



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The Covenant Broken

Exodus 32:1-35

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As we come to Exodus 32 this morning we shift from a long section of legal material and detailed instructions for the tabernacle and back to narrative—a narrative that runs from Chapter 32 to Chapter 34. This the incident of the golden calf—a story most of you probably know pretty well. Ideally, we'd look at the whole thing all at once, but it's too long for that, so my plan is to look at it in three segments, a chapter at a time and to focus each week on one of three major themes that comes out of this incident. This morning I want to look at what this has to do with God's covenant with Israel, with his people. Next Sunday I want to look at what this tells us about God's faithfulness. And, Lord willing, the Sunday after that I want to look at Moses as the mediator between God and this rebellious people and how that prepares us for Jesus. What we'll explore in the next two weeks, though, will depend on and grow out of what he learn here about the nature of the Lord's covenant with Israel.

We've talked a lot about this idea of "covenant" already. First, when the Lord delivered Israel from Egypt, he told them that he was doing so because of his covenant promises to Abraham. He'd promised to make Abraham into a great nation and that through this nation, he would make himself known to the rest of the world. He would bless Abraham's family and through that blessing, bless the nations. And now, in Exodus, we've seen the Lord establish another covenant with the people of Israel. "I will be your God and you will be my people," he's said. Israel will be the people in whose midst the Lord dwells. And so in establishing this covenant with Israel, he has given a law—a means by which Israel will be a holy people suitable to host the Lord's

presence—and instructions for a tabernacle—a house where his visible presence, the cloud of glory, will dwell in their midst, a house where they will bring their offerings and where they will offer sacrifices in atonement for their sins. At the heart of the tabernacle sits the ark of the covenant and the mercy seat, this golden chest guarded by golden angels that serves as something of a throne. David calls it the Lord's footstool. Because human beings are sinful and he is holy, the Lord has gone to great pains these last several chapters to graciously and mercifully give his people a means to live in his presence, but it must be on his terms. The Lord, who is holy, sets the terms, not miserable offenders, as our Prayer Book describes us human beings. Keep this in mind as Moses, his audience with the Lord up on Mt. Sinai now ended, makes his way back down to the people carrying the covenant carved on the stone tablets.

The scene shifts from the mountain top, down to the plain where the people have been waiting for Moses. Look at verses 1-6:

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods 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." So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden 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 a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD." And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

Moses has been up on the mountain in the midst of the storm for forty day and nights. Basically, the people have assumed he's a gonner. They're thinking that there's no way Moses has survived. He went up to the mountain and, for reasons unknown to them, God smote him down or something. Moses was their mediator with the Lord and he's obviously gone. He couldn't cut it. The way they refer to him as "this man Moses" shows disdain.

So the people go to Aaron, Moses' brother. The sense of the Hebrew is that they accost him or at least, they come to him in a menacing way. Moses is gone. Aaron *has* to do something. The people need a new spokesman to act on their behalf with the Lord. This is what's going on here. Our English translations—most of them anyway—are a little misleading when they have the people asking Aaron to make gods (plural) for them. You're probably familiar with the word they use in Hebrew: *'elohim*. This is a generic Hebrew word of "god". It's plural—and the verbs that go with it are often plural—but whether it's plural or singular comes mostly from the context and here the context demands we read it as singular. They want Aaron to "make a god for us". Now, what does that mean? It's not that the people have given up on the Lord. They haven't. They've given up on Moses and they need a new mediator. They're putting Aaron in that role, but specifically, they want some means to bring the Lord down to them. They want to know what to do now that Moses is gone.

This is the human predicament. We long for God. Augustine wrote of God, saying, "Thou has made us for thyself and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee." C. S. Lewis made the same point when he wrote that each of us has a God-shaped hole that nothing else can fill. We long for God. But lacking his revelation of himself, we try either to fill that longing with false gods or we attempt to approach God on our own terms rather than his. The Israelites are doing the latter here. They want the Lord, but having rejected Moses, his chosen mediator, they're only going to get into trouble.

So Aaron takes their gold earrings. The earrings aren't just innocent pieces of gold. Genesis 35 and Judges 8 connect earrings of this sort with pagan religious practises. So this project of Aaron's is tainted already. Aaron takes their gold earrings, melts them down, and makes a golden calf—a young ox or bull. This is significant, too, and it gives a good idea of what the people are trying to do. So, first, we know that they weren't abandoning the Lord for some other god or gods. They just wanted a way to interact with the Lord now that Moses is gone. The calf was an idol of sorts, but not actually meant to represent the Lord himself. When we look at Israel's pagan neighbours, they made representations like this, too—often even oxen or bulls. The idea was that this golden animal that represented strength, virility, and fertility was meant to be a mount—basically a throne—for the deity. What they're doing is making a throne for Lord, to summon him into their presence so that they can know his presence again and receive his guidance.

Now, it's important that this is happening down at the base of the mountain just as Moses is receiving instructions for the tabernacle. At the heart of the tabernacle is the ark and the mercy seat—the Lord's footstool or throne. So the golden calf is essentially a paganise parody of the mercy seat. And everything about it is wrong. The only thing they got right was the gold. They knew it had to be gold if was going to be the Lord's throne. But everything else is wrong. The mercy seat was to be built according to the Lord's design, not a human design borrowed from pagans. The mercy seat was veiled and guarded by angels so that no human might approach the holy and die. The Lord designed the tabernacle to protect the worshipers—they approach on his terms, purified and holy. With the calf, the people approach the Lord on their terms, foolishly coming with nothing to protect them from the presence of the holy. The Lord comes to the tabernacle on his own initiative, but the calf is meant to summon him on the initiative of the people. I think you get the idea. As a

means of connecting with the Lord, the calf is wrong in every way.

In verse 7 we return to the mountain top:

And the LORD said to Moses, “Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden 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!’” And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.” (Exodus 32:7-10)

The Lord disowns Israel. No longer are the Israelites *his* people whom he brought out of Egypt. No, now they're *Moses* people, whom *Moses* brought out of Egypt. His anger burns against them. It's only been forty days since they joyfully shouted out “All these thing we will do!” in response to the Lord's covenant, and they've already fallen into idolatry. They may even be having some kind of orgy in the presence of the calf—which is what the Hebrew behind those words “rose up to play” sometimes means. No, the Lord is through with Israel. Their behaviour is shameful and shocking when you stop to consider all that the Lord has done for them. He announces that he's going to consume them in his wrath and then start over with Moses as he did with Abraham.

But Moses interposes himself between the Lord and the people. Moses has changed. Remember that in the beginning, when the Lord sent Moses back to Egypt to be his mediator to the Israelites and Moses wanted nothing to do with the job and made excuse after excuse? Moses has finally grown into his role as mediator. Look at verses 11-14:

But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.’” And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people.

Is this a case of the Lord changing his mind? He was going to destroy the people, but Moses convinces him otherwise? That's the topic I plan to address next week as we look at Chapter 33. I'll just say today that the answer is, in a way, both “yes” and “no”. What I want to bring to your attention to today is the covenantal aspect of this. First, we know that whatever the Lord is threatening to do to Israel here, he hasn't forgotten the covenant with Abraham. He might wipe out these miserable, fickle, unfaithful sinners below the mountain worshipping around a gold calf, but he *will* continue his mission and fulfil his promises through Moses. Second, Moses appeals to the Lord on the basis of that same covenant: “Remember the promises you made to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel.” That seals it and the Lord relents. The covenant with Israel may be broken, but the covenant with Abraham still stands and the Lord is always faithful to his promises. But someone still has to go down and deal with Israel.

In verses 15-20 Moses heads down the mountain carrying the stone tablets written by the Lord. On the way down he meets up with Joshua. Remember that Joshua had gone part way up the mountain with Moses. Joshua has heard the revelry below and thinks that war

has broken out, but as they draw near the camp they see what's really going on. They see the calf and the dancing—whatever the “dancing” entailed. We're told:

Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the calf that they had made and burned it with fire and ground it to powder and scattered it on the water and made the people of Israel drink it. (Exodus 32:19b-20)

Moses has turned away the Lord's wrath from the people, but now that he's seen their idolatry for himself his own wrath burns against them. Moses is beside himself with fury and smashes the stone tablets. Now, this isn't just Moses throwing a tantrum. As with everything else here, the smashing of the tablets is symbolic. Presumably the people saw Moses do it. The Lord has agreed not to smite the people for their idolatry, but Moses himself now declares the covenant broken. To use the imagery picked up by the prophets later on in Israel's history, the Lord was the groom and Israel the bride and here, on their honeymoon, Israel the bride has been caught in adultery. The groom has chosen to let the bride live, but the marriage is off. That's what the shattered stone tablets represent.

But what's with Moses pulverising the golden calf and making the people drink it? This was a mystery to me until I started looking at the Talmud and there, the rabbis made a connection between this and the test for adultery prescribed in Numbers 5:12-31.¹ There a woman suspected of adultery, in a situation where there are no witnesses, was to be brought before the priest with an offering to the Lord. He would mix dust from the sanctuary floor with water and she was to drink it. If she was innocent, nothing would happen. If she was guilty something would happen to her reproductive organs—the Hebrew is pretty obscure at this point—but it suggests that she would be rendered barren. The rabbis drew a connection

between this practise and Moses making the people drink the gold dust from the calf. It was a means for the Lord to indicate to Moses who the guilty parties were. Presumably something happened to some of the people and not to others and the instigators of this idolatry—maybe those who had accosted Aaron or those who had donated their earrings to the cause. Whatever happened, the guilty became known and this sets up the following scene.

First, in verse 21, Moses corners Aaron. He asks him how he could have done this awful thing that brought such a great sin on the people. And Aaron responds:

“Let not the anger of my lord burn hot. You know the people, that they are set on evil. For they said to me, ‘Make us gods 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.’ So I said to them, ‘Let any who have gold take it off.’ So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.”

“Don't blame me, Moses! These wicked people made me do it. I threw their gold into the fire and out popped the calf.” We get a sense of just how pathetic Aaron's defense is, because Moses doesn't even dignify it with a response. Instead, Moses turns to the people. In verse 25 he sees that Aaron has let them get completely out of control and so he goes to the gate of the camp and addresses the people. Look at verse 26:

“Who is on the LORD'S side? Come to me.” And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. And he said to them, “Thus says the LORD God of Israel, ‘Put your sword on your side each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor.’” And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell. And Moses said, “Today you have been ordained for the service of the

LORD, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day.” (Exodus 32:26b-29)

The guilty parties—some three thousand of them—have been singled out by drinking the pulverised golden calf. Moses then summons the faithful to him. And here we see that all is not lost. At the very least, the Lord's own house in order, because we're told that all the Levites—the priestly tribe—rally to Moses. There's no reason to think that there weren't others from the other tribes, but the emphasis is put on the faithfulness of the tribe specifically set apart for service to the Lord. At Moses' command, they go through the camp, putting the guilty to the sword. If that seems severe, remember that the Lord has instituted the death penalty for a host of offenses that would either undermine the holiness of his worship or that undermine the covenant itself. To enter the sanctuary unprepared meant death. Even to use the incense or anointing oil of the sanctuary for personal use meant death. It was set apart and holy for the Lord. And remember that to break the sabbath, which was a wilful rejection of the covenant, meant death, too. These folks, have turned the entire worship of the Lord upside-down. In their idolatry, they've violated the covenant at its most basic level. And the Levites purge the camp of this wickedness. This sort of sin was a cancer that had to be dealt with. While it wasn't what had been planned, Moses declares that this show of faithfulness to the Lord and to the covenant has become their ordination—they've proved themselves fit to serve the Lord.

So the guilty have been dealt with. The camp has been purged. But the people in some way still bear a burden of collective guilt. The biggest problem is that the covenant has been broken and the shattered stone tablets lie there at the base of the mountain as evidence. Moses has to do something more. Look at verses 30-32:

The next day Moses said to the people, “You have sinned a great sin.

¹ Avodah Zarah 44a

And now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.” So Moses returned to the LORD and said, “Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written.”

As the high priest would enter the tabernacle and the presence of the ark to make atonement for the people, Moses now ascends back up the mountain, into the presence of the Lord in an attempt to atone for what Israel has done—to find some way to renew the broken covenant.

What Moses ends up doing is offering himself as an atonement for the sins of his people—blot me out of your book and forgive their sin. Does that sound familiar? I hope it does. Moses willingly takes up the role of mediator and sacrifice for the people. He’s come a long way from Chapter 3, where he made excuse after excuse! But the Lord refuses Moses’ offer. Moses is an effective mediator between the people and the Lord, but he is not an acceptable sacrifice for their sins. That, however, doesn’t mean the Lord won’t show mercy. Look finally at verses 33-35:

The LORD said to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against me, I will blot out of my book. But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you. Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them.”

Then the LORD sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf, the one that Aaron made.

The Lord and Moses come to something of a compromise. The Lord suspends Israel’s sentence. Their disobedience will come back on them at some point and we read that in verse 35. It’s not clear how much time passed between this pronouncement and the plague, how many—or even if anyone—died. The sin does not go unpunished. But in the meantime the people are on probation. The Lord had made a promise to the people to take them to the promised land

and he will see that they get there. Moses is commanded to take the people and to be on their way. They can no longer camp at the base of the Lord’s mountain. Sinners cannot live in the presence of the holy. This also means that the tabernacle is off. The Lord will not dwell in the midst of an unholy, disobedient, and rebellious people. He had led Israel himself so far, as the cloud in the day and pillar of fire at night, but from this point on, he will send an angel to lead the people. He will not lead them himself, just as he will not dwell in their midst. Again, the covenant has been broken. Of course, we know that there’s more to come, but at the end of Chapter 32 it would appear that because of Israel’s sin, because Israel has broken the covenant while the ink is still fresh—or the ringing of the chisel on stone has hardly died—the Lord has chosen to part ways with this people.

In the great story of redemption, Israel’s deliverance from Egypt and the ratifying of the covenant at Sinai were a hopeful sign of new birth, of new creation. Beginning with this people, the Lord is advancing his project to reveal himself to the nations and to set his fallen and broken creation to rights. But before it’s even begun, his covenant partners fail, his bride commits adultery, and it looks like the Lord’s redemptive plans are as dashed as the stone tablets lying in pieces at the base of the mountain. Praise be to God that his plans do not rely on the faithfulness of mortals!

Brothers and Sisters, I think this ought to highlight for us the seriousness of the human predicament. Even the people who saw first-hand the signs and wonders that the Lord did in delivering them from Egypt, the very people who passed through the parted waters of the Red Sea, the very people who were fed by the Lord’s own hand in the wilderness and saw the thunder and lightning on the mountain, even they could not keep their end of the covenant. They needed something beyond, outside of themselves. They need something more than a law carved on stone tablets. They need the Spirit of God himself to write his law of love on their hearts.

They need a mediator with the Lord, but one greater than even Moses could be. They need a mediator who can also be a sacrifice for their sins. They need a new covenant, not dependent on their fickle and unfaithful performance, but a covenant established on one who can keep it. Friends, Israel reminds us that we cannot redeem ourselves, we cannot return to the Lord’s presence on our own terms. We need another. These stories of Israel’s failures point us to Jesus. In Jesus, the Lord himself came, took on our flesh, and became not only our mediator, but the sacrifice for our sins. As you come to the Table this morning, as you eat the bread and drink the wine, as you recall and participate anew in the death and resurrection of Jesus for us, let Israel’s story, let the events we’ve read from Exodus this morning give you greater appreciation for what Jesus has done. Israel reminds us that on our own we are lost. We need a perfect mediator. We need a perfect sacrifice for sin. Brothers and Sisters, Jesus has, for our sake, become both and in him we know the faithfulness and love of God.

Let us pray: Father, we asked in the collect for the grace to withstand the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. We ask now that you would keep us always mindful of our need for grace. We are, without your intervention, but miserable sinners. But, too, in reminding us of our need for grace, fill our hearts with gratitude for the undeserved favour you have shown us. You have given your Son to die for the sake of those who rejected you. Teach us to think on these things and to mediate on them that we might better grasp your love for us and better love you in return. Through Jesus we pray. Amen.