

Date: September 16, 2007

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 24

**SERMON: When God Repents**

Text(s): Exodus 32:1-14; Luke 15:1-10

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Every parent knows that bringing up children is no picnic. Parenting is a combination of satisfaction and frustration, sorrow and joy, anger and love, and frequently all these emotions within the space of a single day. Each stage of a child's development has its own special joys and pains for the parents. What could be sweeter than that two-year old's smile as she climbs up on your knee before bedtime, and nuzzles her head into your chest? It makes you instantly forget that only twenty minutes earlier, you were ready to commit infanticide because she was lying on the floor screaming and kicking in a titanic rage, fighting your efforts to get her ready for bed. My wife, who is, perhaps, the gentlest and most patient person I know, often used to say, "It's a good thing toddlers are so cute; sometimes their cuteness is the only thing that keeps you from wringing their little necks." Now that our daughter and two year-old grandson are temporarily living with us, our house has turned into a toddler zone, and those experiences are no longer just distant memories for us, but part of our daily routine once again.

In our Old Testament lesson this morning, we find God portrayed in the role of frustrated and angry parent to the fickle and recalcitrant people of Israel. The backdrop of this passage is the story of the Exodus—the deliverance of the people from slavery in Egypt. It's a familiar story to anyone who's ever been to Sunday School. It's not only the central story in Judaism, celebrated annually in the Feast of Passover, but is one of the primary stories for Christian self-understanding as well. Some of our oldest Easter hymns, as well as our baptismal liturgy, compare the liberation from the power of death represented by Jesus' resurrection to the liberation of Israel from Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea.

Getting the people out of Egypt is only the beginning of God's purpose for them. Now that the people are liberated, they need to know how they are to live together in society so they can model how God wants all people to live. In that, they are like children, in that they have to be trained and enculturated and socialized into a people with a strong sense of identity and purpose. So, as their collective story of their origins tells it, God calls Moses up on the mountain— Mt. Sinai— and there gives him the Torah, the Law, that lays out the sort of behavior that will result in their becoming the people that God wants them to be.

As Moses quickly discovers, however, it doesn't do for the leaders of a people to disappear for long periods of time. Things tend to get a little chaotic when the person in charge isn't around visibly being in charge. So while Moses is up there being given God's blueprint for living, the people are down below getting antsy. They call a town meeting and say to Moses' brother Aaron, whom Moses has delegated to lead any town meetings in his absence, and say, "Look, Moses has disappeared, and we don't know what's become of him. There's all that smoke and thunder up on the mountain, and there's a good chance that this new god has gotten angry with him and killed him, or maybe he's fallen off a cliff or whatever. We're tired of hanging around here waiting, but we need assurance that we have a god guiding us and going before us, so make us a god like the kind we had in Egypt, a god we can see and touch. We want to offer sacrifices and we want a big festival.

So Aaron, like a good politician, tries to play it both ways and please everyone. He makes an image of a golden calf for them, perhaps an image of the Egyptian goddess Hathor, who was often depicted as a cow. But then, when the people are admiring the calf and saying, Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt," Aaron is setting up an altar in front of the golden calf and saying that the festival on the next day will be a festival to the LORD— not to Hathor represented by the calf,

but the God who cannot be represented by any image and whose name is simply “I AM.” Aaron is hedging his bets. The people don’t care; they’ve got a visible deity and they’re ready to party. After the people had brought sacrifices and offered them on the altar, the narrator says, “and then the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.” Sounds a little more lively, than our bean suppers, doesn’t it?.

But now the Lord gets in on the act. God tells Moses, “Look, you’d better get down there fast; the people whom you brought up out of Egypt are out of control. They’ve acted perversely by turning aside so quickly from the way I commanded them to live. I’m fed up with this bunch. They are a stiff-necked bunch. Now let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot and I may consume them; and then you and I will start over, and I’ll bring another nation from you.”

Do you notice how when the people are misbehaving, God’s not quite as quick to claim them. They suddenly become Moses’ people. “Your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt have acted perversely.” Doesn’t that sound like what goes on in many families when the kids are misbehaving? Suddenly it’s not “Do you know what our son did today,” but “Do you know what your son did today?”

But Moses isn’t going to let God push off the parental responsibility quite that easily. He comes right back at God. “*O Lord, why are you so angry at your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?*” He goes on to appeal to God’s reputation. If you destroy your people, the Egyptians will rightly judge that you are an evil deity. Change your mind. Repent. Remember your promises that you swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob by your own self. You’re God; you can’t afford to act like an angry parent. You’re bigger than that.

And God listens to Moses! The storyteller says, “And the Lord changed his mind about the

disaster that he planned to bring on his people.” Other translations say, “The Lord repented of the disaster he thought to bring upon the people.”

Now what on earth is going on here? A God who repents of plans to bring disaster on people for their sins? This is not the only place, by the way, where the biblical writers talk about God repenting or changing his mind and averting some awful divine thunderbolt that was about to strike those who were misbehaving. In several of the writings of the prophets and some of the Psalms and in the Book of Jonah, we find the same notion expressed. When the wrongdoers repent and change their ways, God also repents or has a change of mind, and does not follow through with the threatened judgment.

Does God send severe judgments on us? Can God repent and spare people those judgments? I don’t know about you, but even if I did believe that God actively punishes sinners, either individually or collectively, I’d find it pretty hard, if not impossible, to give my devotion to some God whose only appeal to my love was the threat of a thunderbolt if I step out of line.

In this week’s *New Yorker* there was a cartoon showing a dead man on a floor in a room, with an enormous lightning bolt that had come crashing through the ceiling of his house, sticking out of his back. A CSI team is gathered around him snapping photos, gathering evidence, and a detective is asking his widow, “Did he have any known enemies?”

That cartoon points out how for many of us the notion of God’s judgment has become a joke— not something we moderns can actually take seriously. I wonder, though, if we’ve done ourselves any favors by so thoroughly dismissing such notions from our minds.

We’re probably right to give up the notion of the lightning bolts— there are a lot of people who richly deserve them still walking around, aren’t there? Including us sometimes.

But sometimes, these days, I feel as though we're experiencing some sort of judgment, don't you? Couldn't the whole issue of global warming and its consequences be credibly framed in terms of judgment? If even a fourth of the dire warnings we're being given by our environmental scientists (who, by the way are our new priests, in many respects) come to pass, we and the generations to come after us are going to be in pretty deep waters— literally— without a life preserver.

Listening to the congressional hearings this week on the Iraq War and then hearing the politicians all taking sides and making speeches and turning the whole thing into an occasion to score political points off their opponents, I felt a real frustration, confusion, and sense of futility about what we should do next, and I'm sure I'm not alone. We really don't know how to get ourselves out of the hole we're in or alleviate the effects that we've unleashed. This is way beyond partisan politics at this point, and I have no hope that any politician of any party has an answer that's going to help much. This is all of our problem, and I'm not sure we've seen the worst yet. My mind keeps going back to Dorothy Sayers' comment that war is a judgment on nations that refuse to live by the moral law. Sure feels that way to me right now.

It's not that I envision God in the anthropomorphic way the ancients did— a wrathful deity in the sky waiting to hurl vengeance at the people when they step out of line. All the great religious traditions affirm that the world has been created so that it runs best when people behave in certain ways, acting justly toward one another, caring for the interests of the weak or the poor, doing the things that make for peace. If this is true, then the judgments of God are built right into the structure of the universe. When we live selfishly or when the strong bully the weak or when we lose sight of the common good and serve only our own interests, then what we get is what we've got— a God-damned mess.

It's not that God actively devises evil against us ( even though we may feel like that at times), but evil is what we get when we live in certain ways.

And that could leave us feeling pretty hopeless. It leaves me feeling hopeless sometimes.

But that's precisely where this business of God's repentance grabs my attention. Whenever this expression of God having a change of mind or repenting occurs in the biblical stories, it is always linked to the repentance of the people. If the people repent and change their ways, then the judgment is averted.

Just this week in we saw the article in the paper about the progress that's already been made and the work that still remains to be done in bringing Merrymeeting Bay back to its former state of a thriving eco-culture. Disaster has been averted, hasn't it? Why? Well, to frame it in theological terms, a lot of people have repented. To a great extent, we stopped polluting the Androscoggin and Kennebec rivers. We're still paying the price, but the rivers are recovering, and our children will be able to swim in them again and we'll be able to eat fish from them again.

A lot of theologians have had problems with this notion of God repenting, John Calvin, our own tradition's theological ancestor included. Calvin rightly warns against taking our human speech about God too seriously. When we speak of God repenting, we need to understand that we're using human analogies to speak of that which is beyond our power to speak of or to know. But Calvin, like the theological tradition he inherited, tended to think of God as immutable and impassible— the terms that were in vogue and which they got from the influence of Aristotle's thought. As the old Westminster catechism put it, "God is a Being without body, parts, or passions" That could also describe an amoeba.

The biblical images of God suggest a God

who is much more passionately engaged with the world, a God whose presence is immanent within the creation, and who loves the world with all the fervor of a devoted parent. Biblical faith does not see human history as the unfolding of blind forces, but as an arena in which moral choices lead to real consequences both for good and for ill. And God not only cares deeply about the outcome, but is actively at work with us in guiding us toward full maturity and partnership in creation. This conviction of God at work with us in history is why St. Athanasius could say, “The glory of God is a human being, fully alive.”

This is, in fact, at the very heart of Christian faith: it’s what we celebrate at Christmas. As St. John puts it, “*The Creating Word became flesh and lived among us, and we saw his glory.*” Or as St. Paul put it, “*God was in Christ, reconciling the world.*”

That’s why I find this notion of God repenting or having a change of mind so comforting. One of the early church fathers, Tertullian, thought so too. He said that just as we don’t attribute fault or blame to ourselves when we change our minds with regard to a prior purpose, why should we not accord God the same right?

A close-to-home analogy might help us grasp this. Think of a loving, but frustrated parent of a rebellious teenager who wants his or her child to mature into a responsible, loving adult. The child’s rebellious behavior may tempt the frustrated parent to say, “All right, it’s time for tough love; she’ll have to learn the hard way and I’m going to let her suffer the consequences of her own actions, even though it pains me deeply.” But then, the adolescent turns back from the brink and begins to get some perspective and begins to be open to dialogue with her parents again. What’s the parents’ reaction? Joy? Relief? “Whew! Disaster averted! Now she doesn’t have to suffer the judgment of her own actions. Now we can reestablish a relationship.” That’s the image that I have when

I read these texts about God repenting.”

And isn’t that exactly the message we hear in our Gospel lesson, in the two stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin? The shepherd in the first story could easily have said to himself, “Well, it’s that dumb sheep’s own fault that he’s wandered off on his own. So on his own head be it. Let him get eaten by wolves; it serves him right. I’ll protect the 99 that haven’t strayed and who came back when I called them.” If the shepherd had done that, we wouldn’t fault him would we? It would then be a story about the wisdom of cutting our losses, a story about acting practically and prudently. It’s the cost of doing business.

The same with the lost coin. Is one coin really worth all that energy and effort? I’ll tell you, I wouldn’t want to have to clean our own house that thoroughly even if it were a \$20 bill that was lost. And who would fault the woman if she simply cut her losses?

But no, the shepherd will not rest until every single sheep is safely in the fold; the woman will not put down her broom until she’s found her lost coin. And God, like a faithful Creator, a faithful parent, will not rest until we are consumed, not by God’s burning wrath, but by God’s patient and passionate and persistent love that seeks us out in all the dark corners where we lose ourselves. For in the end, God’s repentance is just another name for God’s mercy—a mercy that is wide enough to bring all creation to its intended glory.