

Change God's Mind by Reminding Him He Doesn't Change.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They 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, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.' "I have seen these people," the LORD said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. Now 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." But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God. "O LORD," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why 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. Remember 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 and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'" Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

A couple years ago a movie came out entitled "Hostiles." It takes place in the west in the late 1800's. An army captain who spent years fighting the Indians was asked to escort a dying Indian chief to his birthplace. Over the years the captain had developed a great animosity towards the Indians, but as they traveled along, he came to respect that chief so much that he put his life in jeopardy for him.

That is what we see in Moses. When God appeared to him at the burning bush, he told Moses to go back to Egypt to demand Pharaoh to release his people from slavery. But Moses offered one excuse after another. The people probably wouldn't believe him. Besides, he has sheep to take care of, a wife to love and children to raise. When God called Isaiah to serve him, he immediately responded, "***Here am I. Send me!***" When Moses was asked, he said, "Don't send me."

But look at Moses in our reading today. When God confided in him that he was angry at the people, Moses pleaded with God for them. Today we will look at this conversation between Moses and God. Let's see how a believer asks God to change his mind about punishing us by reminding him that his promises never change.

I. God is right to be angry!

"Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They 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, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.' "I have seen these people," the LORD said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people. Now 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.""

Obviously God is not happy. He is furious. And who could blame him? He brought his people out of their slavery in Egypt. He is taking them to the promised land. At Mt. Sinai he made a covenant with them. And how did they respond? They turned to idols. While Moses was conversing with God those forty days on the mountain, the Israelites persuaded Aaron to make a god. So he gathered up a lot of gold and made a golden calf out of it and the people paraded it around, calling it their god, giving it credit for delivering them from the Egyptians. It would be like a man returning from his honeymoon and the very next day having an affair with another woman.

Of course God was angry. Notice how he no longer called them "my people" but "your" people. But he was not overreacting. The very first command he gave them was, "***You shall have no other gods.***" He gave them this command because he loved them. It is like a parent telling a child, "Don't enter a car with a stranger." "Stay with me and everything will be good." That is the kind of God we have, a God who wants to hold us close to him. But they rejected him so quickly. Fine, he says. Let them live apart from me, and not just now but also throughout eternity in hell. Destroy them now or wait until judgment day, it didn't matter.

Of course you and I wouldn't treat God like that. Or would we? Today you will see how much God loves you. You will hear of Christ dying for your sins. You will shortly receive the very body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion. How long will it be before you commit your first sin? Can we even get to the narthex? Our idolatries are not as obvious as a shiny golden calf, but they are there. Whom or what do we love more than God? What do the priorities in our lives say about our relationship with God? Do we pray to God for help, or do we first go to the bank?

But there is a glimpse of God's love even in his anger. He didn't have to wait to destroy them, but he did. He didn't have to involve Moses, but he did. When God promised Moses he was going to destroy this stubborn, stiff-necked people, he would then make Moses into a great nation another way. That must have sounded appealing to Moses. He, too, ran into their stubbornness and unfaithfulness. There were over two million of them. They grumbled against Moses about everything. It would make life easy if they would go away.

But he didn't want that. He immediately went about changing God's mind. And how could he do that? He couldn't say anything good about the people. He instead talked about God and who he is.

II. But God changes his mind because of his unchanging mercy.

"But Moses sought the favor of the LORD his God. "O LORD," he said, "why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why 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?'"

Moses first used a logical reason. God's honor is at stake. What would the Egyptians think? Would they get the impression God likes to toy around with people, saving them one minute only to destroy them the next?

But the argument that really made the difference was his appeal to God based on who he is. He says to God they are still "his" people whom "he" brought up out of Egypt. And then here is the clincher. He reminded God of his promises: ***"Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember 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 and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.'"***

God made a promise to Abraham. He promised him he will have more descendants than sand on the seashore. He promised him that one of those descendants would be the Messiah or Savior. And God made the same promise to Isaac and Jacob. God's promises are so sure we can speak of them in the past tense as though he has already kept them. When the Lord makes a promise, it is a done deal. He doesn't change his mind. ***"Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened."***

Moses is long gone. The next time we do something that deserves God's anger, who will step in and intervene for us before God? We have one who is better than Moses. It is Jesus Christ. You heard it earlier in our gospel reading. Jesus' critics were right about him. He did welcome sinners and he did sit down and eat with them. But that is who he is. He even gave us two parables on how much he cares for sinners. He will not rest until he finds them.

God should be angry over sin. It doesn't matter if he destroys us now or waits until Judgment Day; we only get what we deserve. But he still loves the sinner, and he found the way to save us. He let Jesus receive all of God's anger for our sins. In a war movie entitled, "We Were Soldiers," Mel Gibson, playing the role of Lt. Col. Hal Moore, was standing over a Lieutenant who had died in battle. He said something profound: "He died keeping my promise." Jesus died keeping God's promise to crush the devil's head and to save the sinner. The difference is Jesus rose from the dead.

I pray, the next time we sin, we understand that sin is not a mistake; it destroys our relationship with God and deserves his full anger. But you can change God's mind by reminding him that his promises do not change. Soon you will come to Communion. You come as a sinner, but you come trusting in God's promise that he forgives sins. Your proof is the very body and blood of Jesus in Communion. Take your guilt to the Lord in the confidence that he changed his mind about you. Call to him for mercy and mercy you will receive because his promises never change. And like Moses, go from being indifferent about your neighbor to caring about him or her so much that you will appeal to God to forgive them. Amen.