



## Sermon of October 10, 1999



### Rev. Mark Trotter

First United Methodist Church of San Diego

(619) 297-4366

Fax (619) 297-2933

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### "EVEN GOD CAN CHANGE HIS MIND"

Exodus 32:1-14

Matthew 22:1-14

I was stunned by the Old Testament lesson for this morning, where it says the Lord changed his mind about the disaster he planned to bring upon his people. I have read that passage before, and there are many others just like it in the Old Testament. But I guess I never paid much attention to them. I thought that they were simply vestiges of a more primitive stage of religion, and something that we in the modern age need not take seriously.

But then I read a book a few weeks ago by Richard Friedman, a professor of Jewish studies at UCSD, in which he makes a point that we ought to take such passages seriously as revelation, and not just vestiges of an outgrown phase of religion, or unimportant details in the story, but the very heart of the story. It says this is the kind of God that we have. We have a God who changes his mind.

But that is not the kind of God that I was raised to believe in. I was raised in the Church, raised by the piety of the Church, the hymns that we sing. Nothing about it there.

The hymns that we sang in the Methodist Church came out of the Reformation tradition, where God was affirmed as being sovereign, transcendent, immovable. The battle hymn of the Reformation, Luther's great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

A mighty fortress is our God,  
A bulwark never failing.

A "bulwark" is something that doesn't move. It's permanent.

One of the most famous Protestant hymns, a favorite of all, written in the 18th century by Isaac Watts, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past."

O God, our help in ages past,  
Our hope for years to come,  
Our shelter from the stormy blast,  
And our eternal home!

Under the shadow of thy throne,  
Still may we dwell secure;  
Sufficient is thine arm alone,  
And our defense is sure.

The picture of God that we were raised with is of a strong, immovable, transcendent, unsearchable God.

And, one of my favorite hymns:

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,  
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes.  
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,  
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

Then in the third verse of that hymn:

We blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,  
And wither and perish, but naught changeth thee.

Nothing changes God. But according to our text this morning, read to us from the Book of Exodus, something does change God. God changes. At least God changes his mind, by the intercession of Moses.

The scene is on Mt. Sinai. Moses is up there on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments. He must have been up there a long time because the people down below are getting nervous. They wonder where he is. Moses is their leader on this perilous trek across the desert. Moses has already demonstrated that he has a special relationship with God, that he has

supernatural powers. They feel confident as long as Moses is with them.

But where is he? Where did he go? When's he coming back?

So they talk to Aaron, Moses' brother, who has been left in charge in Moses' absence. They say to Aaron, "We want something that is going to give us security. We want something tangible, something we can feel, get our hands on." Aaron says, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me."

Now you parents may not want to read that passage at home in the presence of your sons, because it reveals that the wives, the daughters, and the sons, wore earrings. I can hear the family discussion, parents saying, "You cannot wear an earring." The son replying, "But it is in the Bible!" To which you can reply, "So is, 'Honor your father and your mother.'"

Aaron took the gold from the earrings, made a golden calf, and said, "Tomorrow we are going to have a festival." It is peculiar that it was a calf. I mean, it was common for Israel's neighbors to worship idols, and particularly bulls. Bulls were the symbol of fertility. All the neighbors had fertility religions. They had these great big golden bulls.

But nowhere in all anthropology, archeology, or the study of antiquity, has anybody suggested ancient peoples worshiped a calf. Perhaps they did not have enough gold from the earrings to make a big old bull, so they ended up with a little, tiny calf. We don't know. At any rate, they got up the next morning early, and started worshiping in the manner of their neighbors, a manner that was forbidden to them. As it is described in the text, "They sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel."

Meanwhile, on the mountain top, God wakes up Moses, and says, "Go down at once; for your people are acting perversely." You notice now they are Moses' people. Before they were God's people, "Let my people go." But now they are Moses' people. It's like old Ted Leitner on the radio. He says, "My Padres," when they win, and, "Your Padres," when they mess up. The people have messed up. So they are now Moses' people. "Go down at once; for I have seen this, and I aim to destroy them and start once again."

God has done that before. The time of Noah and the Flood, he spared one righteous man, and his family, and began the human race over again. He proposes to do that again. Only Moses intervenes, "Turn from your wrath. Change your mind. Do not bring disaster upon your people. Remember you made a promise to Abraham, Isaac, and to Jacob. And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring upon his people."

This is amazing. It reveals a God who gets angry, and repents, and keeps on forgiving, over and over again. You can read the whole history of Israel in the Old Testament that way. It is a history of God getting angry at Israel, threatening to do something terrible to her, or to abandon her, and then remembering the covenant he has made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and repenting, forgiving, taking Israel back.

So constant is this pattern of fighting and making up, that Israel likens her relationship to God to a marriage. Hosea is the one who makes the most of that. Israel the bride, who is unfaithful,

chasing after other gods. God takes her back, forgives her, remembers the covenant he made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

What all of this tell us is that the most essential thing about God, according to the Bible, is that God is faithful to his promises. God is merciful and loving and forgiving. As Jonah says to God when God wants him to go to Nineveh and preach repentance to the Ninevites so that he can forgive them, and Jonah doesn't want to go. He hates the Ninevites. He knows that if they repent, God will forgive them. He doesn't want that. So he says to God, "I knew you were a gracious and merciful God, long-suffering, abundant in relenting of doing harm."

The God who is far removed from us, immortal, invisible, unchanging, unfeeling, is not the God of the Bible. God may appear that way to those who know him not. That God is the God of the philosophers. The God of the abstract idea, the prime mover, the first principle, the ground of being, some idea, some abstraction. That is not the God of the Bible.

The God of the Bible is a God of compassion and love, of caring and of grace, caring for us so much he gets upset with us, and is tempted to chuck it all. But because he is also a God of mercy and of grace, manifested in the covenant he has made with us, the promise always to be with us, God changes his mind and forgives.

There is another development in this story that is equally amazing. The focus of the scene read to us this morning is the making of the calf and worshipping it. It is an act of pure, unadulterated idolatry, the most abominable thing in the eyes of God. But we know that God will not punish because of Moses' intercession.

But you would expect then that God would withdraw, or do something in response to what they have done to him. We would do that. If somebody offends us in some way, we may forgive them, we are supposed to do that, but we will not abide with them. We will withdraw. We won't associate with them.

And it would be so easy for God to do that, because he's a mountain God. All the gods in ancient times lived on mountains, inaccessible. It was believed that they were apart from us, so they were believed to dwell on top of mountains.

But what is so amazing is that from here on, through the remaining chapters of Exodus, there is a description of the construction of the tabernacle, or the tent of meeting, and the Ark of the Covenant. All of which constitute the place where God will dwell with his people. God, after this incident, will come down from the mountain and dwell from here on with his people. Instead of punishing, he forgives them. Instead of withdrawing from them, he joins them. God will be with them now, forever.

It is as if he understood why they sinned. They were anxious. They were fearful of the future. They were lost without Moses to guide them. In this uncertain future they didn't know what was going to happen to them, so they put their faith in something that was tangible, something visible, something they could get their hands on, something they could see and feel. Their sin was the product of fear. So God forgives, then treats the cause of their sin, not the symptom. Then he says he will dwell with them, so they need fear no longer. No longer do they need to worry

about the future. He will be with them, going with them into the future.

Wherever they travel now the ark will go with them. They'll pick it up, and take the Ark of the Covenant with them. For several hundreds of years, through the conquest of Canaan, they'll carry the ark with them. It will be a sign that God is with them, clear to the time of King Solomon, when the Temple is built in Jerusalem, and the ark will be put inside the Temple.

Until then, it is in the midst of the people, and it is called the Ark of the Covenant, a reminder that God has made a promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that he will never leave them. No matter what we do, God is faithful, and will never abandon us. That is why the psalmist can sing,

Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.

What I want you to see this morning is that the Church sought to describe what happened to the world in Jesus Christ by using that same language. They used the language out of the Old Testament, the language of the covenant, the language of faithfulness and forgiveness, the language of the presence of God with us.

That was especially true in telling of the birth of Jesus. The angel announces, "He shall be called Immanuel." Which means, "God is with us." But the Gospel of John uses language more explicitly from the Exodus story. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Then the fourteenth verse, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

That word "dwelt" is the same word used to describe God dwelling with the Jews in the Ark of the Covenant, in their midst. That is why the Church used the term "covenant" to describe what has happened to us. A new covenant has been made. This time the covenant is sealed with the cross and resurrection of Jesus. This time it is opened to everybody.

The question is often asked, what about the Jews now that there is a second covenant? What about the first covenant? The answer is the same. God is faithful to the promises that God makes. That is why Paul says to the Romans, "The old covenant has simply been enlarged so as to include the Gentiles." The other metaphor he uses is, "We have been grafted on to the trunk of God's promise."

So now we know the God Israel has known since the time depicted in the lesson read to us this morning, the God who came off the mountain. The remote, transcendent God, apart from the people, became the God who dwells with his people.

It is a radical idea of God. It was radical then, it is radical today. It says that God is not above, controlling things, but God is with us, enduring the same things that you and I have to endure.

You can see the difference in comparing the scene of Moses on Mt. Sinai, before this incident, getting an all-powerful God to change his mind, and Jesus, on the Mount of Olives, asking God to "let this cup pass from me." The difference is that God being with us will not alter the

circumstances that we have to go through. God did not rescue Jesus from the cross, but will stay with him to redeem the situation. Because God is with us, good can come out of evil things. That is the enduring message of the cross and resurrection. God will triumph. That is the meaning of the resurrection. But God will do it through taking on the suffering of the world, and that's the meaning of the cross.

Arie Brouer was a Reformed pastor, part of the Reformed Church in America. At one time he was the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches. As a Reformed pastor, he was part of the Calvinist tradition, and the tradition that has the strongest emphasis on God's sovereign rule over the whole creation. It was the Calvinists after all who invented predestination to affirm that God is in control of everything. Every single move that we make is controlled by God.

Then Arie Brouer got cancer. A terrible theological problem for any sensitive Christian, but I would think especially so for a Calvinist. His son asked him about it in the most innocent way. "What does faith mean for you now that you are facing this?"

Arie Brouer responded by saying that he had believed in God all of his life, and because he has cancer is no reason for him to stop believing in God. His son said, "But you and mom have spent a lot of your life trying to make this a better place for all people. This is a very strange way to be paid back."

Brouer said to his son, "Steve, I don't believe that God wants me to have cancer. But what I have come to believe during these days is that God can't do anything about it. That raises some very fundamental questions for me about what I have been taught and what I have believed over the years about the almightiness of God. Because if God can't stop this, then I have to come to some new understanding of God's almightiness, or perhaps reject it altogether. I haven't had time to think about this because I am too busy dealing with all sorts of survival questions. But I am going to work on it."

And he did. He counted the number of times God's "almightiness" is mentioned in the New Testament. He discovered it is only ten times. Nine of the ten times are in the Book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, the vision of the end of history. He said, "I looked at those texts that talk about God's almightiness, and I discovered that every one of them has to do with God's ultimate triumph in history. They say that at the end of history, God's love, and justice, and peace, will prevail. At the end of history, God will prevail in the struggle, and that now God is with us in the struggle. And I said to myself, 'Arie, why in the world haven't you understood this before.'"

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,  
that we might be servants of others,  
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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