



**LIVING WORD
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

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**I Will Show Mercy on
Whom I Will Show Mercy
Exodus 33:1-18**

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Last Sunday, as we came to the end of Exodus 32, we left Israel and Moses in a very discouraging spot. Yes, on one hand, Israel had been spared destruction, but in exchange, the Lord has all but said that he's ditching the people. He won't even refer to them as his people anymore. No, now they're the Moses' people, the people that Moses led out of Egypt.

The Lord had just established a covenant with the people. "I will be your God and you will be my people," he had said. He'd given them his law—their end of the covenant—and they'd loudly proclaimed, "All of this we will do!" But all it took was thinking that Moses had been lost on the mountain and they've fallen into idolatry. Remember from last week, it wasn't that they had abandoned the Lord and gone after a different God. It was that they abandoned Moses. Moses was their mediator with the Lord. And now, so they thought, he was gone. So they made the golden calf as a mount—basically a throne—for the Lord. It was their way to summon him back down the mountain. Instead of Moses as mediator, it was no going to be some combination of Aaron and the golden calf. And in that, the calf becomes a parody of the tabernacle, the place where the Lord intended to dwell with and meet with his people—on his terms, not theirs. It's an awful scene. Here are the people, basically on their honeymoon with the Lord and they're caught in adultery.

First the Lord was furious. He told Moses to get out of the way so that he could destroy the people, but that's

when Moses stepped fully into his role as mediator and pleaded with the Lord. And, notice, he didn't plead with the Lord that the Israelites really weren't so bad. You know, sure, they're having an orgy around a golden idol, but otherwise they're pretty good people—they tithe, they go to church most of the time, they pack a shoebox every year at Christmas and give their change to poor people. No, Moses doesn't plead anything like that. He knows the people deserve destruction. They're a grumbling, unfaithful, adulterous lot. No, Moses pleads the only thing he can: the faithfulness of God. He pleads for mercy based on the Lord's covenant with Abraham. Brothers and Sisters, that's the nature of grace. You can't earn it. It's totally undeserved. That's what makes it grace. And so we read in 32:14 that "the LORD relented from the disaster he had spoken of bringing on his people". "The LORD relented." Think about that phrase as we move into Chapter 33. The Lord relented. The Lord chose not to destroy the people, but that doesn't mean everything's fine. The Lord also announced to Moses that the people would be going on to the promised land without him. The covenant was broken—visibly represented by the smashed stone tablets. He'd make good on his promise and send an angel to lead the people there, but he would not be going himself. Israel would no longer be the people in whose midst he would dwell. That's where Exodus 33 picks up. Look at verses 1-3:

The LORD said to Moses, "Depart; go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your offspring I will give it.' I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest

I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people."

Again, notice that the ground for the Lord's mercy isn't that Israel isn't as bad as they look or that they've done something else that merits overturning the death sentence. The ground for the Lord's mercy is his covenant with Abraham and his own faithfulness. The Lord will do what he has promised and he promised Abraham that his descendants would inherit the promised land. But he will not be going with them. The covenant with Abraham stands, but Israel has broken their covenant of this new covenant with him. An angel will, instead, lead the way and the Lord commands them to leave. They can no longer camp at the base of his mountain.

Notice, though, that even as harsh as this sounds, it's really a mercy. It can't be said often enough that the unholy cannot live in the presence of the holy. This isn't the first time Israel has sinned against the Lord—it's the worst—but it isn't the first time and it won't be the last and without the covenant, which, critically, provided a means of atonement for the sins of the people—without that they would be in danger in the Lord's presence. So this isn't the Lord being temperamental. It's the Lord being merciful and sparing Israel a just punishment. But that doesn't mean the people aren't disappointed. Look at verses 4-6:

When the people heard this disastrous word, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments. For the LORD had said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, 'You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do with you.'" Therefore the people of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward.

The positive thing here is that Israel obviously takes the Lord's rebuke to heart. They longed for the Lord's presence. Again, remember that the whole point of the golden calf was to summon the Lord into their presence when they thought that Moses was gone. Moses had been their mediator and they made the calf to fill that role. They want the Lord. The problem was that they tried to approach him on their terms instead of his—always a dangerous thing to do. So they mourn the news that they will be going on without the Lord.

But Moses isn't done in his role as mediator. He's not done wrestling with the Lord, so to speak. Look at verses 7-11:

Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise up, and each would stand at his tent door, and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. And when all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise up and worship, each at his tent door. Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses turned again into the camp, his assistant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent.

Moses moves off some good distance from the main camp and pitches a tent, which we're told, will be the place where he will meet with the Lord. It's far off. Think again of the adultery imagery of the prophets. Israel has committed adultery and the Lord will no longer enter her presence, but he's

willing to continue to meet Moses at some distance from the camp. This "tent of meeting" is basically a substitute for the tabernacle. The tabernacle was supposed to be the place where the Lord would meet with his people, but since that's not going to be built—at least for now—Moses pitches a tent where at least he can meet with the Lord. The writer stresses the nature of Moses' relationship with the Lord. They meet together face to face. In a similar way, Numbers 12:6-8 says they spoke with each other "mouth to mouth". The point is to highlight the uniqueness of Moses as a prophet. God speaks to him directly. There's nothing cryptic or questionable about it. It's not a dream or a vision. Moses never woke up in the morning and had to wonder if the weird dream he'd had was the Lord or too much pizza the night before. His experience with the Lord was personal and direct.

So the Lord descends to the tent in a pillar of cloud as the people anxiously watch from a distance. And Israel, like the bride trying to get a glimpse of her estranged husband, watches from a distance, no doubt anxious, but I think, still with a measure of hope. Moses the mediator is back, he's meeting with the Lord, maybe he can do something to bring restoration between the Lord and his people. And that's just what Moses does. Moses speaks to the Lord:

Moses said to the LORD, "See, you say to me, 'Bring up this people,' but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." And he said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not

bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?" (Exodus 33:12-16)

"If you're not going to go with us, Lord, who will you send?" The Lord had said he would send an angel to guide the people, but Moses wants to know who this angel will be, how's it going to work. He appeals to the Lord. Back when the Lord first met him and called him, he'd said that he knew Moses by name and that he was favored in his sight. It's worth noting that the only other person in the Old Testament of whom the same is said is Noah. It highlights the uniquely close relationship Moses had with the Lord and on this basis Moses asks the Lord, "Show me your ways."

Things have gone horribly wrong. It's not the Lord's fault. It's Israel's fault. But, still, Moses wants to understand. I think there are probably two main things Moses wants to grasp better. First, he wants to understand what the Lord is about. Why did he choose this fickle and stiff-necked people Israel? Moses understands why the Lord is angry, but he wants to better understand it all. But, second, Moses wants to understand—or maybe we should say to *know*—the Lord: his ways, his attributes, what guides his actions and dealings with human beings. Moses knows that the Lord is sovereign, but *how* does he govern? Abraham asked the same sort of question back in Genesis when the Lord announced he was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham asked, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Genesis 18:25) Both men knew that the Lord is not like the gods of the pagans. He's not capricious or temperamental. Just the opposite, they knew that the Lord acts justly and that, if we can only know him, we might be

able to understand—not fully, of course, but at least in part. Psalm 103:7-8 is our oldest commentary on this scene between Moses and the Lord. The Psalmist writes:

**He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of
Israel.**

**The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding
in steadfast love.**

It's telling in its simplicity. Brothers and Sisters, do you want to understand the ways of the Lord? Know that he is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is holy and he is just. He punishes sin and he cannot tolerate the unholy in his presence, *but* he is at the same time profoundly merciful and gracious with sinners. He loves his people, he will set us and the rest of creation to rights. We sometimes get angry and frustrated with God when we see evil in the world or when we're dealing with our own pain and misery. Why doesn't he end all the evil in the world? Why doesn't he punish the bad people. And we forget that we're part of the problem ourselves. The Lord has a better plan than ours. In his mercy and love he's sent his Son to forgive and to begin the work of new creation and in his patience he has spared us and continues to spare us that the good news about Jesus, the royal summons to the world's true Lord, will go out to the nations—so that sinners will know mercy rather than destruction.

This is the kind of thing Moses wants to understand, but—specifically—he wants to know what will happen to Israel. He stresses that they are the Lord's people. That's what makes Israel different from the other nations. If the Lord has disowned them, if he will not go up with them to the promised land, what is to happen to them. Their fate is bound up with being the Lord's people. This mixed multitude that went up from Egypt,

what is to bind them together, what is to define them if not the Lord?

And the Lord responds in verse 18:

And the LORD said to Moses, “This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.”

The Lord responds to Moses, he assents to his request, based on his appeal. The Lord is nothing if not faithful. If he said that Moses had found favour in his sight, Moses has, indeed, found favour in his sight.

Moses said, “Please show me your glory.” And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,” he said, “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” And the LORD said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.”

It's fascinating to me that Moses has asked the Lord to show him his ways—Moses wants to understand him—and the Lord has agreed, and what does Moses now ask? “Please show me your glory.” He doesn't ask for theology. He doesn't ask for philosophy. He doesn't ask for ethics. He asks to see the Lord's glory. You see, Moses understood that the Lord's ways are bound up with his glory. The Lord does what he does because he is glorious and what the Lord does always bring him glory. He shows grace to whom he chooses to show grace and he shows mercy to whom he chooses to show mercy and if you want to understand the who and the why of it, you've got to understand the

glory of the Lord. I don't think there's any easy exposition of this. Like the cross of Jesus, this is something to meditate on, something to let sink in, and something that we'll never truly plumb the depths of until, like Moses, we've seen the glory of the Lord for ourselves.

Brothers and Sisters, the glory of the Lord, we see here, is something none of us can bear. I think we see here just why the Lord had to give all those rules to the Israelites. The Lord isn't out to get Moses here, he wants to show Moses his glory, but even Moses could never bear to see it head-on. Even Moses has to hide in the cleft of a rock with his face covered by his hands. The glory of the Lord is a fearful and dreadful thing to behold—and at the same time something that somehow reveals his profound mercy and love.

Now, that's the end of Chapter 33. As I said last week, we'd ideally look at Chapters 32-34 all at once, but it's too long to do that, so we're looking at one chapter a week. And I also said that I want to focus on three themes here. Last week I focused on the nature of the Lord's covenant with Israel. Next week we'll look at Moses' role as mediator between the Lord and his people. We've already seen him taking up that role in these last two chapters and we'll see more of it next week. But today I want to look at this question that arises out of Chapters 32 and 33: Does God change his mind? Again, we read last week that the Lord said he was going to destroy the people. Moses interceded on their behalf and, the text says, “the Lord relented”. And, looking forward to what's going to happen, we see that despite his announcement that he will not be dwelling in Israel's midst, the Lord will do just that. Next week we'll read about the renewal of the covenant.

So what's going on here? Did the Lord change his mind? When Moses

appeals to him, reminding him of the covenant with Abraham, was Lord like, “Oh, yeah. I forgot about that.” Or, “Oh, you’re right Moses, I should always count to ten before striking down my people.” Did Moses show the Lord a better way? It raises the question: Is the Lord truly sovereign or not?

Our first problem is that the phrase used in Hebrew isn’t easy to translate. “to relent” or “to repent”, as some translations put it, don’t carry the full meaning. The Hebrew word also carries the meaning of consolation. Some have said that the best way to translate it is to say that the Lord had compassion. That’s not exactly right either, but I think it’s closer. But if we look at all the instances of this phrase in the Bible (2 Samuel 24, 1 Chronicles 21, Psalm 106, Jeremiah 18, Jeremiah 26, Jonah 3 and 4, Amos 7, Numbers 23, 1 Samuel 15, Malachi 3, Romans 11, Hebrews 6, James 1), they all describe a situation in which the Lord has announced a certain course of action and has announced he is reversing it. But this doesn’t mean that God doesn’t know what he’s doing or that he’s not sovereign. First, these instances highlight the importance of prayer and repentance. Prayer and, most of all, repentance matter. The issue in each case isn’t that God changed. It’s that the people involved changed. They repented and came to the Lord in faith to express that repentance.

The Lord punishes sin and rebellion; he blesses repentance and belief. Now, as we saw in our look at Job, it’s more complicated than that, but this is the general trend. But as the Lord said to Moses, he is slow to anger and steadfast in his love. He delights to show mercy and, when he does this, it brings him glory. Israel sinned greatly, but Israel also repented of her sin and the Lord had compassion in response. This is what he said to the people through the prophet Jeremiah:

If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. (Jeremiah 18:7-10)

This is God’s character, to destroy evil and to bless repentance. You see, the Lord must announce his wrath and judgement or a people will never know that they need to change course, that they need to repent and turn to the Lord. So, no, the Lord isn’t changing his mind. He’s doing what he does and what brings him glory. He’s showing mercy to those who repent and believe.

We see this character, this pattern come to full fruit in Jesus. The Lord *will* set his creation to rights. The Lord *will*, one day, wipe every last bit of evil, wickedness, rebellion, and corruption from his creation. But he so delights to show grace and mercy, his steadfast love is so deep, that he humbled himself to be born as one of us and ultimately to die for the sake of his enemies, in order to provide a means of deliverance from that coming destruction. Think of Jesus and his ministry. Jesus’ message was both an announcement of God’s coming judgement, but also a call to repentance and faith. In Jesus we see the living embodiment of God’s delight in showing mercy. And in that we see the constancy and faithfulness of God, who never changes, of God who keeps his promises, of God who is faithful to the covenant he has established with his people—and in our case, through the perfect work of Jesus his son. Think on that as you come to the Table this morning. Reflect on the way in which the cross

of Jesus reminds us of the absolute faithfulness of God to his promises and to his unchanging character. And, Brothers and Sisters, consider that here as we share the bread and wine, as we share in the death and resurrection of Jesus, we, like Moses, are given a glimpse of the glory of God.

Let’s pray: Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for revealing to us both your wrath and your compassion. Without knowing the first, we’d never fully grasp the depth of the second. You hate sin. You hate that we have corrupted your cosmos. You have every right to wipe every last one of us from the face of the earth. But you also delight, you glory, in showing mercy. Teach us to reflect on your love, your mercy, and your grace in light of our sinfulness and the punishment we deserve, a punishment for which only your own Son could pay the price, that we might grasp in some greater way each day the depths of your love for us. Through our Lord Jesus we pray. Amen.