

“Impassible!”

Ex. 32:1-14, Matt. 22:1-14  
Hope Church, Oct. 9, 2011, Lynn Japinga

[Before OT reading: God and the people of Israel had just made a covenant in which God promised to protect and care for them, and the people promised to obey the Law, particularly the Ten Commandments you heard last Sunday. Then Moses went up on Mount Sinai and disappeared into a cloud. Meanwhile, the people grew edgy and impatient. This is nothing new, as we have seen repeatedly throughout the stories this fall. They complained about their enslavement, they complained about the Egyptians coming after them, they complained about the food, they complained about the water, and each time God miraculously set them free or provided for them. But the people had very short memories.]

Sermon:

Think about some of the words you have heard to describe God. Immortal: God is not human like us, and will not die. Immutable: God will not change. Omniscient: God knows everything and has a plan. Eternal: God is forever. These are words of philosophy, theology and often appear in 16<sup>th</sup> century confessions.

I learned a new word this week in my work on these texts. The word is **impassible**. It is spelled like impossible, but with an “a” in place of the “o.” It is similar to the word impassive and means unaffected, or unmoved. An impassible God is incapable of suffering pain, incapable of suffering harm, and incapable of emotion. An

impassible God is tough, distant, and far removed from human characteristics such as anger and pain.

This idea of God as unaffected developed partly in reaction to some other stories in Greek and Roman religion that portrayed the gods as overgrown humans who had temper tantrums, started wars, seduced human males and impregnated human females. Jews and Christians claimed that their God was NOT anything like that, but instead was exceptionally well behaved and above all those messy human emotions and activities. The God of Judaism and Christianity, some philosophers and theologians insisted, is distant, unaffected by human limitation, and absolutely in control of both himself and the world. God is impassible. And a related word insists that God is immutable. God does not change, because change is a sign of weakness and indecision.

That's what many of us have been taught as well ... even if we aren't so familiar with the words impassible and immutable. The Westminster Confession said that God is "without body, parts or passions, immutable." John Calvin said that nothing sorrowful or sad can happen to God who forever remains himself in his celestial happiness and repose!

But this distant, completely in control and unaffected God is not the God we see in the story from Exodus. Because God is very angry here, and with good reason. It was barely six weeks after they had promised to keep all the commandments. The second commandment said explicitly not to make any image of God, but here they were melting down their earrings to make a golden calf. But then the people announced that THIS was the god that had brought the people out of Egypt! It would be like our children believing that the television set provided them with food and clothes and shelter!

God was furious with these stiff necked people and proposed a new plan. “Let me alone so I can destroy them,” God said to Moses. This does not sound like an impassible God! God is definitely capable of emotion here. It even appears that God is having a bit of a temper tantrum.

Moses did not obey this command of God. He would not leave God alone to destroy the people. Instead, Moses talked back to God. Moses did not try to defend or excuse the Israelites or promise that they would do better next time. Moses was fairly certain that would not happen. Instead, Moses appealed to the character of God. Why are you so angry, Moses asked. Do you want to look bad among the neighbors? Do you want people to think you took us out of Egypt only to destroy us?

Moses also said, “You promised!” He reminded God that God had promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that they would be blessed with land and descendants. Even though the Israelites had broken the most recent covenant and God technically wasn’t bound to do anything for them, Moses insisted that God had made even earlier promises.

It is quite an amazing exchange! Moses certainly was not cowering in fear before God. Moses spoke his mind. And God listened. And God changed God’s mind, and decided NOT to destroy the Israelites.

This text poses a logical dilemma for some people. If God is truly in charge and in control, if God has a plan for the world, then how can God change? How can God be affected by the pleading of Moses? This makes God appear less powerful. Think about parenting advice. If you have toddlers, or teenagers for that matter, you should be consistent with your rules. You shouldn’t change your mind and relax the rules. John

Calvin argued that this was not really a dilemma at all. God's action might look like change to us, but it is really part of God's long term plan.

Some people have also wondered how God can be impassible if God is so affected by emotion. John Calvin explained this by saying that God demonstrated "righteous anger" that human beings fully deserve. But remember that Calvin also said that nothing sorrowful or sad can happen to God. I am not so sure.

I think there is actually very deep sorrow and sadness behind God's anger. God had done so much for the Israelites. God freed them from slavery in Egypt. God led them in the wilderness with the fire and the cloud. God provided food and water. But after a few weeks of uncertainty when Moses wasn't around, the people were overcome with anxiety and fear and they made themselves a god out of gold. And they claimed that this inanimate object was what saved them!

God invested so much in these people, and over and over again, they failed. I wonder if God is overcome with grief. God loves Israel, and Israel refuses to be loved. God loves Israel, and the people love a golden calf. This deep love makes even God vulnerable to rejection.

When God said to Moses, "let me alone," I hear grief. God has been deeply disappointed, even betrayed, by the Israelites.

Most of us know something of what this feels like. We have experienced a deep loss. We have been rejected. We have been betrayed by a friend or a family member. We have given our life to an institution or a corporation and it lets us down. And we have similar responses. "Let me alone." Anger. Grief. These losses would not be so painful and wrenching if we did not care so much.

And isn't that the significance of these story? The golden calf would not be so insulting and painful if God did not care so much about the Israelites. The king in that strange parable would not be so angry about those who refused his invitation if he did not care so much about throwing a big party for his son. God's anger arises out of deep love. God's grief is so profound because God cares so deeply. God could choose to remain distant. God could choose to be impassible. God could choose not to get so deeply involved with flawed humans. But instead, God chooses to love. God risks being vulnerable. God gives and gives, loves and loves, and God's people do not always love in return.

Is that a weak God? A flawed God? No ... this is a God who understands what it means to be human. God knows the risk of love.

C.S. Lewis, in *The Four Loves*, wrote, "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one....It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love is Hell."

God chooses to love, even though it is a risk, even though it makes God vulnerable. And God invites us to respond.