

"A David Copperfield Moment?"

"Intercession"

Exodus 32:7-14, 21-24; Matthew 22:34-40

Before I begin this morning's sermon I have a message to share with you from our Presbytery Moderator, Rev. Aaron Beatty, who sent out a message yesterday to all of our Presbytery clergy and Elders. "Greetings friends, as moderator of our presbytery, I would like to invite you to join me in prayer and fasting over the lunch hour during this upcoming week. Whatever your political convictions may be, may we draw near to God in repentance on behalf of our nation, and in pursuit of His will over ours. If you will be joining me (and if another time works better- great) please respond and let me know. Through the next two weeks, may the peace of Christ be with you, guarding your hearts and minds. I would also like to invite you to extend the invitation to your congregations. I will be doing so tomorrow."

I thank God for our Presbytery's leadership and for this invitation and reminder of how important the practice of prayer and fasting is. This invitation is also a subtle reminder of the critical nature of our current social and political circumstances.

Let us consider again the Scripture where Jesus replied to the question the expert in the law put before him, saying, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment." But it's critical to note that Jesus didn't stop there, whereby adding, "And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (NIV) It may be said that there is a human tendency to bifurcate, that is, divide into two parts, that which is, arguably, a single over-arching commandment, to love both God and man, simultaneously, without distinction and without contradiction. There is perhaps warrant and evidence for this view in terms of our OT lesson.

It is an often over-looked point of this story that what Moses did in his intercession for the people of God was, actually, quite extraordinary; it was contrary to what people would expect of anyone in that day, even the leader of a group of sinful people. Who, in their right mind, would stand up to God in seeming defense of a god-dishonoring people? One of the profound and inescapable lessons of the OT is that God is NOT a God to be trifled with. God's anger and wrath are real and are not something to be misunderstood or casually dismissed. The LORD was at a particular moment of great anger and frustration, and rightfully so according to Scripture, when Moses did a most daring thing. Moses interceded for his people, the very people the LORD had saved but was now about to destroy. Simultaneously, they had committed several of the most egregious acts they could have done: created an idol and worshiped it. One can only wonder at what raced through Moses's mind as he contemplated standing before the LORD and interceding for them. It was as audacious as it perhaps was dangerous. Who could know how the LORD would respond to Moses's daring effort? Defending such a wayward people was not a task one delighted in nor performed without some serious fear and trepidation.

I needn't rehash the story and words that Moses spoke for we just read them. One take away from this part of the story is the rightness of interceding for the wayward. Intercession on the behalf of others is an important, and sometimes critical, arrow in the quiver of spiritual battle.

As I was thinking about Moses's intercession on behalf of, or would it be better said, "in defense of", the people of God, it occurred to me derivatively that we should consider briefly the concept and practice of intercessory prayer. I sense that I may have been a bit remiss in not focusing or commenting a little more on the part of our worship service we know as Intercessory Prayer.

This element of our worship is not secondary to the other worship elements. I believe it is a Biblical view that intercessory prayer is as necessary as the reading and study of Scripture, as necessary as the preparation and delivery of the sermon, as necessary as the giving of our tithes and offerings, as necessary as the selection and singing of our hymns and worship songs, and as necessary as the ending of worship with a word of encouragement and blessing. Intercessory prayer is intuited in both elements of our Gospel lesson: love for God and love for our fellow human being. There seems to be something wrong if and when we bifurcate, that is, separate, the two commandments Jesus named. For if and when we love God as God commands us, we will also love our fellow man, even if that involves praying in intercession for our fellow human beings, and derivatively, for our nation.

But lest we misunderstand, Moses did NOT defend his people, per se, by claiming or offering some goofy argument that what they had done was not a violation, nor that their actions were not really that bad after all but merely the mater of a lapse of memory or poor judgment. Moses did NOT go there. Moses simply pled his case in terms of God's great mercy and for the continuance of God's plan uninterrupted. In one sense it's kind of a strange argument but Moses used it anyway: "What will the world think, O LORD, if you destroy your people and upend what you have initiated? Do you want the world to think you are foolish or inept?!" This of course isn't exactly what Moses expressly stated but it kind of gets to the heart of it.

After successful intercession for his people, Moses turns his attention to his substitute leader whom he had left in charge while he was gone, saying, "What [in the world] did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?!" Aaron's response falls into my category of ironic humor, which I find so appealing as you all know by now. My omitting verses 15-20 was for the purpose of making a better sense of the shift from intercession to accountability in terms of Aaron's leadership.

In a bit of paraphrase and slight expansion in terms of the supposed appearance of the golden calf it might be expressed like this: "Moses," exclaimed Aaron, "you probably won't believe this, but...., but the people just handed over all their gold jewelry and I just threw it into the fire. Again, Moses, you probably won't believe this, but, I just threw all their gold in the fire and....., suddenly, out came this calf! It was like magic, Moses! You should have seen it! It was extraordinary!" Again, this is an expansion.

In case you can't tell, I cannot read this story and not be at least a little amused. It is what I consider to be a David Copperfield moment.

[For the reader, what follows in parentheses is the longer version of the shorter version I used in my sermon in the interest of time constraints. It is included in its entirety here for the use of the reading audience.] *[David Seth Kotkin (born September 16, 1956, the son of Jewish parents), known professionally as David Copperfield, is an American magician, described by Forbes as the most commercially successful magician in history. Copperfield's television specials have won 21 Emmy Awards and 38 nominations. Best known for his combination of storytelling and illusion, Copperfield's career of over 40 years has earned him 11 Guinness World Records, a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, a knighthood by the French government, and he has been named a Living Legend by the US Library of Congress. When not performing, he manages his chain of eleven resort islands in the Bahamas, which he calls "Musha Cay and the Islands of Copperfield Bay".*

Copperfield's mother was born in Jerusalem while his paternal grandparents were Jewish immigrants from the USSR (present-day Ukraine). Shy and a loner, the young Copperfield saw magic as a way to fit in and, later, to meet women. As a child, Copperfield attended Camp Harmony, a day camp in nearby Warren, New Jersey, where he began practicing magic and ventriloquism, an experience to which he credits his creative style. His illusions have included the disappearance of a Learjet (1981), the vanishing and reappearance of the Statue of Liberty (1983), levitating over the Grand Canyon (1984), walking through the Great Wall of China (1986), escaping from Alcatraz prison (1987), the disappearance of an Orient Express dining car (1991) and flying on stage for several minutes (1992).]

In my research I found an interesting connection between David Copperfield and the Israelites. David Copperfield was born David Seth Kotkin (September 16, 1956) to Jewish parents. Copperfield's mother was born in Jerusalem; his paternal grandparents were Jewish immigrants from the USSR (present-day Ukraine). Shy and a loner, the young Copperfield saw magic as a way to fit in and, later, to meet women. It should be noted, however, that while people often refer to him as a magician, more accurately and typically, he is referred to as an illusionist. I would guess that at least some of you have seen some of his illusions on television. His illusions have included the disappearance of a Learjet (1981), the vanishing and reappearance of the Statue of Liberty (1983), levitating over the Grand Canyon (1984), walking through the Great Wall of China (1986), escaping from Alcatraz prison (1987), the disappearance of an Orient Express dining car (1991) and flying on stage for several minutes (1992). I distinctly remember watching the disappearing dining car illusion on television as it happened.

Part of the ironic humor here is that Aaron's telling of how the golden calf came to be was not an illusion but a totally false fabrication. What Aaron describes is outrageously funny to me but at the same time heart-breakingly untrue. It wasn't an illusion or a feat of magic; it was nothing but a bald-face lie as we would say.

On top of that, if we go back and read the omitted verses we see that this fabrication, rightfully called what it is - a lie, comes immediately after the furious drubbing Moses gave the people. After angrily casting the tablets to the ground, thus breaking them into pieces, Moses "took the calf they had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it." (Exodus 32:20, NIV) It appears Moses's anger mirrored the intensity of the LORD's earlier anger at the Israelites. One would think that Aaron would not want to stir Moses's anger any further. But instead, Aaron, apparently attempting to distance or excuse himself from responsibility in the present debacle, comes up with the fantastical fabrication. Even after the terrible drubbing he had received with the rest of the people, Aaron has to ratchet it up a notch.

But the various bits and pieces of this fantastic story are not the end of the story, nor are they the main or final point. The main point is that the LORD, in his grace and mercy, does not destroy his chosen people. Moses has interceded and the LORD has granted them clemency.

Lest we miss a key point here, Moses serves as the Christ figure, the one who intercedes on behalf of the people, a people who has done grievous wrong.

When I think of the many instances of intercessory prayer offered during our worship services here, I think of the broad range of issues, persons, and entities prayed over. I think of the different people who have led us in prayer and the gifts that God has given each one of them in terms of emphases, tone, and content. In the past I've had a couple of people tell me they are very nervous about leading us in intercessory prayer. In both cases it seems to be the matter of a sense of inadequacy. "I don't think my prayer is very good." Or, "I don't think my prayer is as good as the others." Let me simply say intercessory prayer is NOT a matter of being good, or better or worse, than others. It's a matter of loving God, our fellow man, and the world in which we live. It is a matter of fidelity, that is, faithfulness to God and the faithfulness that he has granted to a world that has not earned and cannot earn God's blessing and God's ear. If you in your individual or public prayer find yourself kind of nervous about how or what you pray, you might consider Moses's example. We are not told but I can't help but wonder what his level of anxiety and fear was or was not. As I mention from time to time, people of that day knew the LORD was NOT a God to be trifled with. As a side bar note, many people today have lost something of that understanding, meaning they are too casual with God. On the one hand we don't want to have an unBiblical and unwarranted sense of "fear" of God, but, on the other hand, we surely don't want to be as casual as many today seem to be. Maybe there is a question we might ask Moses when we get to heaven. "Were you nervous when you interceded for the people that particular day? The LORD was so hot under the collar!" I would love to know.

One of the issues that has been raised increasingly this past year, at least in terms of the church, is the seeming abandonment of Biblical principles in terms of governance and understanding of our history. The Founders of our nation, both men and women, Founders found to be scattered across the Christian theological spectrum, were utterly convinced, and they proceeded upon, the

conviction that God, as Christianity understands God, had given our nation its birth. I am utterly convinced that if we could talk to many of the key figures of that day they would be inclined to agree that today's America's shift is tantamount to a golden calf incident. The growing cultural sentiment is that America was not founded by the power, influence, and help of the Christian God and the Judao-Christian principles. Increasingly, history has been revised. Many folks attribute our founding and subsequent success to many different things, but not God. A different idol has been caste and a different god is worshiped. "These are your gods, America, who gave our nation its start and which continues it onward today." All the freedoms we were granted by God in those early decades, those freedoms which have been fought for in and through the centuries which followed, are at great risk today. In little over a week we shall see whether those freedoms will have any chance of survival or not.

It should be noted that, to use a phrase of which we are all familiar, to fashion the golden calf was a slap in the face to the LORD. The LORD had been the God who led the people out of Egypt with mighty power and an outstretched hand, as Scripture phrases it, and given her her freedom. It was this same God who gave our nation our founding. To now have our nation, however slowly it has happened, to turn it's back on God is also a slap in God's face.

Let me note two related things here, first, that the United States of America is NOT a "theocracy". By definition, a theocracy is "a government ruled by, or subject to, religious authority." Our nation is not governed by Christianity nor God per se. But on the other hand it was founded on God's principles and by God's omnipotent hand. To shift to a different view and give credit and find guidance elsewhere is to fashion a golden calf idol in our day, no less egregious than in Moses's day.

This past week I couldn't help but think of another Biblical story that seems pertinent to this discussion. I taped a brief FB video introducing us to the story found in 1 Kings 21, the story of King Ahab and Naboth's Vineyard. I offered an encouragement to read the whole story as found in the entire chapter, but with particular emphasis on the first 3 or 4 verses. The story begins thus.

"Some time later there was an incident involving a vineyard belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite. The vineyard was in Jezreel, close to the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. Ahab said to Naboth, "Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth." But Naboth replied, "The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers." So Ahab went home, sullen and angry because Naboth the Jezreelite had said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers." He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat." (1 Kings 21:1-4, NIV)

I've noted elsewhere that it strikes the modern mind as kind of strange that a person is offered a better piece of property in exchange for a lesser valued one and yet refuses the good deal. One way up the economic ladder of success is to sell or trade one property for a better, more expensive one. For Naboth the Jezreelite to refuse the good deal baffles the modern mind. Even more, Naboth perhaps sounds foolish.

There are two things about this passage I want to mention. First, it has to do with the history and theology of Israel, ancient to the present day. Prior to undergrad and seminary I puzzled over why Israel has never seemed willing to give up, or negotiate away, even a square foot of what they know to be the Promised Land. It is apparent that they will never willingly give up the slightest sliver or parcel of it. The Palestinians and other nations have never been able to get Israel to give an inch on this. This was something of a mystery to me, that is, until I learned a theological truth this passage reveals. This passage contains a key to the mystery.

Modern America understands geographical property as a thing, something to hold, occupy, and use for whatever present use one has for it. Basically, geographical property in one location is inherently no better or worse than another. What determines its value is one's perceived use of it and monetary value. It's strictly a utilitarian issue. Conversely, for Israel, in general, and Naboth, in particular, the geographical property that is his vineyard is not of value because of its utilitarian value. That vineyard was part and parcel to his faith relationship with God. In short, possession of that specific and particular parcel of land was inseparable from his relationship with God. To give up that particular parcel would be to give up his faith in God. It would be tantamount to rejecting God himself. That is why Naboth said to King Ahab, "The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers." Equating that to us who are faithful disciples of Jesus, it would be like us renouncing Jesus Christ and all that he stands for. Thus, we know now why Israel has never been able or willing to willingly give up a single square inch of the land the LORD promised to them through Abraham. History and Scripture seem to agree, the people of Israel will die to the last man, woman, or child before they give up their land. This truth has many profound implications on the international stage.

But for today's message the connection is thus.

Though, as I mentioned, our nation and nation's polity is not a theocracy, on the other hand our Constitution and way of life was granted to us by God's gracious hand and by which we have been led through these last 250 years. This is why most citizens of the United States have fought so hard to maintain what God has given us - our Constitution, our foundation, our many forms and instances of freedom, however imperfectly we have held or used them. Our nation has always had many sins of which we have been fully guilty. But that does not obviate the truth that our freedoms and way of life were a gift from God. This is why many of us will never give in to the lie that these things are not now true, nor the lie that they never were true.

There are very few in our present day who do not understand that our nation is at a critical juncture. Most succinctly expressed, it is either freedom or tyranny.

As it was with the people who Moses led out of Egypt, our nation's citizens today have a choice to make - honor the God who gave us our birth and way of life, or to give it all up in the worship of a modern day golden calf. This will be decided shortly, it seems almost certain, in terms of our presidential election and the seating of a Supreme Court Justice. And even then, even if things go well for

us, there is no certainty that the challenge will not return in the future. The golden calf incident was not to be the last incident of apostasy of that ancient people. It would recur again and again. So is the possibility for us. We have to be ever vigilant.

For today now, in specific application of Moses's example for us, I believe we are to pray in deep, fervent, and on-going intercession for our nation and our people. It is not only our citizens who know something of our nation's history and founding. Many other nations know something of it as well. Perhaps in the manner of Moses's prayer we should pray, saying, "O God of heaven, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you who gave us our nation's birth and who gave us our formula for life and freedom, why should other nations laugh at us, or laugh at you, when it seems you have let disaster fall upon us? Why should it be said that you abandoned us? Did you create us and give us this historically unique polity and way of life only to let us fall and be consumed? Please, O Lord, do not let disaster come upon us. Remember our Founders and their trust in you and their deep commitment to you, however imperfectly understood or lived out. Move the hearts of this thy people to return to you once again. Move the hearts of our people to destroy the golden calf idol that has been crafted as replacement for you."

I want to close noting two things, first that Moses loved God with all his heart (however imperfectly; he was merely human after all). But, second, he also loved his neighbor as himself. Otherwise he would never have risked interceding for the people at the precise moment God was so heated, angry, and determined to destroy them all. Can you imagine being Moses and hear the LORD say that he was about to destroy every one of them? He alone, it seems, would have been left.

As a closing thought, each one of us, as disciples of Jesus, are to carry on his work of intercession. The church of Jesus Christ, as the earthly manifestation of the one True and ultimate Intercessor, Jesus, typified by God's prototype, Moses, is also to be firm, resolute, and humbly dedicated in this great work of intercession at this most critical time.

Let us pray. [Here I will let the reader pray his or her own prayer as it aligns with the theme of this sermon and as the Holy Spirit guides.] Amen.