

Exodus 32:1–14 (NRSV)

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.” 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.” So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. 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!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD.” 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.

The LORD said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; 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!’ ” The LORD said 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.”

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? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he 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. 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.’ ” And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

## Your Mother's Uncle<sup>1</sup>

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: October 12, 2014 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Exodus 32:1-14

Moses was on the mountain a long time. The Message version of the Bible, which strives for good plain English, says Moses was taking forever. The people were impatient. From the beginning this was not a journey the Israelites really wanted to be on. Way back when God spoke to Moses in the burning bush, Moses said, "The people won't believe me. They won't listen to me." And, indeed, they didn't. From the moment Moses arrived back in Egypt, things went from bad to worse for Moses and the people. Pharaoh made their work more severe, and the people said to Moses, "You have made us smell bad to the Egyptians!" When Moses told them he would lead them out of Egypt, the people didn't believe him. When they finally did go, they soon had their backs pinned against the sea by Pharaoh's army. They mocked Moses, "Why did you bring us out here to die? Were there not enough graves in Egypt?" And then after they made it through the sea, they complained that the drinking water was bitter. The food was short. They cried, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread."

Oh yes the people were impatient and grumbling. Again. Moses was taking forever on the mountain. They turned to Aaron, Moses' brother. They said: We don't know where Moses is. He's been gone forever. He's probably dead. He brought us out here in the wilderness, and now he's gone off and died on us and left us out here in the middle of nowhere by ourselves. And that God of his? Well, just where is that God of his? That God of his has been nothing but trouble from the start.

They turned to Aaron. Look Aaron you're our leader now. You need to fix this. We need some gods that actually do something. We need something to get us out of this mess.

So Aaron fired up the smelting pot. The people gave him all their jewelry, all their precious metal. Aaron melted the jewelry over the intense heat of the fire. He poured the molten metal into a mold. And, presto, the Israelites had the god they wanted. They were thrilled. They pointed to the calf and declared, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" And the next day, all day long, they held a wild festival. They made animal sacrifices, they feasted, they drank barrels of wine, and they reveled, and you can guess what that meant. They reveled alright.

And God looked down from Sinai. You know, a lot of people make fun of the idea of such a human acting God, the old man in the sky with a big white beard looking down and getting all angry and emotional. Is that what God really is, they ask? Is God really just a more powerful and smarter version of us? I get the question. No doubt what God actually is more mysterious and vast than that, something that human mind can't really comprehend. Tillich called God the ground of all being. But whatever God really is, it should be perfectly clear that God can meet us where we are. God can relate to us in ways we understand. And we can understand a God who has been up on the mountain for days with Moses working out the details

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<sup>1</sup> I've built this story from a bunch of family pieces, so it is in a real sense fiction. It's true in a real sense, too. But there was no such uncle whom we regularly visited.

of the commandments, who looks down and sees that the people have said, “We need some real gods,” who looks down and sees the people drinking and partying in all manner of debauchery because they’re so thrilled to have the golden calf instead of him. We can understand a God who looks down and sees all that going on and who says to Moses, “Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely. ... Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them.”

God says to Moses, “Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely.” Your people, Moses.

My father used to use a similar locution. He had a distant uncle who was, shall we say, odd. You know the old saying that you can choose your friends, but your relatives are yours to keep; they’re given to you. They’re your relatives no matter what. So my father had this distant odd relative whom he didn’t really want to claim. So he came up with a novel way to distance himself from the odd fellow. He reasoned that by marriage, my mother was related to this uncle, too. So my father took to referring to him as ‘your mother’s uncle.’ “We’re going to see your mother’s uncle today,” he would say as we headed out for a Sunday visit. My mother always rolled her eyes, and sometimes she would bother to state the obvious, “He knows better than that, you know.”

Well, in this morning’s passage can’t you just see Moses rolling his eyes? Can’t you just see him retort, “My people have acted perversely?” My people? Wasn’t it you, O God, way back in Genesis 12 who told Abram, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” Was it not you O God, who said I will make you a great people which will number as the sand of the sea and the stars of the sky? Was it not you who told them that this great multitude, their descendants, would inhabit the land of Canaan? And are not those people down there those very descendants who are on their way to Canaan right now? With all due respect, O God, I believe those are your people.

Despite the fact that Moses reminded God that the people were really God’s, Moses remains the cool headed, responsible adult in this particular moment. He says: Look, these are your people. What happens if you wipe them out? What do you think the Egyptians will say? They will laugh in your face. They’ll say: nice God that God of Israel; takes his people out into the mountains just to slaughter them. They’ll say: Promised Land? A great nation? A thriving multitude? What a joke. That God’s people ended up dry bones in the desert. You can’t trust that God as far as you can throw him.

Well God got the point. God changed his mind. The meaning of the Hebrew is that God regretted what he had intended to do. God repented. God calmed down. God got over himself and owned up to the fact that these were his people, for better or worse.

There were quite a few Sundays that we would visit my mother’s uncle, as it were. I remember asking my mother on at least one occasion, “If dad doesn’t like his uncle, why do visit so often?”

She said, “Well, he’s your father’s uncle. He’s family, no matter what he says.”

“So, you mean we visit him just because we’re related, just because he’s family?”

My mother thought about it for a moment, and then she came out with one of her sayings. “Well, blood runs thicker than water,” she said.

“But, Mom,” I said. “Isn’t that just the same thing as saying we visit because we’re related. Why does blood run thicker than water?” I wanted to know.

“You know, your dad actually loves his uncle,” she said. “He doesn’t visit just because he’s related.”

“Okay,” I said, still perplexed. “But if they weren’t related, I don’t think we would visit him. Do you?”

I’m not sure we ever got to the bottom of my mother’s uncle. But I do know that there are some bonds which do not easily come asunder. Family is one of them. Today we celebrated a baptism. The language of the baptism ceremony is filled with special bonds, bonds between family and friends, bonds with the congregation, bonds with God. In the ceremony we recognize a number of ways in which we cannot help but say that we belong to one another. God gives us these connections, these ligatures of belonging that we may support one another and in turn feel supported and accompanied on life’s journey. God is ever urging us to expand these communal connections that we might one day see ourselves as one human family, that we may welcome the stranger and the sojourner as we do those close to us.

In today’s passage we get a wonderfully accessible and moving example of the way it might work. We find God garbed in human mind. God looks down and sees his people. They have offended God so greatly that God wants to disown them. God tries to give the people to Moses, so to speak. “See what your people are doing, Moses?” he said.

But the real point quickly comes to the fore. These are God’s people. They have exasperated God, as they will hundreds of times more in the Bible. They are in many ways a great disappointment to God. But they are God’s people, whom God will not abandon even if they cause him to pull his hair out. They are God’s people first because they are kin; created in God’s image were they, male and female, it tells us in Genesis.

And maybe that’s the greater part of it. Maybe that seed of kinship, that germ of belonging, is what germinates and brings forth a shoot. Think of all those genealogies in the Bible. Think of how Matthew painstakingly gives us Jesus’ lineage and positions him in the line of David, a branch from the stump of Jesse. The bonds of kinship are the tender beginning that allows relationships to withstand stress and strain. It is very hard for a parent to give up a child, no matter how difficult and exasperating raising a child may be. This tender but strong beginning of kinship grows ever more tough and resilient. Finally it comes that one can shout in exasperation, “Those people of yours, Moses ...” or in mild dislike, “He’s your mother’s uncle,” and still find the bond unbroken, the commitment unshaken, and the love still faithful.

Our God is with us. We are not alone. My mother’s uncle was with us. We visited him often. One day, I do believe, the whole human family will belong to one another, and our bonds will be stronger than the ways we inevitably infuriate one another. Amen.