

Exodus 32:1-14: **Refuse Doom!**

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Listen with me for God's word to us from the book of Exodus, chapter 32 (vv. 1-14, CEB):

The people saw that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, "Come on! Make us gods who can lead us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don't have a clue what has happened to him."

² Aaron said to them, "All right, take out the gold rings from the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." ³ So all the people took out the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He collected them and tied them up in a cloth. Then he made a metal image of a bull calf, and the people declared, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf. Then Aaron announced, "Tomorrow will be a festival to the Lord!" ⁶ They got up early the next day and offered up entirely burned offerings and brought well-being sacrifices. The people sat down to eat and drink and then got up to celebrate.

⁷ The Lord spoke to Moses: "Hurry up and go down! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, are ruining everything! ⁸ They've already abandoned the path that I commanded. They have made a metal bull calf for themselves. They've bowed down to it and offered sacrifices to it and declared, 'These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" ⁹ The Lord said to Moses, "I've been watching these people, and I've seen how stubborn they are. ¹⁰ Now leave me alone! Let my fury burn and devour them. Then I'll make a great nation out of you."

¹¹ But Moses pleaded with the Lord his God, "Lord, why does your fury burn against your own people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and amazing force? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, 'He had an evil plan to take the people out and kill them in the mountains and so wipe them off the earth'? Calm down your fierce anger. Change your mind about doing terrible things to your own people. ¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, whom you yourself promised, 'I'll make your descendants as many as the stars in the sky. And I've promised to give your descendants this whole land to possess for all time.'" ¹⁴ Then the Lord changed his mind about the terrible things he said he would do to his people.

The golden calf stands inert, unblinking while people make sacrifices and bow down to it. This is the god that brought us out of Egypt and keeps us safe!

What brings Israel to this point? Well, the Lord seems absent. And what's taking Moses so long? Clearly our leader has checked out. He's up a mountain on some fool vision quest. We need a replacement. Come on, Aaron! Make us something we can see and touch, celebrate and worship!

Maybe Aaron's nervous about the agitated crowd. Or he sees an opportunity for advancement. Or maybe he's convinced himself it's time for theological change. He crafts a little gold calf and the people immediately elevate it to godhood. They dance with relief that their anxiety has been sated.

And the Lord...burns with fury. These Israelites are *God's* beloved people, nurtured into a nation through God's relationship with Abraham and Sarah, with Rebekah and Isaac, with Jacob and Leah and Rachel, with Joseph, with Shiprah and Puah, the Israelite midwives who refused Pharaoh's order to kill all male Israelite babies. God has loved this people into existence, through oppression, and out into freedom.

None of us can love someone without becoming vulnerable, since our loved one has the freedom to choose how to respond. And here in the desert beloved Israel chooses...an inert idol.

Most everybody here has felt some sort of heartbreak. That makes us like God. Created in the image of God, each of us has been given a passionate, beating heart. Like God we can love and care and rejoice and sacrifice. And grieve.

When someone you love forgets that you exist, or throws all their devotion toward something or someone else, how do you feel? Maybe for a time you're so angry you want to forget they existed, burn all their love letters, leave the entire relationship behind and wipe the slate clean. That's the lover's wrath that God displays here. "Leave me alone and let my fury devour them!"

God tried that once, according to the Hebrew scriptures. Humans grew so debased and violent that God regretted ever making them. So God cleansed the earth with a great flood, saving only Noah's family to make a fresh start.

But the flood didn't work at cleansing evil. Generations later, humans still fail so spectacularly that God is again tempted to wipe out a whole people.

Remember Jesus' parable of the loving father, whose second son ran off with his part of the inheritance, lost it all, then returned home in humility? The older son refuses to join the party for his returned brother, angrily telling their father that "your son" has squandered everything and now you're celebrating his life. The older son won't even call him "my brother" but pretends not to be related to him.

In this golden calf story, God gets so angry that God does the same thing. The Lord says to Moses "*Your* people, whom *you* brought up out of the land of Egypt, are ruining everything." In the moment God seems to forget that Moses wouldn't even be there except that God called him, starting at a burning bush in the desert. It took long negotiation for God to convince Moses to join the Lord's cause of liberating Israel. It wasn't Moses's idea to begin with.

The golden calf: inert.
 The people: idolatrous.
 The Lord: infuriated.
 And the called leader: inexorable.

One of the Ken Burns documentaries I'm most grateful for is the film he made with Lynn Novick about the Vietnam War. The history of that conflict reveals idolatry on all sides: the idolatry of ideology¹. Whether the ideology was colonialism, or communism, or a capitalist "free world,"

¹ "Idolatry of ideology" is a phrase from Bruce Cockburn's song "Call It Democracy." *World of Wonders*. 1986.

nations worshiped each idea enough to sacrifice other's lives to that idol, resulting in millions of deaths and ravaged land throughout Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia.

But if we leave the idolatry of ideas and come down to the level of personal experience, many soldiers in Vietnam showed outrageous loyalty. Combatants on both sides under heavy fire rescued their wounded colleagues, or held their positions long after all hope was gone, or survived brutal captivity as prisoners of war. In the film we hear dozens of these stories. Like Vincent Okamoto's. His fellow American soldiers needed help in a blazing firefight, so he ran to a damaged personnel carrier, fired its machine gun to protect his soldiers, and when those bullets ran out he raced to a second vehicle to do the same thing, then to a third vehicle, and then he stopped an attacking enemy group all by himself, then he was injured by a grenade but *wouldn't stop fighting* while his men were in peril. Vincent Okamoto stood in the gap. He put himself between danger and his people.

Moses has that kind of guts. He stands himself in the gap between danger and his people.

Moses pleads with God to be compassionate to the people who gave in to idolatry. And Moses will not consent to their destruction. A few verses beyond what we read, Moses even says to God, "But now, please forgive [the people's] sin. And if not, then wipe *me* out of your scroll that you've written" (32:32). Moses refuses God's extraordinary offer to wipe out all those sinners and make a new nation starting with Moses. He tells God, I'm not giving up on these your people, the ones you promised to bless. If you won't forgive them, then punish me too. Moses inexorably argues with God — *argues with God!* — on behalf of condemned people.²

Jan Bonda served for decades as a pastor in the Dutch Reformed Church. In retirement he found he had something more to preach to the world. He wrote a beautiful book of Bible study and theology called *The One Purpose of God: An Answer to the Doctrine of Eternal Punishment*. Long ago that book helped me see that *how* we read the Bible can be a matter of life and death. Bonda's book is one of the reasons I ended up getting a theological education.

And Bonda holds up this story from Exodus as a lesson in God's ultimate purpose. He writes, A person is not chosen because God is willing to accept that person but not the others. An individual is chosen because God intends to use that person to *save those others*. Moses was God's chosen one because he was willing to put his own salvation at risk on behalf of that of others.³

God chose well because Moses simply refuses doom. Although God's wounded heart burns with righteous anger, Moses stands in the gap, brave as Vincent Okamoto, and refuses to quit "until God has assured him that God will forgive Israel and will dwell in their midst."⁴ Here is Moses's finest moment, when he calls God to remember God's own promises and hopes. Moses pleads for God's own deepest nature, loyal love, to win out over momentary divine anger. *And the Lord changed his mind*. In the end, God also refuses doom.

² Walter Brueggemann says, "It is evident...that Moses' relationship with Yahweh is lively and disputatious and will have endless seasons of risk, alienation, and restoration. All of this belongs as much to the person of Moses as it does to the character of God." *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997. p. 580.

³ Bonda, Jan. *The One Purpose of God: An Answer to the Doctrine of Eternal Punishment*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998. p. 58. My emphasis.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 63.

There's no love without vulnerability. And every loving relationship requires flexing from both participants. God changes God's mind because love demands it, and because Moses would not give up. Jan Bonda says,

This story about Moses makes abundantly clear that [a] spirit of acquiescence is the complete opposite of what Scripture teaches us about the will of God. Whoever [God calls] is called not to accept passively the doom people have brought upon themselves. And those who do acquiesce cannot be the tools through [whom] God realizes God's purposes.⁵

In 1996 "Keshia Thomas was 18 [years old] when the Ku Klux Klan...held a rally in her home town in Michigan."⁶ A small clutch of Klansmen in white robes and hoods rallied in Ann Arbor while a much larger group of citizens protested the Klan's presence. White supremacists and their protesters were kept separated by heavily armed police.

Keshia was among the anti-KKK protesters when someone shouted *There's a Klansman in the crowd!* "They turned around to see a white, middle-aged man wearing a Confederate flag T-shirt" and sporting a [Nazi] SS tattoo on his arm.⁷ The man started hurrying away as the crowd followed him. It was unclear whether he was a KKK supporter, but he sure looked the part. Collective anger turned those protesters into a mob. Someone shouted "Kill the Nazi!" and the man was knocked to the ground. People started kicking and hitting him with their protest signs.

Keshia, a Black woman still in high school, "threw herself on top of [this] man she did not know and shielded him from the blows."⁸ The startled mob found themselves beating not an outcast but one of their own. The fury abated. The *BBC News Magazine* published some amazing documentary photos of this event.

So what gave [Keshia] Thomas the impetus to help a man whose views...appeared...so different from her own, [someone who never thanked her]? Her religious beliefs played a part. Also, she says, "I knew what it was like to be hurt. The many times that that happened, I wish someone would have stood up for me."⁹

Keshia refused to let even a white supremacist be doomed by his own choices. Her bravery and compassion challenge *us* to refuse drawing social or political lines that encourage damnation of "those others."

Now in her 40s and living in Houston, Texas,

[Keshia] says she tries to do something to break down racial stereotypes every day. No grand gestures — she thinks that small, regular acts of kindness are more important. "The biggest thing you can do is just be kind to another human being. It can come down to eye contact, or a smile. It doesn't have to be a huge monumental act."¹⁰

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Wynne, Catherine. "The teenager who saved a man with an SS tattoo." *BBC News Magazine* online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-24653643>

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*



God help all of us to live like Keshia in this hurting world, renouncing wrath and rediscovering that God has planted loyal love deep in our hearts too. And even when God feels absent, which happens to me sometimes and maybe to you also, today's scripture calls us to refuse a sense of doom, to resist the fear that our faith may be in vain, to relinquish the temptations of idolatry.

Most of all you and I are called to refuse anyone else's doom. Who has been condemned by poverty, by the legal system, by systemic racism, by rising sea levels, or by their own choices? How will we stand in the gap, even putting ourselves at risk to save others?

That is the way of Moses.

The way of Jesus.

The way of God.

In the name of God the Liberator,
 God the Liberated,
 and God the Liberation Theologian.