

“Can I Get a Moses?”

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Jack Miller

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Sea Island Presbyterian Church, Beaufort, SC

Exodus 32:1-14

Matthew 22:1-14

Last year, I had the honor of going to a local elementary school to read to some of the classes there. One of the books I selected was a fun looking retelling of “The Boy Who Cried Wolf.” How many of you know that story? Well, as it turned out, each child in the classes I visited not only knew that story, but many of them were very familiar with the version of it that I brought with me. I thought they would be bored hearing this story one more time, however, as I read the tale of the boy who knowingly lied in order to get attention, those kids were on the edge of their seats. They cringed as we got to the frightening parts, and they began to quake with anticipation as we reached the end. Even though they knew the story, they were holding out for a different ending. Yet the ending is inevitable, and the boy seals his own fate.

The story from Exodus this morning is a lot like that. We know what’s coming, and we just can’t do anything to stop it. We probably knew it last Sunday, as we heard how God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. We just knew there would be trouble. God does not want these people to sin, and so God gives them some rules to follow, the first two of which are, “Don’t have any other gods but Me; and don’t make and bow down to and worship any idols.” So it shouldn’t surprise us that the people come almost immediately to Aaron, who is in charge while Moses is up on the mountain with God, and those people demand that he make for them other gods in the form of two calves that they can bow down to and worship. And Aaron said, “Ok.”

There are several things about this passage that really stand out to me, and this exchange is one of them. Aaron and the Israelites know the power and fidelity of God, they know the commandments God has placed on them, and they are as quick as lightening in violating those laws and turning on the God who freed them from slavery. They don’t even break the laws in a murky, “up to interpretation,” kind of way. They do it brashly, becoming the poster children for the catchphrase, “Sin boldly.”

That leads to the next thing about this passage that stands out to me. God informs Moses about what is happening at the base of the mountain. “Moses, your people, whom you brought out of Egypt, have really done it this time.” I can’t help but remember the many times my mother would greet my father at the door as he came in from work with the words, “Guess what your son did today?” I am just thankful that my parents were, at least in this instance, more gracious than God. God looks at the perverse actions of this stiff-necked people Israel and wants to burn them up in the fire of divine wrath. We might think to fault God for having such an extreme reaction. However, God has warned them about the consequences of disobeying their Creator and Savior, and they just refuse to listen. Whether we like it or not, God is perfectly justified in this judgment and punishment.

Which leads me to the final thing that stands out to me in this passage: Moses’ response to God. With courage and faith, Moses comes before an angry God and pleads for the lives of these people. He rejects God’s offer to make him the patriarch of a new clan of chosen people, and stands in the breach begging for their salvation. He even **offers himself as an atoning**

**sacrifice for their sin.** This is the same man who stood before the presence of God in the burning bush and practically begged God to choose anyone but him. Now he stands as one of the bravest and most admirable people we can ever imagine meeting. What a change Moses has undergone! And God listens to Moses' pleas to turn from his fierce wrath; to change his mind and not bring disaster upon his people. The Lord, the Creator of heaven and earth, changes his mind. Moses successfully intercedes for the Hebrews. And while they escape the wrath of God, Moses returns to them and reprimands them for their sinful actions. Though the Israelites are spared from destruction, they do suffer consequences for their disobedience.

The world needs people like Moses. Moses' who intercede on behalf of the "righteous people" who can't seem to stop sinning long enough to let their holiness have a chance. Moses' who intercede on behalf of people who claim to know and understand the Scriptures, yet consistently fail to do what they say. Moses' who intercede on behalf of people who try to tame God, or remake God in their own image, or worse yet, become God themselves. And believe me, those Moses' have their work cut out for them, because I stand before you today as one who needs the intercessions of a Moses.

We also need those Moses' to come back to us and show us how we are straying from the path that we are called to follow. We need Moses' who will boldly tell us when we are disobeying God, who will call us to account, to repent, to make amends, and to do better. We need Moses' who will remind us that God is God and we are not. We need Moses' to point out that God is trustworthy and just; and that we are God's covenant people, called to live as faithful and obedient participants in the pact we have entered into with our sovereign God.

We need Moses' today as much as the Israelites needed the Moses then, especially when we remember that idolatry is as seductive and subversive as ever. While we might not have a pair of golden calves that we bow down to and worship, there are plenty of competing traders who beg us to invest with them the energy, time, and affection that God demands from us. As we seek after those things, we are oblivious to the sneaky way they become the top priority in our lives, and replace God as the things we worship and serve. And maybe those things aren't even really all that bad. Donald McKim writes, "The seductiveness of idolatry lies in the fact that what we are focusing upon can, indeed, be a relatively good thing. We can pour our energies into our jobs, our political affiliations, our hobbies, our families, even into the work of the church. But when these become predominant in our minds and hearts, we are in danger of turning away from the true God and worshiping the 'idol'".<sup>1</sup> Indeed, we in modern Western society are more susceptible to the sin of idolatry than our ancient Israelite ancestors in the wilderness.

In one example from history, a political regime systematically took over the Christian religion of its people, substituting the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the party line. That political regime was led by Adolf Hitler, and through the efforts of the Nazi ideologues, the "German Christian" movement mobilized to support, in the name of Jesus Christ, the atrocities enacted by Hitler. Indeed, most German people took the union of Christianity, nationalism, and militarism for granted, and patriotic sentiments were equated with Christian truth. In this case, a political ideology became the idol so many Christians bowed to and worshiped. A small, but faithful, contingent of Moses', comprised of the likes of Martin Niemoller, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Karl Barth, composed a theological declaration that endeavored to call all Christians in Germany to tread the "path of faith and obedience to the Word of God" (8.04) and entreated them "to return to the unity of faith, love, and hope" (8.28). In the declaration, these Moses' rejected the idea that the church was permitted to abandon its foundation on Jesus Christ in

order to conform with changes in prevailing political convictions (8.18).<sup>2</sup> Their statement was a ringing affirmation that God's people must listen to and obey Jesus Christ, and him alone. Not emperor, not country, but Christ alone.

We need Moses' as much as the ancient Israelites did. We need Moses' as much as the people of Germany in the 1930s did. We need Moses' because how we think, how we speak, how we behave, and how we act matters. If we didn't know that already, then Jesus' parable about the king throwing out the poorly dressed wedding guest should give us a clue. Jesus, our ultimate intercessor, our very atonement, **the one who was greater and worthy of more glory than Moses**, compels us to pay attention to our faithful witness. We need Moses' to remind us that we are a covenant people, and that it matters how we live. It matters to God.

I think we need Moses', and I think we have a lot of good candidates here. The world needs people who know the Word of God. The world needs people who speak and act in ways that reflect true faithfulness. The world needs people who can boldly hold others accountable for their words and actions. Make no bones about it my friends, being a Moses isn't for sissies. It means coming face to face with a God whose righteous anger burns hot against a stiff-necked and disobedient people. It means calling out those stiff-necked and disobedient people. But even so, I think we need Moses'.

1. McKim, Donald K. *Introducing the Reformed Faith*. Louisville:WJK, 2001. p. 74
2. To read the Theological Declaration of Barmen as it appears in the Book of Confessions of the PC(USA), visit [https://www.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/boc2014.pdf](https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/boc2014.pdf)