

**“Stiff-necked”**  
**Exodus 32:1-14**  
**October 15, 2023**  
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When we think about God, we think of someone so much bigger than we are, someone who exists completely outside of our understanding of time and space. God exists outside our physical universe, so no matter where we are, God is always there with us. God exists outside time, in eternity, so at every moment, God is there, the same yesterday, today and forever. Maybe you're familiar with the words of the hymn: “Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes. We blossom and flourish, as leaves on the tree, we wither and perish, but naught changeth thee.” That's what we understand God to be - unchanging, eternal, always the same.

And if that's your understanding of who God is, today's scripture reading may come as a bit of a surprise, because right there in the text, it says that God's mind was changed. After the people rebelled against God's leadership and guidance and abandoned the covenant they had made together at Mount Sinai, God responds with judgment. God decides to destroy the people and start over, building a new nation from Moses and his descendants. But when Moses intercedes on the people's behalf, begging God to reconsider, to show them mercy instead of judgment, the Bible says that “The Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.”

And that is surprising. If God is truly eternal, existing outside of time and space, able to see all outcomes from every decision, every effect before the cause has even happened, how is it possible for God's mind to be changed? How can

God be persuaded to try a different course of action, to reconsider a decision that's already been made? Surely God made the right choice the first time - surely there wasn't new information God hadn't considered, that Moses brought up at just the right time - "Oh, wow Moses, you're totally right, I never thought of it that way - thanks, buddy!" That doesn't fit with our understanding of who God is. God who is unchanging, eternal, the same yesterday, today and forever, how can God's mind be changed?

Well, I think to understand why God's mind is changed, we need to understand what is happening with the people here. God has just given the people the covenant - the ink is barely dry on the ten commandments, Moses has just brought them down the mountain, hot off the press, and the people have all agreed to join that covenant, to be God's people, now and forever. And just before that, God led the people out of slavery in Egypt, dividing the Red Sea in two to rescue them from their enemies, guiding them through the wilderness to Sinai with pillars of cloud and fire, feeding them with manna and quail, sending water from out of the rocks, providing for the people at every step of their journey.

It's only been a few months since the people were slaves, suffering and dying with no hope for the future, and now they're a free people, protected and loved by this powerful, passionate God. And so now that God and people have joined together in this covenant, now that they are part of God's family, Moses heads back up the mountain to get some further instructions on the next steps - guidance on what he needs to know to safely guide the people through the last steps of their journey on the rest of the way to the promised land. And yes, this takes some time - the Bible says that Moses was on the mountain for forty days

and forty nights, which is a long time to be camping in the wilderness, but in the grand scheme of things, when you think of all that God has done for the people so far, and all the obstacles that still stand in their way before they can rest in the land God promised to them, giving Moses and God a little one-on-one time together shouldn't be too much to ask. All the people have to do is just wait, wait at the bottom of the mountain for God to finish giving Moses his marching orders, and then they can all leave Mount Sinai together and head for the promised land together.

But the people don't want to wait. They can't wait. As the days drag into weeks, and Moses shows no sign of coming back down the mountain, the people decide that they're done waiting. Moses must be dead, or something. It's time to move on - elect a new leader, choose a new God, and get back on the road to somewhere, anywhere else - maybe back to Egypt - I hear they're hiring. The people are so impatient, they can't even wait for Moses to return from the mountain, they decide to abandon Moses and abandon God - all the promises they made when they joined the covenant, all the miraculous protection and provision God has provided for them, it all means nothing. They want to keep doing what they want to do, and they're not willing to wait for Moses, or God, or anything else.

But the bigger problem here isn't just their impatience. God tells Moses exactly what the real issue is, the issue that has been causing them problems ever since they left Egypt, and even before that. "This is a stiff-necked people," God tells Moses. That's their problem - they are stiff-necked. When you are trying to lead a team of oxen, you would use an oxgoad - a long, pointy stick - and when you want the oxen to turn, you give them a little poke in the neck with the stick,

and then the oxen turn in the direction they're supposed to go. But if your oxen are stiff-necked, you can poke and prod at their necks as much as you want, but they will not turn, they will not change course, they will insist on going where they want to go, no matter what you do to try and change their direction. Stiff-necked means stubborn, it means unyielding, uncompromising, unwilling to turn, unwilling to change.

That's what's wrong with the people. They are stiff-necked. From the moment they left Egypt, they have been grouching and complaining, using every tiny setback as an excuse to quit and turn around and go back to Egypt, go anywhere else other than where God wants them to go. God is trying to change them from slaves into children, from outcasts into family, and they just don't want to change, they don't want to follow, they don't want to listen to what God has in store for them. No matter what God does, the people are so stubborn, so stiff-necked, they just won't change.

So honestly, God's decision to just scrap the entire project and start over, wipe out this stubborn, stiff-necked people and try again with a new batch, I can understand it. It makes a lot of sense. If I was Moses, if I was God, I think I'd be in favour of a fresh start too. But ultimately, that isn't what God does. Ultimately, God decides to show the people mercy, God decides to give them a second chance. But it's the way that God does it that is truly surprising. After announcing judgment, after telling that Moses that the decision is made and it's time to move on, The Lord changes his mind.

God chooses a course of action, and then listens to Moses, and decides to take Moses' advice, and take a different path. And by doing that, God is acting in the complete opposite way from what the people have been doing ever since

they left Egypt. In the face of this stiff-necked, stubborn people, people who refuse to listen, refuse to follow, refuse to consider that they could be wrong and that God might know the best way forward, God decides to model what it looks like to change your mind, what it looks like to consider another point of view. God is leading by example, demonstrating to the people what they need to learn. To this impatient people, eager to go where they want to go, God shows incredible patience, choosing to wait and show mercy instead of rushing to judgment.

To this stiff-necked people, God shows how to soften your heart, how to change your mind, how to consider a new path and follow it humbly. Because if God is willing to do it - if the eternal creator of the universe is willing to show humility and change a chosen course of action, then surely the people can learn to do that too - with God as their teacher, their example, their guide, maybe they can learn to become a little less stiff-necked, a little more humble, maybe they can start to live in a new way, a way that will lead them closer and closer to their loving, merciful God.

And that's important for us to remember today, because the problem that the people faced in the wilderness is not a condition particular to any one group of people or nation, it's a problem we share. The problem is humanity, all of us. Human beings are stiff-necked. We are stubborn and impatient, we fight back against every attempt to lead us to something different, something new, something more than the old ways we've always known. We keep falling back on the same terrible solutions that have led us into more misery, more trouble, more death; we still respond to violence with more violence, injustice with more injustice, hatred with more hatred. Every time we run into the smallest setback,

we react with despair or fear, we turn on the people around us, we look for someone to blame. We are a stiff-necked people, still insisting that our way is the only right way, our cause is the only righteous cause, that those who disagree with us are our enemies, that any compromise is surrender. And the more we dig in, the more we fight back, the deeper and deeper the trouble grows. We can't solve war with more war. We can't solve terror with more terror. We can't fix what is broken in humanity by doubling down on our brokenness. Our hope is not in ourselves, because on our own, we are hopeless.

But we aren't on our own. We are stiff-necked people, but we serve a soft-hearted God, God who is quick to turn towards mercy and compassion, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. Our hope is in Jesus Christ, the one who was willing to sacrifice eternity and enter into history to save us from our sin, who was willing to change himself, change his mind, change his entire being, to become human alongside us, the one who was willing to humble himself so low he went willingly to die on a cross for our sake.

In Jesus Christ, God became human so that human beings could become more like God - to teach us humility, God became humble; to change our stiff-necked ways, Jesus became a servant, a lamb led to the slaughter, a man of sorrows acquainted with grief. And if God is willing to do that for us - if God is willing to so fundamentally transform the divine, eternal nature to fit inside the womb of a peasant girl in Galilee, to walk the streets of Palestine alongside all the broken, lost and outcast people of this world, if God can change, then maybe we can too. Maybe our stiff necks and hard hearts can soften, maybe we can find a way forward that leads out of this never-ending cycle of violence and war, selfishness and pain, a way that leads through death into life. As God's family, as

the people of the new covenant sealed in the blood of our humble saviour, Jesus Christ, we are called to keep our necks from growing stiff, keep our hearts from growing calloused. We are called to be open to the voice of the Holy Spirit, calling us to change our minds, to try something new, to consider that we don't know everything there is to know yet, that the way of Jesus Christ might be leading us somewhere new, somewhere unexpected.

God's plans for us will always lead through trouble, through pain, but we know that God never asks us to do something that God hasn't already done for us - in Jesus Christ, we follow the one who knows us, knows our weak, stiff-necked, hard-hearted ways, and still chooses to show mercy, compassion, unending love, who still leads us in humble ways that lead towards peace. Today, may we follow Jesus Christ, may we become more like him in all we say and do, so that the world will see the patience, mercy, humility and grace of Jesus Christ in us, everywhere we go. In the name of Jesus Christ - Amen.