

“Stiff-necked People and a Gracious God”

Exodus 32: 1-14

October 25, 2020

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

This morning we continue to journey with the Israelites; their story is told in the book of Exodus. To recap: God has brought the Israelites out of Egypt and freed them from the slavery they endured as a result of the cruel systemic oppression of the Pharaoh and his people. Once saved from their bondage, God sustains the Israelites while they journey through the wilderness, providing food (manna) and water for them. Finally, the Israelites camp at the foot of Mt. Sinai – the mountain of God - and God instructs Moses to climb the mountain in order that God can provide instructions for the people as to how they are to live in community – instructions we know as the 10 Commandments. While Moses is conversing with God about boundaries and commandments the Israelites grow impatient because of Moses’ delayed return. And that is where our story picks up this morning – Moses is on the mountain conversing with God and the people are at the foot of the mountain, doing what they do best – grumbling and complaining. The biblical writer describes the Israelite people as “stiff-necked”, which means willful, obstinate, strong willed, obdurate, stubborn as a mule, bull headed, pigheaded.

Some years ago, my family traveled to Germany to visit relatives in Oberkirk. During our two-week visit we decided to spend a day on the French side of the Rhine River in Strasbourg. There is a magnificent cathedral on the town square in Strasbourg. After exploring this

magnificent cathedral, my mother decided she want to visit the town square shops. The rest of us wanted to climb the steps up to the roof of the cathedral to glimpse a magnificent overview of the city. We all agreed that while we climbed to the roof of the cathedral, my mother would have a cup of coffee at a small café next to the cathedral. When we returned, in about half an hour, we would all shop together. When we arrived back at the café, admittedly about 20 minutes late, my mother, who had grown impatient with our delay, was no where to be found. This was pre cell phone days so we had no way of communicating with her. We decided to spread out and search the surrounding shops. After about an hour we found my mother happily shopping. We were furious with her, a fury born of fear for her safety. And she, being stubborn and bull-headed, was completely unrepentant. Stiff-necked: willful, stubborn as a mule, bullheaded. My mother was definitely stiff-necked that day in Strasbourg.

Let's hear about the stiff-necked folks in Exodus.

Prayer for Understanding

Read Exodus 32: 1-14

I have always enjoyed hiking; in my younger days I did some hiking with the Sierra Club. As a member of the Sierra Club, I would receive some catalogues from a company in California advertising walking vacations; trips that lead in and out of some of the most rugged country in the world. All you had to do was pick a vacation destination, spend a month or more getting in shape, and show up. The trip leader takes care of all your needs once you pay your deposit and join the group.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells of her experience with these walking/hiking vacations: “I always watch the trip leader’s face very carefully when the group assembles at the airport; it will be his job to move us all from point A to point B – about eight or ten miles a day and over two or three mountains – come rain, snow, or blisters. You can almost see him wince when someone gets off the airplane wearing brand new everything or when someone shows up twenty pounds overweight and gets winded riding the airport escalator. But the trip leader is stuck with us. The only question is how clever will he be at getting us to move along, especially when we are tired, hungry, wet or suffering from blisters. When you have walked six miles in steady rain and your boots gush muddy water every time you take a step, you start daydreaming about all the comfortable things you left behind at home – your car, your bed, your closet full of dry clothes and you start thinking that next year you will rent a house at the beach.”

A two-week hiking vacation is not a forty-year exodus, but Moses was a trip leader all the same, with the orneriest bunch of walkers anyone ever had to move from point A to point B. They whined and balked and criticized his leadership. They demanded better food, more water, a shorter route, and they got nostalgic about the good ole days in Egypt when they were well fed slaves.

Early in their desert hiking, Moses went up Mt. Sinai and did not come back down when the people expected. Impatient, they complain to Moses’ brother, Aaron. Aaron gets creative and collects all their jewelry, melts it down and fashions little golden calves to worship. This is convenient, because they believe they might get what they want with a small, portable god – something they could make. The God who made them was turning out to be a little too hard to

deal with, so they switched over to a god they could make and thereby, control. Their action is a fundamental act of disloyalty to the God who delivered them from slavery and entered into a covenantal relationship with them.

God's response – now remember God has explained to the Israelites over and over again, that he was a jealous God and would simply not put up with the people running after other idols. "The Lord says to Moses: I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation." God could have zapped them immediately, but God chooses to take a little time out to seethe, to allow his fury to burn hot. God has not quite determined exactly how he will respond to the fickleness, disloyalty of the people of Israel. God is leaving the door to Israel's future cracked just a bit.

At this point, Moses, trip leader extraordinaire, jumps in and intervenes, appealing to God's promises, God's reasonableness, and God's reputation among the nations. And Moses' argument changes God's mind about the "disaster God had planned to bring on his people." Unfortunately, it did not change the people's propensity for being stiff-necked – pursuing their own agendas – and their tendency to create their own idols. By definition an idol is anything, or anyone, we would put in the center of our lives other than God.

If you don't think you have any idols, any gods of your own creation, I can suggest several golden calf detectors. Your checkbook or debit card, for instance. What is it that you invest in most heavily? What do your bank statements reveal to you about what you worship? Or your calendar. What gets the lion's share of your time? And perhaps your calendar

indicates how much time you spend in religious activities but are you doing it for God or are you doing it to fulfill some need you have? Whatever it is, we all want to possess those golden calves of our own making. We can bow down to those gods. That is one of our choices. We can serve them. Or we can seek the living God – even if the food is not so good, and the water is hard to come by, and the traveling expectations are ridiculously high. Remember, it is in the wilderness that God has the power to transform this band of sojourners into a community of faith – the people of God.

So, you choose. Who will you serve? If you should opt for the living God, well then you are forever connected to all the other hikers. Those who have too much baggage and are always trying to get someone else to carry it for them. There are those hikers who whine incessantly – about blisters, sun burn, dry mouths, lower back pain, weak knees; they are the ones who are so self-absorbed that they cannot absorb the beauty of the landscape surrounding them. And then there are those who are courteous and helpful. And the talkers who never pause for breath; the silent ones who never share what they are thinking. To choose God is to choose traveling companions. Some are delightful, others are a bit annoying. Some forget their commitment and wander off to do a little shopping. And let's be truthful – we all can be a little stiff-necked at times!

But the good news is that our God is a gracious God, abounding in steadfast love for us even when we whine, complain and are stiff-necked. God changes his mind about how he will deal with us because God loves us and is persistent in trying to shape us into the community of faith which he intended since the day of creation. It is this openness to change that reveals what it is about God that is unchangeable: God's steadfastness has to do with God's love;

God's faithfulness has to do with God's promises; God's will is for the salvation of all. God will always act, even make changes, in order to be true to these unchangeable ways and to accomplish these unchangeable goals." (Terence Fretheim, page 287)

Our fury at my mother's disregard of our agreement in Strasbourg abated. And eventually she did apologize for worrying us. And we moved on. Continued our journey. Why? Because we loved her and she loved us.