

Sermon: Standing in the Breach

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Oct 15, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Reading the Scripture is an opportunity to be immersed in a world of the others—the ancient Israel, the first century disciples. It is also an occasion to join a deeper conversation with the people of God. Explicit or implicit, intertextual movement in the Scripture connects us to a wider community of people, of words and ideas.

I think that's is why I am drawn to passages that reach out to other passages in the Bible. It is like the Bible is alive, not just as a product of divine inspiration, but as a bridge across time and space where ancient authors and readers in subsequent generations engage collectively in an exercise to wrestle with God, with who God is, and who we are before the divine.

Reading Psalm 106, we find the psalmist making a grand and formal appeal to God. Written probably after the Babylonian exile, this psalm outlined Israel's unfaithfulness over generations, over hundred of years. Structured as a chiasmic poem, the psalm echos the captivity in Egypt to the captivity in Babylon, to tell the story about this long history of disobedience and sinfulness. But more importantly, it also tell the truth about the Lord's enduring mercy to the people of covenant.

Psalm 106 is a communal confession, a national confession as Charles Spurgeon calls it. Using often the communal plural of "we" and "us", for example in verse 6, "both we and our ancestors have sinned; we have committed iniquity, have done wickedly", the psalmist leads the people, the nation in confessing their sins, and appealing to God for undeserved mercy.

But from time to time, we do hear the occasional "I", as the person of the psalmist surfaces, however briefly, an intimate moment in an otherwise public psalm. For example in verse 4, "Remember me, O Lord, when you show favour to your people; help me when you deliver them."

Bible translators often try to paper over this occasional "I" by masking it with the collective "we". In my opinion, that is unfortunate because this occasional "I" reminds us that the collective people of God is made up of

singular, small and sacred individual, like you and I, standing before the Lord, reaching out to the divine, praying for mercy... 'remember me, help me'.

Jumping to verse 19-23, the psalmist recounted the story of the golden calf as recorded in Exodus 32. In that story, Moses was delayed in coming down from Mount Sinai, so the people became impatient. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us." This is a clear violation of the First Commandments: "You shall have no other gods before me".

Aaron, the brother of Moses, should've shut down this rebellion before it even began, kind of nip it in the butt. But, he played the politician in trying to manage the situation, to appease the crowd. So he said to the people, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters and bring them to me." Aaron was probably thinking 'there is no way these greedy and selfish people would ever yield their gold so willingly', or 'look, if they are going to ask me to pay a price in faith, they better be willing to pay a even bigger price in gold'. Whatever he was thinking, the Israelites complied, willingly and immediately. Back against the wall, Aaron had no choice but to cast the gold and formed them in a mold, to an image of a bull—a golden calf.

The rebellious people, upon seeing the golden calf, rejoiced and proclaimed, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!", a clear violation of the Second Commandment, "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth."

When Aaron saw this, still trying to manage the situation that was increasingly getting out of hand, he built an altar before the golden calf, and made a proclamation, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to Yahweh", invoking the self-revealed name of the Lord, thus violating both the Second and Third Commandments, "You shall not bow down to them or serve them; You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God."

Early the next morning, they rose and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being. One can still see the futile attempt by Aaron, to guide the wayward people back to God, via a proper form of worship of sacrifices and burnt offerings. But the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to revel. The Scripture passage did not provide us

with any description of that revelling, for the readers can probably fill in the gap with their own wild imagination in the worst possible ways.

Heinrich Heine, the 19th century German poet, writer and literary critic, who was known for his satirical wit, wrote this poem “Das goldne Kalb”, as a critique of what he saw as excess of the upper class. You can see his poem and the cover illustration on the cover of this week’s bulletin. The poem was originally in German, of course, but allow me to read a translated excerpt,

“Double flutes, horns, violins
Strike up for the pagan dance,
And Jacob’s daughters
Dance around the Golden Calf —
Brumm, brumm, brumm —
Drums beating, laughter pealing!

With skirts lifted to their loins
And clasping each other by the hand,
Virgin of most noble lineage
Real like a whirlwind
Around the cow —
drums beating, laughter pealing!”

The English version doesn’t do justice to the poetic flair of the German original, but one could almost make out a rhythmic drum beating in the background, to this dance, this form of worship. It is a reminder to us modern and post-modern generations that idol worshipping may take different forms, but the allure, the attraction, the indulgence of it is still very much alive. It seduces us, takes us away from God, and leads us inevitably to our own demise.

That would’ve been the fate of the Israelites, had it not been the intervention of Moses, for the Lord God was exceedingly angry with the people. The Lord said to Moses, in Genesis 32:9, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, and of you I will make a great nation.”

This is one of those what-if moments in history...What if Moses was a bit more ambitious? What if Moses had entertained, not an illusion of but a

very real possibility of grandeur? How different would be the biblical stories of salvation and redemption? How different would we perceive God? However, to keep the long story short, Moses interceded and God showed mercy to an undeserving people. Tragedy avoided, the covenant continued.

Coming back to Psalm 106, the psalmist recalled only a briefest summary of the golden calf story, in a matter-of-fact tone. Yet in verse 23, employing a theological interpretation of his generation, the psalmist describes what Moses did that day, as **'standing in the breach'** before God. The image of a breach is rich in meaning and implication. A breach can be as simple as a gap in a wall, a barrier or defence. It could also points to a gap in relationship—a broken marriage, injury done by one to another, a betrayal, or an unfulfilled promise. Therefore, to stand in the breach can be seen as plugging a leaky wall, or it could also mean to bridge the gap, to bind two parties back together, to repair damage, to heal and to reconcile.

Moses certainly stood in the breach before God that day. What he did cannot be minimized, and certainly deserved to be memorialized. The gap between God and the people was bridged; relationship repaired, injury healed. More importantly, what Moses did that day points to what Jesus was going to do two millenniums later on the cross. For Jesus stood in the widest, the most uncrossable breach of all, the chasm between the fallen humanity and the Holy, Righteous God. With no care for his life, his own sacrifice, and in obedience to God the Father, Jesus stood in the breach so we would not be consumed by the holy flame. He still stands in the breach today, healing us, repairing damages we do to ourselves, to each others, to the world.

When I read terrible news coming across the wire, be it conflict in Ukraine, tension in India, or violence in Israel and Palestine; when I see how our carefree society continues to worship excessive consumption all the while the planet burns; when I am so tempted to give into despair, I am reminded of Jesus standing in the breach, for us, still. I am reminded of Apostle Paul's invitation issued all of us, which I read as an invitation to join Jesus in the breach, in Philippians 4:1, (in the Message version), "My dear, dear friends! I love you so much. I do want the very best for you. You make me feel such joy, fill me with such pride. Don't waver. Stay on track, steady in God."

In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. Amen.