fretheim, Terrence E. Interpretation – a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching: Exodus. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1991, 285.

² Fretheim, Terrence E. Interpretation – a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching: Exodus. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1991, 287.

Almighty God came into our world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth to intercede on our behalf. He is the only one “who can go to God in his own right and intercede for us, who himself does not need an intercessor.”³ Jesus puts himself in between God’s perfection and our failures. Jesus put himself between heaven and earth on the Cross. Jesus took upon himself even more than the penalty we deserve for falling short of God’s hope for us. Jesus saves us by making right the relationship with our God that our sinful nature has disrupted.

As the apostle Paul wrote in Romans chapter 5,

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.... But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.⁴

This story of Moses not letting God alone but pleading with God on behalf of the Israelites-gone-astray suggests to me two things for us to reflect on.

First, let’s realize that we are forgiven because Jesus Christ intercedes with God on our behalf. Jesus has taken our side, has come to our defense, has pleaded our case before God asking for mercy rather than punishment, forgiveness rather than condemnation. We are made right with God despite our sinful nature because Jesus intercedes on our behalf.

Second, in the work of Jesus on our behalf I see an invitation, and appeal, for us to recognize and to act when we have the opportunity to intercede for the sake of others.

- When we recognize that a child has broken a rule we can intercede so that the consequence is a learning opportunity rather than merely punishment.
- When a co-worker’s unintentional mess-up has left them open to criticism, accusation, and retribution, we can intercede so they have the opportunity to acknowledge their mistake and make up for the mess-up.
- When we see or hear someone being disrespected because of their religion or ethnic heritage or some other matter than distinguishes them from the majority population, we can intercede to defend and respect their personhood as a fellow beloved child of God.

Yes, we, too, are called to intercede for others to embody the mercy of God and Jesus Christ the Son.

The story of the Golden Calf reminds us that we, too, find ourselves straying from our intended path. But as Moses interceded for the sake of the Israelites, Jesus intercedes on our behalf. In turn, we are urged to embody Christ’s love by recognizing and acting on opportunities to intercede on behalf of others.

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³ <https://www.simplybible.com/f317-hebrews-jesus-the-intercessor.htm> accessed 9/16/2020

⁴ From Romans 5:6-8 New Revised Standard Version