

“Make Us Gods”

In the name of him who remembers the oath he swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, dear friends in Christ: In our Lenten devotions we have been traveling along with the Children of Israel on their desert journey from where they were slaves in Egypt to the Promised Land. In the process, two things have stood out: first, the people’s stubborn faithlessness that turns from the Lord at every problem that arises; and second, the Lord’s continuous, longsuffering, patient, and gracious care and provision for his people despite their faithlessness. Reviewing it all, it’s hard not to feel some frustration with the Israelites. We wonder, why don’t they ever learn to trust the Lord? But that’s the wrong way to look at it. It’s almost to see it from the Lord’s perspective. He’s likely asking the same question. No, because you and I are not the Lord, it’s better that we put ourselves with the Israelites and ask, why don’t I ever learn to trust the Lord?

The answer to that question, what lies at the root of our human faithlessness, emerges in the narrative before us this evening. So, allow me to set this up. We’ve jumped ahead in the storyline. Now the Israelites camped around the base of Mount Sinai. They’ve been here for some matter of weeks. On the third day after their arrival, the glory of the Lord blazing like a consuming fire descended upon the mountain; but because sinners cannot look upon the fullness of God’s glory and live, it’s been largely veiled by thick clouds and rising plumes of smoke. Still, an ever fluctuating red glow is evident, punctuated by bright flashes of lightening and the continuous rumble of thunder. It’s an awesome sight to behold, and not just a little scary.

Not long after his grand appearance, from the mountain the Lord spoke the Ten Commandments into the ears of his people. But to hear the voice of the Lord declaring his holy Law was more than they could bear. Trembling in terror, they begged Moses to ask the Lord to stop speaking directly to them. “You, Moses, act as our go between. You listen to what he says and then tell us. If we hear his voice any more, it will kill us.” They’re right. The Law of God does that.

The Lord agrees to the arrangement. And in this we see Moses emerge again as a Christ-like figure, the mediator between God and man. Moses goes up on the mountain where the Lord gives him the instructions for the covenant that he is making with Israel. It consists of the Law, some of which they’ve already heard, and also the sacrifices by which the Lord will reckon the people’s sins forgiven. Moses returns to the camp and explains all this. They make the sacrifices. Moses sprinkles the blood of the covenant on the people. And having been covered by the blood, their sins forgiven, the people enthusiastically agree to the terms of the covenant. They take a solemn oath: “Everything the Lord has commanded, we will obey.” There’s a feast of celebration. And Moses and 70 of the elders of Israel are granted the special privilege of dining in the presence of the Lord. In that moment, a bit of heaven has come to earth. It’s a foretaste of the feast to come in the future when all things are restored.

Okay, then Moses returns to the mountain to receive further instructions and, significantly, a hard copy of the full covenant. I refer to the tables of stone inscribed front and back by the finger of the Lord. This time Moses is on the mountain a full 40 days standing in the Lord’s presence. It’s near the end of those 40 days that the events recorded in this evening’s reading unfold. I know that was a lot of background explanation, but it’s necessary to have it in mind in order to understand what happens next.

Moses' prolonged absence has given the people some time to think about the covenant they made with the Lord. The more they think about it, the more they don't like it. What sounded so good at first: "I will be your God and you will be my people" and "We will obey", well, the second part of that in particular they don't find so attractive; but that means bailing out on the first part too.

A large delegation of Israel's leaders approaches Aaron, Moses' brother, who has been left in charge while Moses is away. "Up, make us gods to go before us", they demand. This is key. It's often assumed that people make idols so that they can have a visual representation of their god. It's further assumed that the Lord prohibited Israel from making idol images of himself because he is too grand and glorious or whatever to be portrayed by such a thing. But see here, this isn't the case at all. The Lord *is* visible to these people. He's in plain sight right there on the mountain. He led them here too in visible form, appearing in the cloud and pillar of fire.

These people don't want an idol because the true God can't be seen, but because they do see him and they don't like him. He's scary. He makes moral demands of us. He wants to tell us how to live as his people. He presumes to judge our behavior. That's what we don't like. The nature of mankind's rebellion, the root source of our faithlessness, is our rejection of the Lord's authority – indeed, of any higher authority. No. I want to do what I want to do and I don't want anyone telling me no. In other words, I want to be in charge. I want to be God.

And that's the problem, because that God on the mountain *speaks*. He gives us his Word to live by. But idols don't. They never say a word. They don't make any moral judgments. Indeed because idols can't speak, we have to speak for them. *We* decide what they would say if they could speak. With this in mind, I hope you can see that the people's demand that Aaron "make us gods" can be understood two ways. On the surface it's "make us an idol". But what's behind it is the demand that we become our own gods. "Make us gods!"

Having made this demand, it becomes obvious why the Lord chose Moses and not Aaron to lead Israel. The latter is weak, a people pleaser, willing to surrender to their will in order to keep his position of authority; which rather ironically proves that he's not really in charge. Adding to the irony is that he asks the people to surrender their earrings. Biblical scholars believe that these were worn as marks of their servitude in Egypt. They identified the people as slaves. So the symbols of their slavery are now being used to enslave them to idol worship, to sin, and to death. That they come from the ears – the organs of hearing – completes the picture, because they aren't listening to the Lord of life who set them free.

Aaron fashions a golden idol in the shape of calf. Doing so, he's likely borrowing from Canaanite mythology, where the calf was seen as a fertility symbol. The next day they bow down before it, sacrifice to it, and proudly proclaim this image of gold to be the god who led them out of Egypt. What follows is a full blown pagan orgy of feasting and sexual depravity. Hey, you break one commandment, you might as well break them all – or at least as many as possible.

The scene shifts to the top of the mountain where Moses is still in conversation with the Lord. Moses doesn't know what's going on down below; but the Lord does. And he's not at all happy with it. He tells Moses, "Go down, for *your* people, whom *you* brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves." Note carefully his use of pronouns. They are no longer *my* people; they are *yours*, Moses. And *you* led them out of Egypt. Not *me*. His meaning is clear: they have disowned me; I have disowned them. And rightly so. They deserve it.

The Lord then proposes a new covenant. He announces his intent to sweep away the entire nation of rebellious Israelites with burning jets of white hot flame. We'll start over with you, Moses. I'll make a great nation of *you*.

It's here that we see Moses take on what is his most Christ-like role in the account, that of intercessor. He pleads for the people over and against the righteous anger of the Lord. He makes no apologies for their behavior. Moses knows very well what kind of people they are. He doesn't claim that they deserve to live. But he does appeal on their behalf, and the basis of his appeal is fourfold. First, that they *are* the Lord's people. He refers to them as "*your* people, whom *you* have brought out of the land of Egypt. Moses is reminding the Lord of how this all began. You saw the suffering of your people, their misery in their slavery, and you sent me as your man to lead them out. Second, Moses appeals for the people for the sake of the Lord's own reputation. What will the Egyptians say if you destroy them? They saw your power to rescue your people. They felt it, much to their dismay. But if you destroy your people, it won't look good on you. The Egyptians will say you only brought your people out to kill them. (Side note here: actually it's the Israelites who say this every time their encounter a problem.)

The third basis of Moses' appeal is the Lord's promise to the patriarchs to make of them a great nation and to bring them to the Promised Land. It's worth noting that was an unconditional covenant. The recently made covenant at Sinai was conditioned on the people's obedience, which, as we've seen, didn't last very long. But the promise God made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was made only on the foundation of God's grace and goodness which can never change. Therefore this covenant cannot be revoked or broken.

The fourth and final basis of Moses' appeal occurs a bit later in the storyline, after he has gone down the mountain to deal with the idolatrous rebellion and then returned to the mountain again to speak to the Lord. He says, "Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin--but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written." Though Moses is innocent of this sin, he offers to be held equally accountable for it. It is certainly the most Christ-like thing he says, although it falls short of what the Lord Jesus actually did when he alone bore the sins of all on the cross.

Having heard Moses' intercession for the people, the Lord relents. In mercy, he chooses not to punish his people as they deserve. But still the problem needs to be addressed and corrected. Moses heads back down the mountain carrying the tablets of stone upon which is written God's unchanging Word – hence the expression "written in stone". And to fully appreciate what happens next, we have to see Moses switch roles, as it were. On the mountain he was a Christ figure acting as mediator and intercessor. But now he is the agent of God's wrath and judgment. His role is to act as the Law of God. In his hands he holds the Christ figure: the Word of God in physical form – as Christ is the Word made flesh.

Upon arrival at the camp, Moses is shocked and horrified by the extent of the rebellion going on. He sees the people dancing and frolicking in lewdness and sinful lust. In his righteous indignation and fury, he throws down the tables of stone, smashing them to pieces. It is, on one hand a picture of what the people have done by their sin. They've taken God's Law and destroyed it. But it is on a deeper level, a picture of how God himself deals with the problem of human sin and rebellion. He crushes Christ for us. He vents his wrath and fury against our sin on Jesus, the Word made flesh.

Not everyone receives the benefit of Christ's sacrifice, however. There are some in the camp who continue to rebel against the Lord and his goodness even after Moses has returned to set things straight. They are cut down without mercy because they refuse God's gracious gift of forgiveness. The rest are made to taste the bitter dregs of their sin. There are always consequences; but the good news is that they have been restored into fellowship with the Lord. They are once again *his* people.

And by his grace and the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, so are we. Though we in our sin and rebellion are ever trying to make ourselves gods, Jesus by his mediation, his intercession, and his bloody passion, death, and resurrection has made us God's. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!