

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2023

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(from Psalm 106)*

- One: Praise the Lord!
All: **Give thanks to the Lord, for God is good;
God's steadfast love endures forever.**
- One: Remember us, O Lord,
when you show favor to your people;
All: **let us know the blessing of your chosen ones
and the gladness of those you love.**

***OPENING HYMN** "Praise, My Soul, the God of Heaven" GtG 619 *(Verses 1-3)*

1. **Praise, my soul, the God of heaven;
glad of heart your carols raise;
ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
who, like me, should sing God's praise?
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Praise the Maker all your days!**

2. **Praise God for the grace and favor
shown our forebears in distress;
God is still the same forever,
slow to chide, and swift to bless.
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Sing our Maker's faithfulness!**

3. **Like a loving parent caring,
God knows well our feeble frame,
gladly all our burdens bearing,
still to countless years the same.
Alleluia! Alleluia!
All within me, praise God's name!**

(next page...)

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UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

The praise of your name is still on our lips, O Lord, even as we turn to confess our sin to you. When we perceive your mercy and patience, we know we are not merciful, we are not patient. As we come to know your loving kindness, we know we are not loving, and we are not very kind. Forgive us, gracious God. Mold us into your faithful people. Transform us according to your grace. And lead us in the way of your Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON *(from Psalm 103)*

One: "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."
All: **"The Lord does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities."**
One: "For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is God's steadfast love toward those who revere God."
All: **"As far as the east is from the west, so far does God remove our transgressions from us."**
One: Rejoice in God's greatness and grace toward us!
All: **For in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.**

THE PEACE

One: The peace of Christ be with you.
All: **And also with you.**

(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READING Exodus 32:1-14

Exodus 32:1-14 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹ *When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do*

not know what has become of him." ² Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." ³ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" ⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord." ⁶ They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

⁷ The Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸ 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, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" ⁹ The Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰ 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."

¹¹ But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, 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? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that the Lord brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, 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.'" ¹⁴ And God changed God's mind about the disaster that God planned to bring on the people.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON "What Moses Taught God" by Pastor Bill Vincent

There seems to be some confusion on the part of several in this story.

The people say about the golden calf, "These are our gods who brought us up out of the land of Egypt!"

No.

I'm not sure what they were thinking.

Were they drunk? That's too easy an answer.

But they are giving credit where credit is not due.

How often do we confuse things in like manner? When it is to our liking or for our convenience.

We point fingers at others, refusing to accept responsibility for our actions.

We accept full credit for something others had a hand in, or for something that was given to us.

The people are confused.

Surprisingly, God seems somewhat confused, too.

Talking to Moses, God says,

“Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt...”

Come again?

I can imagine Moses thinking to himself:

“‘My people’? You've got to be kidding! I didn't put together this motley band of misfits. These people wanted to stone me not too far back, remember? Oh no!

Don't try to brush them off on me! These are not my people!”

What is God thinking?

I don't know.

But God is angry and may not be thinking too clearly at the moment.

God's anger burns hot, and an imminent confrontation is brewing.

Then into this brew – in between the unseemly revelry of the people and the unseeing anger of God – into this mix steps Moses.

Moses is the one who intercedes, who serves as mediator.

Moses is the one who is not confused: the clear thinker; the "voice of reason," if you will.

Moses is the one who remembers, and remembers correctly:

"Remember, God, they are your people. You are the one who brought them up out of Egypt with a mighty hand. You are the one who made a covenant with them, who promised to be their God and they would be your people.

Remember?"

Back in Genesis it was God who remembered: Noah and the animals in the ark, floating above the rain-soaked earth. "*And God remembered Noah.*" (Genesis 8:1) (It is the turning point in the story, by the way.)

Now, in the bone-dry desert, it is Moses who remembers, helping to jog God's memory.

And in both cases, remembering leads to deliverance.

Now, lest we be too rosy in our portrait of Moses, let us note Moses is also shrewd: he knows where the power is. He goes to the top, speaking to those in high places.

He doesn't talk to the people – not at first.

He talks to God.

For he knows that God must be the one to change first for there to be a chance for the people to change.

God must be the one to change first for there to be a chance for the people to be delivered (again), even from themselves.

At this point, I wonder how many of you may be slightly uncomfortable with this talk of God in very human terms.

“What about the unchangeableness of God? the unchanging foundation upon which we can stand amidst the shifting sands of time and culture?”

There is a bold anthropomorphizing of God in this passage. That is dangerous theologically, for it too easily leads to creating God in our own image, which always leads to trouble.

Such human imagery about God can make us anxious, uncomfortable, uncertain – it seems unseemly.

So what do we do with that notion of God “changing God's mind”? It is mentioned more than once. We must do something with it, besides simply dismiss it, which seems too simplistic.

Terence E. Fretheim makes this observation:

The God of Israel is revealed as one who is open to change. ... This means that there is genuine openness to the future on God's part... 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. (Exodus, Interpretation series, p.287)

In the end, when all is said and done, we must note this: it is solely by God's choice, God's mercy, that the people are spared, even though they do not deserve it.

And maybe that's what it means to say that (in a sense) God changed God's mind.

The logical thing to do would be to go with the one who was steadfast: Moses.

The logical thing to do would be to stick with the one who passed the test of faithfulness. (In some ways it could be argued that is precisely what God did previously with Noah and Abraham.)

The logical thing to do would be to say, "Three strikes and you're out!" And this ‘calf thing’ the people were involved in was at least the third strike.

But God chose not to do the supposed logical thing.

God chose to do something different. And has consistently made that same choice over and over again: with Jonah, who ran away from God's call, and Jeremiah, who complained bitterly against God's call; with Gomer, who was unfaithful herself, and Rahab, the prostitute; with Peter, who denied, and Paul, who persecuted; with you and with me.

God chose to do something different than we might expect.

And so, God changed God's mind. God changed the "rules of engagement," if you will. God changed the criteria. God changed the standard

And in so doing, God reaffirmed God's deepest self: faithfulness, love. That God is for life, for covenant, for relationship.

A relationship founded not on the basis of the people's deserving – or undeserving.

But a relationship founded on the basis of God's promise, on the basis of God's graciousness.

Not to say that God is a pushover. God is not blind to the people and their ways; they are stiff-necked, and there are consequences to wrong choices. God still knows right from wrong, and far better than we.

But God realizes – changes one's mind? – that if this ‘covenant thing’ that God is about is to work, it will have to be because God makes it work.

The story, it seems, serves as a way of reminding us that God's presence in our midst, God's call to us, God's inviting us to partner in ministry, God's entering into relationship with us, is solely by God's gracious choice.

It is not our doing.

And it is not by our deserving.

It is by God's gracious choice. Period.

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,” wrote John Newton, **“that saved a wretch like me.”**

Kathleen Norris, in her book Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith, speaks about that word, “wretch.” One etymology has it meaning **“a wanderer, an adventurer.”** But another says **“a wretch meant an exile, a banished person.”** Norris writes,

The word as used today means not so much one who has been driven out of a native land, but one who would be miserable anywhere. To some extent we have internalized the word to mean someone who is exiled from being at peace within the self. A “wretch” may designate someone who is materially poor and unfortunate, but it also means a person who is inwardly hapless and pathetic.

The word “wretch,” then, does not paint a picture of who we want to be. Or who we think we are.

So, Norris suggests, we try to “take the edge off” the word, replace it with something more palatable. But it doesn’t work. For, Norris continues,

I suspect that anyone who has not experienced wretchedness – exile, wandering, loss, misery, whether inwardly or in outward circumstance – has a superficial grasp of what it means to be human. ... if you can’t ever admit to being a wretch, you haven’t been paying attention. ... [For] it might take knowing oneself as a wretch to truly know grace for the wonder that it is. (p.165, 166, 167)

We have nothing on God. We have built for ourselves enough golden calves to fill the world many times over. We have no bargaining chip with which to strike a deal. No final card up our sleeve to play.

We have no claim on God, by ourselves, because of our supposed goodness.

We stand bare, naked before God with nothing to offer. Guilty as charged. At the complete and utter mercy of the divine court. Wretches, all.

And God says, "I choose you. You are mine."
That is grace. Amazing grace.

So yes, there does seem to be some confusion in this story, and its contemporary manifestations.

We are the ones most often confused: confused about who is our God; confused about our need to be delivered from our various and sundry Egypts of slavery, our temptations to idolatry, our running after false promises and hopes...and even our blindness to our own sin: our self-centered ways and self-promoting methods – our wretchedness.

We are confused.

But God is no longer confused.

So that, "in the fulness of time" (Galatians 4:4), God sent the Son to communicate as clearly as God knew how – which is to say, as clearly as it can ever be communicated – that God chooses to be in relationship with us – human beings, people – in spite of ourselves. God chooses to love us. God remembers the promise: the covenant that God will be our God, and we are God's own people, God's own children. And God will be faithful to that promise – faithful to God's self – even though we be unfaithful...to ourselves and to God.

God chooses to be faithful to us.

God chooses us.

And that choice is good news.

We hear that choice – that communication – from the lips of Moses.

We hear that communication most clearly from the lips of God's own Son.

God says, "I choose you; I claim you; I embrace you; I love you; you are mine."

We need to hear that message.

Even we who have heard the message before need reminding.

And others do, too.

There's a world around us that needs to hear this message.

And as we hear that message – that word of grace – it becomes our turn to remind others.

Much like Moses once reminded God.

***HYMN** "Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound" GtG 649 (*Verses 1-4*)

**1. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.**

**2. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
and grace my fears relieved.**

(continued...)

**How precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed!**

- 3. Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come.
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.**

- 4. The Lord has promised good to me;
his word my hope secures.
He will my shield and portion be
as long as life endures.**

Text: Stanzas 1-4, John Newton, 1772.

Music: AMAZING GRACE, *Columbian Harmony*, 1829; arr. Edwin O. Excell, 1910, alt.
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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**We trust in God,
whom Jesus called Abba, Father.
In sovereign love God created the world good
and makes everyone equally in God's image,
male and female, of every race and people,
to live as one community.
But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.
Ignoring God's commandments,
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
accept lies as truth,
exploit neighbor and nature,
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation.
Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.
In everlasting love,
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
to bless all families of the earth.
Hearing their cry,
God delivered the children of Israel
from the house of bondage.
Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.**

(from *A Brief Statement of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

One: We give ourselves to you...

All: ...God of grace and love.

THE LORD'S PRAYER (Traditional)

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever. Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

By your grace, you have chosen us, O God. By your grace, you have showered us with blessings in abundance. By your grace, accept the gifts we offer to you. By your grace, teach us to give even as you have given to us. Amen.

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" GtG 475

**1. Come, thou Fount of every blessing;
tune my heart to sing thy grace;
streams of mercy, never ceasing,
call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet,
sung by flaming tongues above;
praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it,
mount of God's unchanging love!**

(continued...)

2. **Here I raise my Ebenezer;
hither by thy help I'm come;
and I hope, by thy good pleasure,
safely to arrive at home.
Jesus sought me when a stranger,
wandering from the fold of God;
he, to rescue me from danger,
interposed his precious blood.**
3. **O to grace how great a debtor
daily I'm constrained to be!
Let that grace now, like a fetter,
bind my wandering heart to thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
prone to leave the God I love;
here's my heart; O take and seal it;
seal it for thy courts above.**

Text: Robert Robinson, 1758, alt.

Music: NETTLETON, Wyeth's *Repository of Sacred Music, Part Second*, 1813.
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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

One: ...And let the gathered people of God say...
All: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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