



Sermon delivered by  
The Rev. Dr. Augustus E. Succop III  
Quail Hollow Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
October 15, 2017

## "A Change of Mind" (Exodus 32: 1-14)

The feeling of betrayal is devastating. To discover that someone has betrayed you, someone you know and respect and love is painful, and the recovery can be long and hard, if there is a recovery. One of my classmates in seminary had been a divorce attorney. He had served in that capacity of almost 20 years. One day he realized he was finished. He had had enough of being an accessory to the pain and hurt that accompanies betrayal and infidelity. My classmate had benefitted monetarily. He was good at what he did, but one day he knew he had had enough, and soon thereafter he came to discern a call to be a pastor. Instead of cleaning up the pieces of broken promises and broken hearts, he wanted to spend the rest of his working years promoting love and hope and healing.

Who hasn't been touched by betrayal, by infidelity, by having your heart broken by someone you thought you could trust? Such pain has to be the most painful of human experiences, which may explain why Jesus came to know such pain on the night when He was betrayed by one of His closest friends. Jesus knows the pain of betrayal. We may think such pain is strictly human, humanly personal and private, but it really isn't. Jesus knows that pain quite intimately. And if He knows that pain intimately, then Almighty God knows that pain, as well.

When I read over the morning lesson, I am reminded of why I hold the love I hold for the God of Jesus Christ. Our God has never protected the divine heart from pain, never. If anything, the God of Jesus Christ has willingly, *willingly* become vulnerable for our sake. Paul helps us to understand that vulnerability by telling us that Jesus did not hide and protect Himself from our humanity. Jesus emptied Himself of divine privilege. Jesus took on the form of a slave, and for our sake became one of us, even to the point of feeling our pain on a cross of death. When we are tempted to believe no one knows how we feel, that may be a slight exaggeration because there is One Who does know our pain, and that One is Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

In college, I sat with a friend who discovered he had been two-timed by his girlfriend. I recall him saying over and over again, *If only I had known. If only I had seen the hints and heard the lies, it would have been easier to accept.* My friend came to realize that what he and his girlfriend had shared had meant nothing to her. That is what hurt. Their relationship had meant nothing to her. There is an echo of that hurt in what God tells Moses. The Israelites have gone off after other gods, and they are giving those gods all the credit for delivering them out of Pharaoh's hand. God is venting to Moses because God's heart is filled with pain. God's heart has been broken. God has been betrayed by the people God loves and has saved. From God's point of view, what God has done for the Israelites has meant nothing to them, nothing at all. The Lord said to Moses, *I have seen what they have done, how proud they are about their actions, and I need some time to cool off because I am hopping mad, and I may just do something I may regret.* When you read those words in Exodus, you can almost feel the heat, the wrath, the hurt being expressed, and we shouldn't be surprised that it comes through so poignantly.

As we come to learn, Moses engages the Lord. In a sense, Moses becomes God's pastor, and Moses helps the Lord to see that doing what the Lord is tempted to do would go against everything the Lord has professed to be for us, not just for the Israelites, but all of humanity. Moses speaks to God and says, *Remember the promise You made to Abraham and Isaac and Israel, to Sarah and Rebekeh and Rachel.* Moses urges God to have a change of mind, to spare the people, to give them another chance. That's hard to do, isn't it? When you feel betrayed you are not feeling charitable as in a second chance. But interestingly enough, Moses doesn't ask the Lord to give the people a second chance. Note this because this is important.

What Moses asks of God is, *Don't forget Whom You are, O Lord.* Moses doesn't ask God to forgive or to provide a second chance. Moses asks God to remember God's identity, that *You are the God of great promises, promises made and promises kept.* No other god can make and keep the promises God can make and is willing to keep. *Only You are that God,* so says Moses. *Only You can deliver on the promises You make,* so says Moses. Moses knew and knew quite well God's track record, and God does have a track record. Moses had witnessed that when God made a promise, God keeps the promise. All those other gods (small "g" gods), they can't do that. They would love to do that, but they can't do that. All those other gods have no track record. Those gods are powerless. In today's parlance, those gods

are impotent. They have no wherewithal to do what the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Isaac and Rebekeh, the God of Rachel and Israel can do. They have no power! None.

God does change the divine mind because God is that kind of God. The God of Jesus Christ is a God of promise, and within that promise there is forgiveness, there is a loving-forgiveness. But more importantly, far more importantly, within that promise is found the true identity of our God, the God Who in time erases our sin, and in our place Jesus comes to bear the pain and the suffering that is rightfully ours to own, and Jesus reinstates our true identity as children of God. Once we were no people, once we had no identity, but now we are God's people. We need to hear that loudly and clearly and faithfully. The great crime, the great sin, the great betrayal is to become someone we are not. By their actions, the Israelites became people God did not recognize. Isn't it the same with us? We are baptized to be a child of God, but then by our actions, our words, our thoughts we betray our identity. We become people no one recognizes. We become people we fail to recognize when we look in the mirror.

The great pain of betrayal is to become people we are not and should never become. The daughter of Harvey Weinstein has said that all the accusations against her father have turned him into someone she doesn't recognize as being her father. Sin has a way of distorting the human image, spiritually, of course, but at times even physically. The great temptation is to become someone you are not, and when that happens we end up betraying the One Who gave us our identity in the first place. Which why we owe Jesus big time! What Jesus has done for us is to make sure God never changes the divine mind when it comes to you and to me. Because of the cross, God recognizes us as the people of God. When God sees us, God sees Whom? Jesus, and in Jesus we are now and we are forever God's children, members of God's holy family, and *that* will never change. The God of that promise will never break that promise, never, never.

For all the times I have read the morning lesson, I have always smiled when I have gotten to verse 14 where it says: *And the Lord changed His mind about the disaster that God planned to bring on the Israelites.* I have smiled in reading those words because I always picture Moses heaving a great sigh of relief. I picture Moses thinking, *Mission accomplished.* Moses must have felt no small relief when God announced that God had had a change of mind, and instead the people would live to see another day. There would be more work ahead and more heartburn, as well, but at least the people would continue to learn and to live into being God's people. Sound familiar? It well should.

By the grace of God, by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God does not forget God's promise to love, to be the God of promise, to see us as God's children, people who have so much learn about being God's people, about being brothers and sisters in Christ. All of that was once put into jeopardy because we forgot our identity, but no more. We know whom we are. We are God's people. We know that, and *so does God*. We are members of God's holy family, and when it comes to family you don't forget; you don't forget whom you are and whose you are. And should you ever forget, here's the good news: we have an Advocate with the Father. We have Someone Who is willing to remind us of whom we are, and why we have been given life not death, life, abundant life, even life beyond this life, a life worthy enough to be lived in the very presence of the only living God.

**Let us pray:** Holy God, to believe we may actually change Your mind is extraordinary, but according to scripture it is not unexpected. Through our faith in Jesus, inspire us to be the people You have called us to be, the people we have been baptized to be. And through the life-changing conversation we have with You through Christ, remind us always why we are so loved by You. Amen.