

The Courage to Pray—Learning from the Boldness of Moses in Exodus 32

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Scripture Readings: Exodus 32:1–14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philippians 4:1–9; Matthew 22:1–14

I don't know about you, but I find that parable from Jesus in Matthew 22 difficult to process. (I'd almost say, difficult to swallow.)

Assuming the king in the parable represents God, this God seems to be pretty *violent* and *vindictive*.

Granted, when the king sends his troops to kill “those murderers” (v. 7)—that is, those who had killed his slaves (v. 6)—well, that *may* be justified.

But then he burned the entire city too. A bit extreme, don't you think? This king (this God) doesn't seem to be able to control his anger. He did all this because, we are told in verse 7, “he was enraged.”

And then, when he finds the man without the wedding robe, he tells his attendants to “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (v. 13)

Now, no anger is mentioned at that point. And his question to the man actually uses the term “friend.”

But given that the king just burned down an entire city in anger, maybe that's like Vladimir Putin, having just attacked Crimea, calling you (who live in nearby Ukraine) “friend”; you're not quite sure how to take that.

So I'm sympathetic with the man who didn't have the wedding robe. I can understand why, after the king asked, “*Friend*, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?” the man was *speechless* (v. 12).

Speechless Before God

It is possible to find yourself speechless before God. Sometimes, you realize you've screwed up—royally—like the man without the right robe. And you feel . . . naked, and insignificant before God.

Or, someone you know—and care about—has gone off track; and your insides are all tied up in knots over the situation. You don't know how to *begin* to pray.

And sometimes the church in this country seems so messed up (the church we're a part of) that God must be *really* angry. *We* certainly are. And we stand there dumbstruck—speechless, not knowing how to *start* to articulate this overflow of emotion that we're feeling.

Besides, we might wonder if it is appropriate to “bother” God with our concerns. After all, God is . . . God!

Is God really *open* to hear about *our* needs? Wouldn't that be trivial to God?

Doesn't he *know* anyway? After all, God is . . . omniscient—all knowing.

And, maybe, God is *angry*; and it's difficult to speak to someone who is angry.

Of course, these days we often think that anger is too . . . anthropomorphic—too human-like—to think of God that way. But if not angry, then maybe God is too . . . stern, too distant, too . . . transcendent. Too much *beyond* us.

Often, our image of God—our sense, our feeling about what God must be like—renders us speechless. Like the man without the wedding robe.

In this he wasn't too different from Moses.

Moses Was Initially Speechless

Moses was *initially* speechless, after he realized the people of Israel had screwed up.

According to the verse that comes *just before* our Scripture reading in Exodus 32 (that is, the last verse of chapter 31), Moses is up on Mt. Sinai, and he's just received the tablets of the law written by God's own finger (Exod 31:18).

While he's up on the mountain, the people get Aaron to make them a golden calf—an *image* by which they intend to worship God. But that is expressly prohibited in the second of the Ten Commandments (given in Exodus 20).

By their idolatry, the people of Israel have broken the Sinai covenant (which Moses symbolizes when he later smashes the tablets of the law). The covenant they have just made with God (and sealed in chapter 24) is now, in effect, *null and void*.

So God tells Moses, “Go down at once! *Your* people, whom *you* brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods [or possibly, This is your God], O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” (vv. 7-8)

I think that God *sounds* pretty angry here. And he uses that distancing tactic well-known by all parents, like when your spouse asks you: “Do you know what *your* son has just done?”

God is putting the responsibility for the people—who have just broken the second commandment—squarely on Moses's shoulders.

And Moses, understandably, doesn't know what to say. He's speechless.

How do we know that? We can tell because the very next verse says, “And the LORD said to Moses” (v. 9). But God has *just been* speaking in the previous verse. So there was no need to start verse 9 with “And the LORD said to Moses.”

Unless God had *finished* speaking in verse 8; then he waited for a response. But he got none. So God speaks again. And he tells Moses about his anger.

And the LORD said to Moses: “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now *let me alone*, so that my *wrath* [my anger] may *burn hot* against them and I may consume them; but of *you* I will make a great nation” (vv. 9-10).

God doesn’t actually say he’s angry. Instead, he asks Moses to give him *time* to *get* angry enough to destroy these idolatrous people.

Moses Finds His Voice

And Moses, who was initially speechless, senses an opportunity. He senses an opening. It’s an opening in two senses.

First, a *breach* has opened up between God and his people—a parting of the ways. And that’s tragic.

But Moses senses another sort of opening. God seems to have intentionally left him a *space* for intervening. Because God is not angry enough *yet* to destroy the people.

So Moses steps into the opening; he stands in the breach. And we’re told that Moses implored the LORD (v. 11).

He starts with a question. A question is a safe way to start praying; you can’t go wrong with a question.

“O LORD,” he asks, “*why* does your wrath burn hot against *your* people, whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?”

Note what Moses has just done—under the guise of just asking a question.

God had described the people to Moses as “*your* people, whom *you* brought up out of the land of Egypt.”

But Moses won’t have it; he turns the tables: these are “*your* people,” says Moses, whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt.” *You* chose Israel to be *your* people; *you* redeemed them in a miraculous way by *your* great power. That must count for something. So, how come you’re so angry that you want to destroy them?

And then he immediately asks another question: “Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with *evil intent* that he brought them out to *kill* them in the mountains, and to *consume* them from the face of the earth?’” (v. 12a)

You started something *good*, Lord—the redemption of your people. If you don’t finish what you started, if you wipe out these people you redeemed, what will the Egyptians think of you? You’ll get a bad reputation!

And if we think that God wouldn't be swayed by this sort of reasoning, then Moses's final motivation may count for more.

“Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants,” Moses says, “how *you* swore to them by *your own self*, saying to them, ‘I will *multiply your descendants* like the stars of heaven, and *all this land* that I have promised I *will give* to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’” (v. 13)

You made a promise, Lord—you swore an oath; you better stick to it. Moses calls God to be true to his own commitments.

And sandwiched between these motivations is Moses's request. What is Moses trying to motivate God to do?

His request is simple, but audacious: “*Turn* from your fierce wrath; *change your mind* and *do not bring disaster* on your people” (v. 12b). Or, as the King James puts it, “*repent* of this *evil* against your people.”

And does God take offense that Moses dares to ask him (actually, to *tell* him) to change his mind? As if Moses knows *better than God* what he should do!

No, God doesn't take offense. Verse 14 is almost an anti-climax.

“And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.”

It seems anti-climactic. But it's a *momentous* change.

The Reason for the Second Commandment in Exodus 20

You can see how momentous the change is by going back to the second commandment in Exodus 20, about not making an image or bowing down to it (Exod 20:4-5a)—the very commandment that Israel broke by worshiping the golden calf.

Right after this prohibition of images, God gives the *reason* for it—which functions as a motivation for our obedience. It's a two-fold motivation, equivalent to a carrot and a stick. But the stick comes first.

“For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of parents on the children, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me” (v. 5b), “but [and here comes the carrot] showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments” (v. 6).

This prohibition of making images is grounded in the fact that YHWH, who is our God, will not tolerate rivals; and his “jealousy” will result in punishment, and that punishment overflows to the third and fourth generations. That's the stick.

But then comes the carrot—God's love, God's *hesed*, often translated in the KJV as “lovingkindness,” and in the NRSV as “steadfast love,” and in the NIV simply as “love.” This love is for a *thousand* generations.

But note that even this overflowing love is conditional. It is for those who love YHWH and keep his commandments.

That's how things stood *before* Moses's intercession.

A Momentous Change—The Revelation of God's Name in Exodus 34

Our Scripture reading from Exodus 32 actually covered only Moses's *first* intercession. He keeps on praying throughout Exodus 32, 33, and into chapter 34.

His final request is that he wants to know God's *ways* (Exod 33:13) and see God's *glory* (Exod 33:18).

And this is the famous story of God putting Moses in a cleft of the rock face on Mt. Sinai. And God "passes by." But Moses can't see God's *full* glory (his direct "face," if you will), because it would kill him. He gets to see God's "back," but that's enough to cause Moses's face to shine when he comes down the mountain.

And, as God passes by, he proclaims the meaning of the name YHWH.

He actually did that *before*, at the burning bush (in Exodus 3), when he told Moses the *initial* meaning of the name YHWH.

And, of course, the meaning of a *name* in the Bible is equivalent to the *character* of the person.

Back then Moses had said: If the people ask me what is your name, what should I say? And God says his name is YHWH, a name that sounds like the verb "to be" in Hebrew.

Then God says: "I am who I am," or (perhaps better) "I will be who I will be." The point is that the nature of YHWH (that is, God's character) would be revealed in the exodus, which is *future* (so "I will be who I will be"). God *will be* revealed as the one who cares about his suffering people.

That's what Moses (and Israel) needed to understand back then at the burning bush.

But here, after the golden calf, things are different.

And so there is a *second* revelation of the meaning of the name YHWH in Exodus 34. There is a second—deeper—revelation of the *character* of Israel's God, who is also *our* God. So this is important for us.

As YHWH passes by, with Moses hid in the cleft of the rock, and all of us listening in, we hear these words:

"YHWH, YHWH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin;" (Exod 34:6-7a)—that's the carrot.

Then comes the stick—“yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.” (Exod 34:7b)

Notice what has happened between the motivation for the second commandment given in Exodus 20 and the revelation of God's character in Exodus 34.

First of all, the stick and the carrot are reversed. Here we have the carrot first, then the stick.

But more than that, the carrot—the reference to God's love (God's *hesed*)—is greatly expanded. There is a piling up of terms for love. God is *merciful* and *gracious*, *abounding* in (or *overflowing* with) *love* and *faithfulness*.

Indeed, this love is so abundant that it overflows into *forgiveness* (a *new* element, that wasn't mentioned in Exodus 20). And forgiveness covers multiple categories of wrongdoing. It doesn't matter what you call it—iniquity, transgression, rebellion, any type of sin. It can be forgiven.

And showing love to a thousand generations is mentioned, as in Exodus 20; but the conditional element is gone. God's love isn't limited here to those who love him and keep his commandments. It's just . . . love to a thousand generations. Period.

This doesn't mean there is no judgment. The stick is still there; God's justice will be met. There are consequences for disobedience.

But those consequences no longer cancel the covenant. And from here on the Sinai covenant is *no longer* conditional. It is an *unconditional* covenant.

That is truly momentous!

Indeed, it's not too much to say that if Moses had not interceded for Israel, there would no longer have *been* an Israel. And the history of salvation would be very different.

In Psalm 106, which was sung this morning, the memory of Moses's intercession after the golden calf is *so significant* that verse 23 notes:

“[God] said he would destroy them—
had not Moses, his chosen one,
stood in the breach before him,
to turn away his wrath from destroying them.” (Ps 106:23)

God's Love as the Basis for Prayer

But did Moses really change God? Was God primarily a God of judgment *before* Moses interceded? And then became a God of mercy and love *after*? Or, was it that Moses's intercession bought out—and made clear—what was *already* there?

One of the things Moses learned about God when he passed by was that he is “*slow to anger*.” Nothing really new there.

Remember that Moses was able to pray in the first place—he was invited to pray—because God was *not yet* angry enough to make an end of the people. Even back then in Exodus 32—right after Israel’s idolatry—God was *slow to anger*.

In fact, that core summary of God’s character that Moses received in the cleft of the rock turns out to be the *ground* and *basis* for God inviting Moses’s (and our) intercession. God was *always* a God of love and forgiveness.

God’s Love Is Learned through Prayer

But the only way that Moses *learned that* was by stepping into the breach—and *praying*.

And we really can’t understand God’s love without personal engagement with God, without *calling* on God, without *asking* God for help.

It’s when we articulate our needs to God, and are heard by God, when we know we have been taken seriously by none other than the Creator of the universe—it’s only *then* we learn—truly learn, with more than just head knowledge—about the love of God.

Moses learned so well about God’s love that later on in Numbers 14, when there’s another crisis in Israel, he appeals to what he learned at the golden calf.

Numbers 14 tells the famous story about when the people refuse to enter the Promised Land (at Kadesh-Barnea) because they were afraid of the Canaanites, thinking they were giants who would destroy them.

Due to this lack of faith on the part of the people, God again threatens to destroy them.

And once again Moses intercedes.

And he appeals to what he learned about God’s character back in Exodus 34. “And now, therefore,” Moses says, “let the power of the LORD be great *in the way that you promised* when you spoke, saying, ‘The LORD is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression.’” (Num 14:17-18a) That’s quoting God’s words back to him.

And so Moses pleads: “*Forgive* the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, *just as you have pardoned this people*, from Egypt even until now.” (Exod 14:19)

Then the LORD said, “I do forgive, just as you have asked.” (Exod 14:20)

Really? Just like that!

The Model of Moses’s Prayer in the Prophets

And intercession becomes part of the prophetic tradition, as various prophets *stand in the breach* between God and the people. They face the people, bringing God’s word of challenge and repentance. And they face God, *defending the people in prayer*, trying to avert God’s judgment for as long as possible.

In fact, the prophet Jeremiah is *so persistent* in pleading for the very people that he has been challenging that God has finally to tell him (on at least three occasions) *not* to intercede any more (Jer 7:16; 11:14; 14:11). Because the people are too far-gone and judgment is inevitable.

Intercession is so crucial to the prophets that Ezekiel lists *lack* of intercession as a sure sign of a false prophet (Ezek 13:5).

And then, later in Ezekiel, God laments: “I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall *and stand in the breach before me* on behalf of the land, so that I would *not* destroy it; but I found no one.” (Ezek 22:30)

Moses as Our Model Today

Clearly, prayer was not easy back then; and it’s not easy now.

Like the man without the wedding robe, we may find ourselves speechless before God; or, at least, we find it difficult to pray; we often don’t know *how* to pray.

I suggest that, like Moses, we simply tell God what we need. And like Moses, we can appeal to God’s own promises, to the commitments God has made. And especially we can appeal to God’s *character*—of love.

God’s love is both the *foundation* of prayer (it’s what can motivate us to pray) and it is the *result* of prayer. It is precisely by calling on God in our time of need that we come to know what God is really like, that we come to know the depths of God’s love.

So we come back to the speechless man in the parable. He had no answer for the king. This makes me wonder: Suppose Moses had been there to intercede for him? Would the outcome have been different?

The lesson from Moses—concerning the power of prayer, to really affect God and change the outcome—finds its way into the New Testament.

Time will not allow me to take us through the teaching of Jesus on prayer.

So I’m glad for our reading from Philippians this morning. *You* may focus on “Rejoice in the Lord always.” (Philippians 4:4)

But *I* will focus on: “The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” (Philippians 4:5b-6)

If we take the Bible seriously, and gather up the courage to pray—to engage God like Moses did—I wonder what the effect might be. How would *we* be changed? And what might the outcome be of our prayers *on behalf of others* in need?

Why don’t we see?

Amen.