

Between Two Worlds  
Sermon for the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Easter (Rogate)  
Sermon Text: Exodus 32:7-14



*And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. <sup>8</sup>They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" <sup>9</sup>And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. <sup>10</sup>Now therefore let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you." <sup>11</sup>But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, "O LORD, why does Your wrath burn hot against Your people, whom You have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? <sup>12</sup>Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did He bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your burning anger and relent from this disaster against Your people. <sup>13</sup>Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants, to whom You swore by Your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.'" <sup>14</sup>And the LORD relented from the disaster that He had spoken of bringing on His people.*

Christians live between two worlds. On one hand, we hold on to the belief that God is there and hears our prayers. On the other hand, we live in a world in which most people don't believe in God. Because we all regularly deal with people who don't share this belief in God with us, we also feel the pressure to live as if God didn't exist. Or at least to pretend that He doesn't exist so that we don't stand out too much. It can also happen that we plan our entire life as if God no longer exists. We may even go to church or pray as if God no longer exists. And we mostly count on God not hearing our prayers anymore either. But our prayers are often situated in the space between belief and unbelief, between seeing God face to face and complete separation from God. Prayers are therefore also a source of power between our world now and God in the next. Prayer is the living expression of our faith in the midst of unbelief and a knowledge that God reaches into our life, even when we don't see it. Prayer is the breath of faith – without prayer, we would die.

Prayer can also be a place in which we must suffer the pressure between both worlds in this time and the next. Moses seemed to know about this previously mentioned pressure between two worlds. Perhaps that was also the reason why he initially had great respect for this assignment and wanted to reject God calling him. Because the people would rebel against God and Moses represented God's cause, he knew that these contradictions would eventually crush him. Something like that can't work out well in the long run. And in our sermon text for today, it actually happens that it all comes to a head and the house of cards collapses. The people ultimately wanted to break away from the God of heaven and earth. They wanted to continue living without God. Moses was in the middle, like always. What had happened? God had saved the people from Egypt and His acts of salvation were clearly visible among His people. But the whole thing only went well as long as the people could claim God's salvation and His care for them and could feel and see God's actions. Moses had barely left before their faith in God disappeared into the desert sand. When faith in God disappears like this, not only does absence of faith occur, but this faith is replaced with something other than the living God. A replacement god comes in. For the Israelites, it was the god that they had always wished for, a god according to their own desires, a god they could control, one that, when he was needed, could be wheeled into the middle of the gathering and could show off his gold, a god who didn't complain if he was abused so that people could themselves be a kind of god. But also a kind of god that could quickly be shoved into a corner again when it had served its purpose, a god that didn't speak to our conscience, but remained silent so that we could be god ourselves. The Israelites wanted a god like that, a god that they could use for themselves, and above all they wanted a god who wouldn't mix himself into private matters. They wanted a god with worldly feelings and values, a god of "human grace," a god that you could pull out of the dusty closet to add a little religion to all

those important times in life but could just as quickly be packed away again. It was a “do it yourself” kind of god, a god the people made who was nothing more than an idol. This is ultimately how the people fell away. God summarized the hopeless situation like this: “They are stiff-necked.” The image these words conjure is of an ox whose neck has grown firmly in one direction. Such an ox can no longer be guided by anything or anyone – neither to the left nor to the right. The ox is like a person who has tunnel vision. Such a person can only see what is in front of him, he is not influenced by anything behind him or to the right or left of him. He races towards the abyss at ever increasing speeds and there is nothing and no one who could help him. Already in the short sentences above, we recognize that many in our society resemble the Israelites back then. Modern people don’t live in a vacuum either. They can’t just get rid of God. Instead, idols and demons take His place. God’s commandments are trampled underfoot. And above all, God Himself, or the thought of God, is banished to the world of fairy tales, while we and our own wishes and goals are dancing around the golden calf. We can observe the consequences of this daily. I often hear the deep groaning and whining from Christians: “Nobody believes in God anymore and our congregations keep getting smaller!” But the lamenting isn’t really helpful. With Moses, I see something very different happening instead of complaining. Moses recognizes the critical situation. He knows that the people’s rebellion must lead to death. And then, he does something amazing. Instead of going to the people to sound the alarm or even to plunge them into depression, he goes to God first. He wants to prevent the punishment that is imminent. Even Moses knows that it is futile to change the people. He is counting on God to change His will and not destroy the people. This is truly an astonishing thought. Can we even expect God to change His will based on our prayers? Yes, of course God can. When God revealed Himself to Moses, He did so as a person and not as a mindless machine. If God is a person, then He enters into a relationship with us. And like with every other relationship, there is the possibility that one side or the other will respond to the wishes of the other. By allowing God Himself to enter into a relationship with us, He allows us to ask Him to change His will. Moses’ prayer shows us that we aren’t subjected to a mindless fate in our world. We aren’t the result of a series of causalities that must happen regardless of what we can do or ask. No, we are caught up in and by God’s will and love. For this reason alone, it is clear that we can hope that the course of the world can be changed through our prayers. Of course, our prayers can’t be understood mechanically or even magically. Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane: “Thy will be done!” shows us that we submit ourselves to the will of God. But it would be catastrophic if we were to conclude from this that prayer is pointless because God’s will is unchangeable. Moses firmly assumes that his prayer can change God’s will – and that’s why he prays. And in doing so, he is completely committed to his people. Isn’t that important information for those of us who believe in God today. When we know that God can change the course of the world, is it not reckless to watch how people go to their eternal doom? Moses himself could have become great because God’s plan was to destroy the people and continue with Moses alone instead. But Moses doesn’t leave it at that. He literally bombards God with his prayers. Even though God had told Moses to leave Him alone, God can hesitate. God can make us wait a long time, He can even put us to the test. But in any case, God wants us to call upon Him with all our problems and He wants us to beg Him to change His will!

Even more important than the question of whether God can change His will, is the question – what right do we have to worship God in this way? It’s clear that the people of Israel sinned. They had already made a covenant with God beforehand and established a relationship with God by doing that. But it was this covenant that they had broken. Therefore there is no doubt that God had the right to destroy the people of Israel. That’s why the question is urgent whether it is right for Moses to intercede for the people at all. If God forgoes the punishment, would it not mean that He would give up His justice? Moses doesn’t excuse the Israelites. He also doesn’t try to plead for extenuating circumstances. He knows full well that the people have no right to mercy. Instead, his entire focus is on God’s mercy. Moses’ prayer appears bold, at first glance because he reproaches God: Just think about what the other nations would say if they saw that You saved Your people from the hands of the Egyptians only to destroy them Yourself in the mountains? And then, Moses reminds God of His own promises that He made to their forefathers. You can tell from the prayer that Moses really wants to obtain mercy for the people. We don’t see weary sighs here saying: “That’s just the way it is, no one believes in God anymore!” No, here someone is fighting for the salvation of the people. Behind Moses’ prayer is a deep spiritual understanding. Moses had already recognized that God, even when angry, had not lost the other side of grace. Moses recognized even then that God’s real goal was to be merciful. And by

insisting on God's promises, Moses fled to this merciful God. We can say this even more clearly after Good Friday. If we walk on the side of grace, lightning can no longer strike us there because lightning has already struck on Golgotha and the cross of Jesus. Its power and sting were destroyed on Good Friday. In the conversation with Moses, we see in an astonishing way how the people sin and stand before the pit of destruction. Then something amazing happens. Instead of the people showing remorse, God does. God Himself makes a U-turn and now wants forgiveness instead of punishment. What a spiritual revolution is happening here in secret!

Moses' prayer gives us courage – courage to believe, courage to pray, even the courage to kneel between the pews and pray for our people. Who knows what worlds are quietly in motion there. God wants us to know this hidden world. He wants us to beg Him for change. He wants us to listen to Him and He wants us to remind Him of His promises. And because there are still such prayers, God holds His hands protectively over us. There are many people in our city – they are at work, they eat, drink, love, exercise, plan their next vacation – they are full of hope and concern for the future. When we pray, God holds His hands protectively over this city. The world could not survive without this protective hand. Amen.