“Changing the Divine Mind”  
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Hope UCC

Artist Ellen O’Grady remembers her childhood fascination with the Hallmark version of Noah’s ark—the feeling of being safe, snuggled up with her own personal zoo, shuttered from the dangerous storm...that is, until a boy in her Sunday school class looked at a story Bible and asked a troubling question: “Where are all the bodies?” The teacher asked in a steely voice, “What bodies?” The boy replied, “the bodies of all the people and animals who died in the flood?” The teacher narrowed her eyes and called him “a very rude boy.” It was the first time O’Grady realized there is a story behind the story. Some of us were also shamed as children or teens in church for asking uncomfortable questions, for suspecting that the premise presented wasn’t the full story.

The phrase, “The Bible said it, I believe it, that settles it” couldn’t be farther from the truth. The Bible is a living, breathing book inspired by God’s Spirit, written by authors of many social locations over centuries. It includes dramatic hearsay, ecstatic poetry, prim proverbs, tedious genealogies, fierce prophetic curses, detailed laws, letters from prison, and apocalyptic visions. It contains two creation stories and four gospel accounts, so that we might see truth in the round. The Bible is rife with family dysfunction. It reflects the full spectrum of emotion from joyful praise to desperate lament. Its stories are not tidied up for proper consumption. Yet somehow many of us learned that there’s only one way to read it—literally; that there’s only one message in it—believe in Jesus or you’re hell bound. This contradicts the way Jesus himself understood the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus railed against legalism and boiled the commandments down to: Love God with your whole self and love your neighbor as yourself.

Take this morning’s text. Through the lens of legalism, breaking the commandments brought severe punishment. But through the lens of love, we can reclaim them as best practices in our covenant with God and neighbor. Be faithful to God and your spouse. Practice Sabbath rest. Honor your parents. Don’t lie, steal, kill, or covet. If one lives according to these ten best ways, they live whole-heartedly. If a community lives accordingly, it’s a recipe for healthy boundaries, justice, and peace. So great irony lies in the fact that God’s people violate the commandments before God has finished talking with Moses on
Mount Sinai. They erect a golden calf, as if to remind us that our covenant depends not on good behavior, but on God’s grace.

As a kid, the Israelites struck me as spoiled in their constant complaints in the wilderness. As an adult, I understand the painful truth that the very things that protect us in trauma can prevent us from living fully into our freedom. The Israelites’ problems came before the exodus. Moses, it seemed, was flying by the seat of his pants and had no real safety route out of Egypt. In truth, they didn’t really trust him. You see Moses, despite the Hebrew blood coursing through his veins, was raised in the privilege of adoption into the royal family of Pharaoh. He couldn’t begin to fathom the forced labor demanded of the Hebrew people. Then he botched his one attempt to resist when, with a fatal punch, he killed an Egyptian guard and fled the country. Now, here he was, leading the people out of Egypt as if he didn’t know east from west. He led them directly to the Red Sea, and behind them: the crack of whips against horse flesh, a ground-shaking stampede of Egyptian chariots coming to retrieve the Hebrew people. Who couldn’t guess that Pharaoh would change his mind? Who imagined, with his heart cold and slick as whetstone, that he would let them go without a fight? Every enslaved Israelite knew the wisdom made plain by Frederick Douglass: “Power concedes nothing without demand.”

With the sea ahead and the Egyptians at their backs, they cried out bitterly, *Were there no graves in Egypt that you brought us here to die in the wilderness?* At the last minute, Moses stretched his hand over the sea and parted the waters. The Hebrews walked across on dry land. And a pillar of cloud, the divine presence, moved between them and their pursuers, who perished in their wake.

You’d think that would have been enough to trust Moses. Until the next catastrophe. First it was bitter water, then hunger in the desert. As their bellies ached and their children cried, they longed for the days in Egypt when they knew where their next meal was coming from. So God miraculously provided—fresh water sprang from dry stone; a layer of honeyed bread flaked from the desert floor each morning; quail beached themselves on the sands by night. They received their daily bread, and yet still scarcity ate away at their hearts, so they hoarded. You can almost see the cages fit tightly around their minds. You can almost hear their hearts rattle against the lock.

Sometimes we too know the difficulty of trusting when that trust has been abused. The longing for predictability that prefers the devil you know to the strange taste of freedom. The cynicism that rises with bitterness on the tongue at the first sign of trouble. The impulse to accumulate, even when it
overrides your better angels. Those instincts that helped you survive, but now no longer serve you. Too many of us suffer from these survival techniques—so much so that we accept political gridlock, even when crises require real solutions. So much so that we coddle our addictions to cell phones or alcohol or security. So much so that mass shootings in schools and the suffering of Syrians becomes normalized.

In anti-racism training, we call it internalized oppression. The tape that plays on an endless loop in the minds of the dispossessed, saying that maybe you’re not as good as everyone else. Maybe failure or violence or moral bankruptcy are engrained in your DNA. It’s an internalized tape that wears you down, mentally, emotionally, and physically until disparities in education, wealth, and health become the norm.

So when the Israelites arrived at the base of Mount Sinai, received the Ten Commandments, and Moses ascended into the divine cloud and daily failed to return, the wait seemed intolerable. Up on the mountain, God launched into a forty-day lecture on property and restitution, festivals and conquest, blood, the tabernacle, and burnt offerings. Down on solid ground, the people went stir crazy until they began to question, once again, the leadership. A group cornered Aaron to instruct: “Come, make gods for us. As for this Moses, we don’t know what happened to him.” They were, after all, deeply self-conscious about this God called Yhwh leading them from pillar to post. It would be far more convenient—a confidence booster, really—to fashion a god just like those of their neighbor nations. A god not unlike their oppressors’.

I love how in this foundational story of the Bible—this tale of the Exodus that helps us define salvation—in this story human grumbling, temptation, and propensity for false idols are not left out. This story tells us what it means to be human, coming up out of the land of captivity and into the wilderness of freedom. It also tells us about God. I love that in this story God comes off as a hopeless romantic prone to bouts of melancholy. God was so terribly excited about the exodus, Moses, and the promised land flowing with milk and honey! God was so thrilled that it took forty days to articulate the legal structure that would form the basis of Hebrew life. And yet, after all this—the plagues, the Passover blood, the splitting of the sea, fresh water in the desert, daily manna and quail, the pillar of cloud and of fire—after all this, the people of God’s heart wandered astray. And God—the Creator of all that lives, the very essence of love—God became enraged.

Now I don’t know about you, but I was taught that God was the unmoved mover, the same from generation to generation. Anything was
possible for God, I was told, except to change. For God was who he was. He. But here in the drama at Mount Sinai, we find a very different theology at play. Here we have a God completely affected by human action. Utterly devastated by the failure of the people to be faithful. So enraged was God that the divine solution seemed to be annihilation. Have you ever felt that way when you were betrayed?

Thankfully, Moses intervened. Moses, in that poignant moment, reminded God of the divine heart. Pled for mercy upon God’s beloved people. Articulated the plan of salvation—to show the oppressor that all God’s might, all God’s brilliance and terrible plagues and dogged persistence—all was for the liberation of the enslaved. To set the prisoner free, to bring good news to the poor, release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind. “Turn from your wrath,” pled Moses, “change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your covenant promises.” And the sacred text declares, “God changed God’s mind.”

Could it be that the divine-human covenant is so generative, so entangled, so utterly synergetic, that we can change the divine mind? That in our best moments we can articulate a truth so teeming with possibility that we bend the arc of the universe, we conspire with God to call forth the justice tempered by mercy, the love grounded in grace, the hope that forgives and begins anew? Could we be agents of God’s kingdom not just talking about it or praying for it, but actually living and building it, brick by solid brick, in this present reality?

The word conspiracy comes from the root word conspire, which literally means to breathe with. We who are made of star dust and earthen clay, animated by God’s breath, we get to choose if we will breathe with God, if we will conspire with divinity, just like Moses. You see, somewhere along the way, Moses internalized liberation. His inner tape played on a loop of forgiveness and mercy.

And that’s why we are here today, isn’t it? To internalize liberation against the world’s drumbeat of oppression. To internalize hope over and against the cynicism that plays out on our screens. To internalize mercy over the bitter appetite for revenge. To internalize love over the fear that courses through the veins of history. To internalize subversive joy beyond our deep wells of grief. To build up our minds, hearts, and souls to chart a new course, to voice a different reality—God’s kingdom.

You see, the Bible is not God. It is a guide to God, a road map with switchbacks and surprise detours. But if you look deeply, you'll discover the gospel of liberation and love—the narrative that we are broken by the
alienation of sin, yes, but we are blessed as well, that is our birthright. The narrative that though the wages of sin is death, new life will follow, as sure as the breaking dawn. The good news that in God’s movement, the last will be first and the first will be last.

This is the church experience that civil rights legend Ruby Sales remembers as a girl. “It was a religion,” she recalled, “that said people considered property were essential in the eyes of God...I grew up in the heart of southern apartheid,” she continued, “and I’m not saying I didn’t realize it existed, but our parents were spiritual geniuses who created a world where the notion that I was inferior...never touched my consciousness.” Which sounds like the beloved community. It sounds like a taste of the kingdom of heaven. It sounds like an exodus out of mental and spiritual slavery into the salvation of liberation, the Christ-consciousness that frees us up for the work of justice and mercy. May we be about it today, here in this world. Amen.