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Exodus 32:7-14
9-11-2022

God Relented

Good morning Church

Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you. Our covenant partner and deliverer. Amen.

Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind.

You can tell a lot about what someone thinks about God by how they pray. For instance, Do any of you remember that prayer you're supposed to pray before going to bed?
Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my Soul to keep[;]
If I should die before I 'wake,
I pray the Lord my Soul to take.

This prayer is not about loving God or neighbor, but about that anxiety that God will bring us home to heaven if we pass away while we sleep. I remember praying this and other prayers like this. I remember praying to God when I was scared or maybe I wanted His help with something mundane. That I would do well on that test tomorrow that I did not study for.

If you were to listen in on my prayers that I made as a child, you would assume that I was either talking to some judge asking for a lenient jail sentence or a wish granter. Though, if you listen to a lot of prayers that I do today, you'd probably assume God was a doctor, hoping that God would intervene in the midst of our troubled lives and bring healing and justice to our world. Like the hymn, Healer of our every ill, light of each tomorrow, give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow.

And I think that we can tell a lot about what Moses thought about God by his prayer. Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind. The Hebrew people rebelled against God by creating a golden calf and God seems to have made up his mind to destroy the people. Instead, God will start over with Noah. Like restarting with Noah after the flood or starting with Abraham. Then Moses intercedes for the people giving God three reasons why God should relent from his anger.

Number one, God you are a rescuer. Number two, the Egyptians would think you are a cruel God. Number three, remember the promise you made to Abraham.

And as I read this story, I was wondering, well is God setting up a test for Moses, so that Moses would know God's character? Or maybe Moses really changed God's mind, a conclusion that brings up all sorts of depressing questions, like why can't we pray the drought away?

But then... I was struck by an even bigger question. Why is God's mercy such a big deal? Because a God that brought destruction must have been the cultural expectation. In the Babylonian creation myth, the gods want to destroy humanity because they are too noisy and also routinely kill humans for offending them. As Caley put it two weeks ago, Moses lived in an enchanted world of spirits and gods that killed people.

You can tell a lot about what someone thinks about God by how they pray.

Moses sees God as a conversation partner, a rescuer, and a keeper of promises. A God that relents... God remembers the rainbow promise to not destroy utterly. God remembers Her covenantal promise to be faithful to Her children even when they are unfaithful.

I do need to be clear. When Moses comes down from the mountain he is also furious with the Hebrew people. He grinds up the golden calf and forces the people to drink the bitter consequences of their rebellion. But God that relents...

This text makes me wonder what kind of cultural expectations we have for the character of God. For instance. People often tell me how they like Jesus, but not that vengeful God of the Old Testament. And I really want to point them to this, that God relents. God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Or that God is only far and distant, like a clockmaker that only creates the watch without interfering. But Moses speaks to God like a conversation partner close at hand.

How we pray says a lot about what we think about God. So as you pray, think about what kind of God you are insinuating. Is God a wish-granter? A vengeful God waiting for you to make a mistake? A shepherd looking for lost sheep?

We'll never be free of our cultural worldview, we'll only be able to see through a mirror darkly.
So I invite you into that disorienting space of considering how our cultural understanding of God
is getting in the way of seeing the God that relents.