

**“Experiencing God’s Grace” – Exodus 32:1-14**  
A Sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork, Associate Minister  
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God of Grace and Glory, we thank you for your steadfast and merciful love. As we explore and reflect upon the stories of those who have gone before us, may we trust in your Holy Spirit to guide, illuminate, and ignite our souls, as we listen for your word to us this day. Amen.

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Today, as we conclude our sermon series on Exodus, let us take a moment to appreciate how far we’ve traveled alongside Moses and the Israelites in this epic journey. We began with the courageous women who saved Moses and the other Hebrew children from Pharaoh’s plot to kill them. We heard Moses’s call from God in the burning bush to lead his people. We heard his plea to Pharaoh to “let my people go” and observed that great dramatic showdown between God and Pharaoh as the plagues unfolded and culminated in their escape through the parted waters of the Red Sea. And we saw how God provided for them in the wilderness with the things they need for a good life – the basics like food and water, as well as instructions for loving and just relationships with both God and with one another.

Through it all, we have seen how God saves; how God liberates; and how God calls us all into service and into covenantal relationship. And today, we’ll explore how God forgives.

Not long after the proclamation of the Ten Commandments, God invites Moses to come up to the top of Mount Sinai alone for a very long meeting which, among other things, will result in the creation of the stone tablets upon which the commandments are written. According to the story, Moses was gone for forty days and forty nights.

As we’ve noted before, forty is often a symbolic number. But, nevertheless, Moses has been gone for a good long while, and the people are beginning to get anxious. What’s taking so long? Is he ever coming back? Did he die up there? Did he run away and abandon us? Did God abandon us too?

All along, they have been wondering where this whole experience is leading. They’ve complained along the way and they’ve struggled to trust Moses at times; wondering if they’ve just been led out into the wilderness to die. And we can certainly understand their concerns. We have felt the same way at times. And yet, all along, God has provided for them and shown them the way.

But, those feelings of uncertainty and anxiety seem to bubble up again in this moment. I think that is part of what is behind this idolatry, this desire to make and worship their own god. In the midst of their uncertainty, they want something concrete to hold onto, to focus on. Faith in this seemingly wild and unpredictable God of Exodus has been hard sometimes. And they are still struggling to trust Moses and to trust in God, even though it is God, with the help of Moses, who has led them out of Pharaoh’s grasp and brought them safe thus far. Perhaps, instead of the God they have, they wish for a god they can domesticate, control, and manage instead. But this golden calf sure won’t do a whole lot, either. And the true God can’t be domesticated and controlled.

So, they don't deal with these feelings of uncertainty, doubt, and impatience very well. They seem to completely forget everything about Moses, God, and their new covenant. And, in one fell swoop, proceed to violate the first two commandments.

They're really not off to a great start here, are they?! This is the first real test of their collective faith without Moses. It's their job to hold up their end of this covenantal relationship into which God has invited them. They've been given the instructions to follow. And they fail. They mess up in a pretty big way.

And, Aaron (who should know better) fails to call them out and goes along with this plan. It seems like Aaron is struggling with some of his own doubt, uncertainty, and anxiety too. Maybe he's wondering if Moses has deserted him.

Now, up on the mountain, God sees what's going on and gets really, really mad. So mad, in fact, that he's ready to abandon this plan all together and wipe out these people and start over with Moses alone.

But Moses, at great personal risk, intercedes on behalf of the people, reminds God of the covenantal promises that have already been made, reminds God how far they have come, and begs God for another chance.

And it works. Verse fourteen of our passage today is very important: "And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people." God's mind changes. Even God, in this story, was tempted to let anger, wrath, and vengeance take over, but instead changes, and chooses mercy, forgiveness, and another chance.

So, Moses goes down the mountain. And, even though he's already interceded for the people, he also gets really, really mad when he sees them dancing and reveling around the golden calf. He's so mad, in fact, that he smashes the stone tablets containing the commandments – as if to say, "these are brand new and you've already ruined them!"

And then he confronts Aaron. "What were you thinking? You let the people run wild!" And, I can just imagine Moses thinking, in that moment, "that's the last time I leave my brother in charge!"

And, Aaron... oh, Aaron. Bless his heart. His reaction is a bit like a little kid who has been caught doing something he isn't supposed to be doing. First, he passes the blame. "It was their idea!" And then he goes on to spin this tale about how he collected their gold jewelry and just tossed into the fire and out came this calf. Really... it just magically popped out of the fire, did it, Aaron? You didn't have anything more to do with it than that? Clearly Aaron knows that what they did was wrong, but he isn't ready to own up to it and take the consequences.

And, at this point in time, though God has chosen mercy, we are still left wondering what it will take to mend the covenant and repair the relationship between the people and God so they can move forward together.

The book of Exodus deals pretty honestly with the tension between wrath and mercy, between the desire for vengeance and the willingness to work towards forgiveness and reconciliation. Both God and Moses get really, really angry (and justifiably so). But, ultimately, they both forgive and move forward in relationship with their people. And, eventually, as a symbol of the mending and

renewing of this covenantal relationship, new tablets with the commandments are made to replace the broken ones.

And, beyond the book of Exodus, as the biblical narrative and the story of our faith tradition unfolds, this pattern continues. This is certainly not the last time the people will mess up. It will happen again and again. And yes, there are some rough patches along the way. But time and again, God forgives. Time and again, the people are given a path toward reconciliation and a way forward.

As people of faith, we all must face this theological question, this theological choice. How do we understand God's way of relating to humanity?

Do we choose to believe in a God who is obsessed with rules, who won't let us put one toe out of line, who is quick to punish, who condemns those who have done wrong?

Or do we choose to believe in a God who is merciful and gracious, who forgives, who doesn't give up on us as individuals, or on humanity as a whole, despite our many flaws and failures?

Do we choose to believe in a God who is immutable and unmovable, who is rigid and fixed?

Or do we choose to believe in a God whose mind can change, who is moved by compassion, moved to mercy, whose love is alive and dynamic?

And this theological choice affects our human choices as well. How will we be? Will we be immutable and immovable ourselves? Or will we be capable of change, capable of mercy and forgiveness.

The faith of Moses, the faith of Jesus, our faith, ultimately chooses a God of Grace. And both Moses and Jesus demonstrate such grace to others, even when it's difficult.

It is difficult sometimes. It is hard sometimes for people to accept this grace for ourselves and for others. Sometimes it seems easier for people to dwell in guilt and self-criticism rather than accept grace for ourselves. Sometimes it seems easier for people to hold onto feelings of anger, and grudges rather than offering a bit of grace to others.

And forgiveness is hard sometimes. Every week we pray, "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." If it were always easy, we wouldn't need to pray about it all the time. Jesus knew that.

Forgiveness takes work. There are the big wrongs people do to one another, of course, which can make forgiveness very difficult. But even for the smaller slights, we sometimes struggle to give a little grace, forgive, and move on, don't we? We can sometimes dwell on that one negative statement or word of criticism, that one mistake.

What will it take for us to be able to wipe the slate clean and move on?

I do think that there is a relationship between our ability to accept God's grace for us and our ability to extend grace to others. Perhaps we have to truly know and accept that we are loved in order to extend love to others. Perhaps we have to truly know and accept that God's abundant grace is given to us, as a free gift of love, in order to extend grace to others.

So, in case you need to hear it today, hear the good news: God loves you. God's grace is for you. God forgives you. Let go of the guilt. Be gentle with yourself. And, when you're feeling stuck, God is there with you; and God can help you find a way forward.

And God's love is persistent. That's the way this story goes. God didn't liberate the Israelites from their enslavement to Pharaoh just to give up on them in the wilderness when they messed up. With a little encouragement from Moses, God remembers those covenantal promises and remembers that love is much deeper than their mistakes. It is the same with us too.

But it still takes work sometimes to repair the relationship. God forgave the Israelites. And God still loved them fiercely. But God also expected them to change their behavior and to be held accountable. God expected them to do better next time. The law still stood, and God still expected them to hold up their end of this covenantal relationship. And together they would work towards reconciliation and find a path forward.

Accepting grace for ourselves and extending grace to others doesn't mean we are released from the work of living into a just and right relationship with God and with our neighbors. In fact, the opposite is true. If we value these relationships enough to accept grace for ourselves and choose to extend grace to others, then that can motivate us to do the best we can to nurture these relationships so they can be repaired from past wrongs and rebuilt and renewed to be even stronger and deeper.

Think about every good redemption story you've ever heard, whether factual or fiction. Redemption is almost always about more than just being forgiven and unburdened of past failings and wrongs. Redemption is also about finding a better way forward. Redemption is about being freed up so we can find a new path. And though one's journey to redemption may be deeply personal, it often has communal and social dimensions. A personal experience of redemption can lead to repaired and rebuilt relationships and positive social change.

John Newton, for example, who wrote *Amazing Grace*, was convicted by his newfound faith to stop working for the slave trade and to start working for abolition. His experience of grace motivated him and directed him to make a change for the better. It wasn't overnight. It was actually a more gradual process, but he turned his life around and found new purpose in working for the wellbeing of others.

Think about what this could do for humanity and our world. If we could somehow, collectively, let grace become our primary motivator and director. What better ways forward could we find together? What might we be able to build together?

And it all starts with the good news of God's liberating grace... God who still loves us fiercely; God who forgives our past failings and wants to move with us into a better future.

Let that good news of God's love and grace soak into your soul... and let it move you, motivate you, and direct you. Because even though we sometimes feel like we're still wandering around in the wilderness and we still face our own doubts, anxieties, and uncertainties, God's not done with us yet. God keeps pursuing us with grace and new chances. God is right here with us, calling us forth in love to lives of wholeness and service. And God is still leading us onward.

So, let us carry on in trust, in faith, and in hope that one day, by the grace of God, we might all find the Promised Land together. Amen.