

Would The Real God Please Stand Up?

May I have your attention, please?

May I have your attention, please?

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Our readings this weekend reveal God's forgiveness and mercy.

- In our Gospel, Jesus says there's "more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than 99 who need no repentance."
- In our epistle, we heard emphatically: "Jesus came ... to *save* sinners."
- In Psalm 51, we heard the Psalmist, utterly confident in God's forgiving nature cry out:

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness; in your great compassion blot out my offenses."

Then there's that Exodus reading:

"Now let me alone so my wrath may burn hot ... and I may consume" these people.

What are we to make of this passage which feels irreconcilably inconsistent with the Gospel? God comes across as capricious and tyrannical.

As I studied this week's readings, a slightly-modified refrain came to mind – words from a great modern-day prophet, Eminem.

Who's the real story, yes **who's** the real story
 All those **Old** Testament texts are **just** plain gory
 So **won't** the **real** God please stand up, please stand up, please stand
 up.

I know: I'm no Eminem. Yet my goofy refrain captures a serious question arising whenever we encounter Old Testament stories involving God's wrath: is this God the same One who sent Jesus?

It's an age-old question. Christians have been asking a version of this question for thousands of years – many still ask today. In the second century, several groups of Christians believed the tension between the stories of wrath and those of Jesus was irreconcilable. They saw the god described in the Old as a capricious tyrant, a lesser god than the God who sent Jesus to save the world and asserted the Old Testament had no place in Christian Scripture.¹

Here's the thing: Jesus regularly referred to himself as the *fulfillment* of “the law and prophets.” For this reason, the Church rejected the move to jettison the Jewish Scriptures. “The Holy Scriptures of the Old *and* New Testaments are the Word of God”² and must be read together. This means

¹ For an excellent discussion of this part of the Church's history, watch Robert Barron's video, “On Violence in the Bible” available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1A65Wfr2is0>.

² The quote comes from the service for ordination on page 526 of the BCP but has its roots in this ancient debate.

when I read the Gospels, I do so with Abraham, Egypt, Deuteronomy, kings, and prophets in mind. And when I read the Old Testament, especially troubling texts like today's, I'm fully aware that God so loved the world that he sent Jesus so all who believe in him may have eternal life. This means if I come away from today's Exodus reading with the interpretation that God is capricious and cruel, I have misread it. For me at least, the only way to avoid this is to read the passage in context. Let's dig into the context here and see where we can get.

So far in Exodus, God has freed the Israelites from slavery with "signs and wonders" (7:3), led them through the Red Sea on dry ground, guided them through the wilderness by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, and brought them to Sinai. Here, they've heard the voice of God and been chosen as God's "treasured possession." God has promised they'll be "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (19:5-6) and has entered into covenant with them. That covenant begins:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

and continues:

You shall not make for yourself an idol ... You shall not bow down to them or worship them.

Now Moses has ascended the mountain to receive from God additional instruction and two tablets on which God has written the terms of the covenant. Trouble is, he's been there for 40 days, the mountain looks to them like it's covered in "devouring fire" (24:17), and they're terrified. Breaking the first two commandments of the covenant, they make an idol and declare: "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" (32:4).

That's where our passage today picks up. God, echoing their words, says to Moses: "Go down at once! **Your** people, whom **you** brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely ... Now let me alone, so my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of **you** I will make a great nation."

If we just read today's text, what strikes us most is God's burning wrath and the threat to destroy the people. Yet in light of the wider narrative, something else strikes me. God engages Moses in conversation. "Go down at once ... let me alone so my wrath may burn." If God's wants to destroy these people and begin anew with Moses as a new Abraham,

wouldn't God say something like, "Change of plan. They made an idol. I destroyed them. I'm gonna need you to have some kids"?

Instead, God engages Moses. God invites Moses into a conversation. God invites Moses to intervene.

It's interesting: Moses understands their fear. When God called him to go to Egypt and intercede with Pharaoh, Moses was so afraid he refused five times before reluctantly assenting. So Moses does intervene for them. He stands in the breach between God and the people and intercedes. "You can't mean this. You're the God of forgiveness and mercy."

I'm with Moses. I'm convinced God didn't mean it. If that were really God's intent, God wouldn't have initiated a conversation with Moses about it.

You know, there's a funny thing about the people's behavior along the way from Egypt to the promised land. Remember I said when they got to Sinai, they heard God speak? It happened when God gave the 10 Commandments: the mountain trembled and they heard a sound like a trumpet. They were so afraid they told Moses: "You speak to us, and we'll listen; but don't let God speak to us, or we'll die" (20:19). God asks Moses

to intervene for the people today, because the people have appointed Moses to that role.

This notion of an intercessor between us and God continues for thousands of years, all throughout the Old Testament. You know, when the Israelites build the Temple, they even place a veil between the place where God is thought to dwell (the “Holy of Holies”) and the space where they worship to ensure they don’t get too close. God accepted this, acting through Moses and through priests, kings, and prophets as intercessors. It never worked out well. Like that old game of telephone, when a mediator shared God’s word with the people, the message never got through the way God intended. Ultimately, God chose to cut out the intercessor. That’s what happens in the Incarnation, Jesus is fully human and, when we speak with him, we have a sense that we’re not talking to God – just someone like one of us. And yet, Jesus is fully divine so when we’re talking with Jesus, we are in direct relationship with God. With his death on the cross, Jesus – God enfleshed – stands in the breach for us and intercedes one final time, forever opening our direct access to God. That’s why the veil in the Temple split in half at his death.

It's not God who changes between the Old Testament and the New. It's us. Through Christ, we see God face to face and know clearly the God of forgiveness and mercy who's always been there calling us "a treasured possession."

After the dust settles and before the Israelites continue their journey, Moses asks God: "show me your ways so I may know you." And God obliges. Passing before Moses, God proclaims:

The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ...
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin (34:6-7).

This week, I felt like there was an "Epic Rap Battle of History" brewing inside me. And I've got to tell you, God won. After I threw up my best rhymes, God answered:

Y'all **act** like you never heard of **irony** before
Jaws all on the floor like I was **really** mad and sore
Like I would **eva** smite my **homies**, even **though** they are chore
Tremblin' and **afraid**, forgettin' **all** that came before
I am **merciful** and **gracious**; I am **slow** to lose my tempa
I **abound** in steadfast **love** and I've got your back **wheneva**

Y'all, **I'm** the real story, yes **I'm** the real story
The same **yesterday**, today and **forever** into glory
I am the real God, and I always stand up
For you.