Our Mediator

**Introduction**

Good morning, Bethel! Once again, I have the privilege of sharing the word of God with you all. This will be my last time preaching here as your Youth Pastor. This is also a sermon that our classis is going to use to examine me in preaching. So, there’s no pressure at all. Today we are going to look at Exodus 34:1-9. Before we spend time reflecting on the Word, let us spend some time in prayer.

**Hook**

If you are a sports fan of any kind, you know that most sports require referees. This is because, in most high stakes games the teams or players involved cannot be trusted to make the honest or correct call every time. As a result, an impartial party needs to mediate between teams and determine what is fair to the best of their abilities. This is particularly important when emotions run high, or one athlete is far stronger than the other.

That imbalance occurs pretty much anytime someone in the NHL tries to fight Zdeno Chara. Chara is the tallest ice hockey player in the history of the NHL. He stands at 6’ 9” and he is no scrawny tall guy either, he is a filled out 6’ 9”. I have seen Chara fight several players smaller than him, usually instigated by the smaller player, and he takes hits like a tank. It is good for the little guy that the refs step in otherwise someone could get seriously hurt fighting Chara.

In this narrative we will see a situation develop between two imbalanced sides. We are going to hear about how Moses mediates between God and his people.

**Text-** Exodus 34:1-9 (NIV)

The Lord said to Moses, “Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. 2 Be ready in the morning, and then come up on Mount Sinai. Present yourself to me there on top of the mountain. 3 No one is to come with you or be seen anywhere on the mountain; not even the flocks and herds may graze in front of the mountain.”

4 So Moses chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones and went up Mount Sinai early in the morning, as the Lord had commanded him; and he carried the two stone tablets in his hands. 5 Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. 6 And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, 7 maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”

8 Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped. 9 “Lord,” he said, “if I have found favor in your eyes, then let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance.”

1. Trouble in the Text: Worship on Israel’s Terms

From the very start of this passage, despite the intimacy between Moses and God, we can sense that some serious things have occurred. There is something tense or weighty about it. One of the ways we can tell something bad has happened is because God commands Moses to make new tablets of stone to replace the ones he broke. What could cause Moses to break tablets God himself wrote on?

Also, both Moses and God, even though they are having a profound and powerful moment together, describe the people of Israel as a stiff-necked, wicked, rebellious, and sinful people. Why is such strong negative language used when referring to the people of Israel?

It is for this reason and many others that commentators agree that we cannot understand this text without talking about what has happened before. The previous chapters allow us to see some of the baggage that has been brought into Moses’ encounter with God.

Leading up to this passage, God has rescued his people from Egypt, he has fed and protected them, and he has just started making plans for the building of his tabernacle and all the laws and rituals that would enable him be among his people. However, as God is sharing the ten commandments from the top of Mount Sinai, the people become afraid of God and fear their own destruction. As a result, they ask that Moses share the words of God instead of God himself. This request for a mediator makes sense and Moses and God oblige their request. Moses goes to the top of the mountain himself to listen to God’s commands and requirements.

However, time goes by, and the people start to wonder what happened to Moses. Instead of looking at God’s past protection and provision as a sign of God’s faithfulness, they question if God is still with them and, out of fear, they fashion a golden calf, worship it, and party.

In the past, when I considered this story, I thought the people were worshipping a god other than Yahweh, but what they are actually doing is making an image that represents God. In those times calf and bull statues functioned as a seat for the gods. The people want something concrete that they could use to worship God. They wanted their own way to have contact with God. As a result, they borrowed from the belief systems of the people around them and worshipped God in the ways they could understand or identify with instead of letting God determine how he ought to be worshipped.

Of course, God knows about their sin and tells Moses about it. God is described as feeling hurt and rejected by his people. He then threatens to destroy Israel and abandon them because they have twisted his requirements for worship, and they have signaled that they don’t trust him. God tells Moses that he is done with Israel and that he will start over with him.

Hearing what God has said, Moses begs God to relent. Then, he rushes down the mountain and when he sees them partying and worshipping this calf. Moses is filled with rage and smashes the tablets God has given him. He grinds up the golden calf, which is a sign of utter destruction, and he makes the people drink it. Then he instructs the Levites to kill about 3000 people. Some commentators suggest that the 3000 people were likely those most responsible for the incident. Finally, God afflicts many with a plague.

Despite all that the Lord and Moses have done for the people and even though the Israelites have seen powerful displays of God’s presence and power, this story makes its clear that the people are not capable of loving God and being obedient to him.

1. Trouble in Life- Worship on Our Terms

Whenever I watch hockey or soccer, I am always keenly aware of the moments when an infraction has occurred without the refs noticing. Especially when it’s a team I cheer for. I instantly yell out something like: “How did the referee miss that!? Or “that’s not fair!”

The referee’s job is to mediate between teams and to make sure that both teams are playing by the rules, but sometimes the refs don’t see everything, and the game is not played the way it should be. Brad Marchand form the Boston Bruins is notorious for this. He loves to agitate players on the other team and egg them on when the ref isn’t looking. The truth is that many competitive teams encourage their players to do what they can get away with stuff if it gives them an edge.

In this passage it seems the people are aware that the referee is gone, and they get uncomfortable with the idea that their mediator and channel to God is nowhere to be seen, so they skirt the rules and change the game for their own comfort and security.

As much as we scoff at the Israelites, we too struggle to worship God in the ways that he requires. Maybe we aren’t making golden calves and worshipping God through physical, old school, idols, but we are often guilty of idolatry. We worship all sorts of things like our comfort, our wealth, our jobs, other people, and many other things. We too are often guilty of worshipping him in ways that appeal to our own sensibilities and desires and instead of submitting to him wholeheartedly. We don’t give God our everything like the Shema in Deuteronomy 6 demands, that is to love God with all our heart, soul, and strength.

We, just like the Israelites, forget about all that God has done for us. We become apathetic about our faith and fail to internalize the fact that we have been redeemed by sheer mercy and grace. Sometimes we act like God is happy with whatever scraps of our time and attention we can give him. We can be guilty of half-hearted worship in that we compartmentalize our faith. We think that, if we go to church on Sundays and do our best to live morally, we have somehow appeased God. Sometimes we may think we can manipulate him. We can be just as rebellious and stiff-necked as the people of Israel

The truth is that God isn’t looking to be appeased by empty rituals. God wants to be relationally connected with his people. That is why he had plans for a temple in the first place, so he could be among his people, not worshipped in some weird abstract form of idol worship. He wants his people to love him with every decision, thought, and action that they have because he has chosen them and set them apart, but also because he knows that submission to him and his decrees is good for their flourishing.

The problem is that no matter how hard we try, we cannot be truly intimate with God on our own. Our sin separates us from God. We, just like the Israelites we, on this side of Heaven, will never be able to worship God the way he desires to be worshipped. We need to have our sin removed so that we can be in the presence of a Holy God without dying. We need someone who causes God to see us without our sinfulness and depravity. We need someone who empowers us to worship God with every fiber of our being, we need a mediator.

1. Grace in the Text- Moses the Mediator

What is fascinating about this passage is how invested Moses is in both the protection of God’s holiness and reputation, and his desire to see God bless the people of Israel. In this story, Moses boldly asks God to forgive Israel and to make the people his inheritance despite their sin. In chapters 32 and 33 we see more of Moses’ mediating efforts.

First, he talks a lot about God’s reputation and how the people of the World would see God if he brought the people of Israel out into the desert and then killed them. God responds to Moses by saying that he will let the people live, but his presence will not go with them into the land of Canaan. Moses also appeals to the promises God made to his forefathers and points out that the people of Israel are useless without the presence of God. They will not be any different than the nations around them without God’s presence, they will be just like everyone else.

Moses also does one of the most jaw-dropping things; he offers himself. He offers to die in place of the people. This is shocking because, Moses, since day one, has been treated very poorly by these people. They constantly challenge his authority and grumble against him.

It is obvious in this story that God is pleased with Moses and his efforts to mediate. God first hears of Israel’s rebellion, he offers to make a new nation out of Moses. God also rejects his offer to die in place of the people, namely because Moses’ death could not atone for the sin of the Israelites. Eventually, because of Moses’ persistence, God’s wrath towards Israel relents and he tells Moses that he is willing to recommit to his people because of his pleasure in Moses.

Moses, emboldened by his success, asks to see God’s face as evidence of God’s commitment to his promises. God agrees to this as well and we hear about God passing by him in chapter 34.

**Our scripture passage for today overflows with God’s grace for his people and it demonstrates his willingness to forgive them.** He gets Moses to start over on writing the terms of the covenant. It’s almost as if God has completely forgotten about their sin.

In verses 6-7 we see that God proclaims his name (which is so Holy and powerful Israelites refused to utter it), he passes by Moses, and shares a famous refrain or confessional statement that is used to describe him all over scripture. However, unlike other times this refrain shows up, there is a special emphasis on God’s patience and his willingness to forgive sin, wickedness, and rebellion. This showcases God’s love and desire to forgive his people. **God’s grace and his ability to forgive are emphasized in this passage.**

It appears everything is tied up into a little bow. But, if you are like me, you reflect on this story and you wonder why God seems so fickle that someone like Moses can change his mind. **It doesn’t sound like the sovereign, authoritative, God, we see elsewhere in scripture.**

Though we need to be very careful not to minimize or explain away why God presents himself a certain way, there may be a few realities that resolve this tension:

It is possible that God wants to show his emotional side. He wants the Israelites and Moses to understand, in a human way they can process, how God could react and how much it pains God to see this kind of rebellion.

Also, God, through his word, wants to make it obvious that he is a gracious and forgiving God and that he is pleased with the idea of a mediator who is willing to risk it all to ensure a healthy relationship between him and his people. God is hinting at a future reality in which there no longer needs to be priests or a sacrificial system to work as mediators between God and his people. God is hinting at the only perfect mediator that ever lived. He is hinting at the one that would embody his grace and forgiveness. This passage points to Jesus.

1. Grace in Life- Jesus our Mediator

One of the things that changed many sports was the introduction of instant replay into refereeing decisions. This change ensures less errors and even changes the outcomes of games. The reason instant replay is effective is because it helps to remove bias and you can easily have multiple cameras that see more than the officials can. That being said, even instant replay officials can get it wrong.

Jesus is the perfect mediator because, much like instant replay, he sees all and knows all because he is fully human and fully God. He understands our frailty and brokenness because he lived among us in this fallen world. He understands God’s side of the equation because he is God.

However, the biggest reason Jesus is a better mediator is the fact that Jesus removes the barrier between God and his people. Jesus, through his death, removes sin. He, unlike Moses, was able to offer himself for the people because he was a sinless sacrifice and only he could bear the burden of God’s wrath against sin. **Because Jesus removes sin, the barrier between God and his people is shattered and God’s forgiving and gracious attributes reach their fullest expression.**

Do we struggle to worship God in the ways he desires? Yes. Do we sin and commit idolatry in a variety of ways? Yes. We sin because we are not yet fully made new. However, because of Jesus’ work on the cross, God sees us through the lens of Jesus’ blood. He sees us a sinless and invites us into a deep and personal relationship with him! This is all possible because of Jesus’ mediating work which he continues to do at the right hand of God! We don’t need to sacrifice animals or go through an earthly priest, we go through God himself in Jesus! We have unrestrained access to God who is gracious, forgiving, and calls us his children

If this thought doesn’t fill your heart with joy, especially when you consider what life was like for God’s people before Jesus’ mediating work, you need to ask God to reveal to you through his spirit how profound this reality is.

I think we as Christians sometimes take God’s grace and forgiveness for granted. Instead of considering the cost of this kind of love, slowing down, and spending time connecting with God through the spiritual disciplines, we let the busyness and worries of life distract us.

The crazy thing is that the more we spend time with Jesus embrace this profound truth, the more holy we will become. It is the genius of God to make it so that our access to him stirs in us a spirit of gratitude which enables us to live and worship as he intends.

Our access to God also empowers us, by the Holy Spirit, to share the wonderful news we have received with the world around us. We get to proclaim that people can have a relationship with the God of the universe. We get to introduce people to the best mediator who has ever lived, Jesus Christ!

**Personal Aside for Listowel.**

Let’s Pray

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