

What Kind of God Do You Believe In?

Exodus 32:1-15

This week Forbes.com and Yahoo.com published their annual list of the cities in the US with the highest crime rates. They tallied the data using the FBI's uniform crime report for 2010. They used the FBI's numbers for four categories of violent crimes: murder and non-negligent manslaughter; forcible rape; robbery; and aggravated assault.

As you might expect, Detroit found itself at the top of the list. There were 1,111 violent crimes per 100,000 people, including 345 murders. Almost one murder each day. It's more violent than other places like LA and New York which are notorious for violence.

Some other cities made the top five, some you may not have expected. Anchorage AK is number five, due in part to a serious problem with methamphetamine use. And Springfield IL is number three, also due to high use of meth and severe poverty, despite a low 7% unemployment rate.

While this all sounds pretty terrible, the striking thing about this study is that since 1990 violent crime has been on the downswing. A number of explanations have been offered for that trend: more police, more people in jail, improved crime fighting methods.

No one can say for sure. But the odd thing is that this downward trend has continued despite the fact that we have suffered blistering unemployment and record poverty for the past three years.

Typically in times of severe economic distress people will grow more desperate in their attempts to have their needs met. They will resort to robbery, violence and corruption as a way of dealing with the fact that it's so much harder to make an honest living.

But the point is that this has not been the case despite the fact that we're suffering through the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. Crime is not going up; Detroit has less crime, even though their houses have dropped to where they're worth about a third of what our houses are worth.

No one can really explain why crime continues to drop even though people are significantly more desperate than they used to be. Unfortunately this trend of ours is usually the exception.

In other places where desperation grows, violence erupts. Even in our own rural and urban areas, despite the overall downward trend in crime, people react to poverty by doing things that they know aren't right, and things they would never do if they thought they could make an honest living.

This morning I want to focus on our tendency to revert to poor behavior when we get tense, overwhelmed, disillusioned, or angry. I think that's what this passage gets at, though it does so in a rather unconventional way.

This story comes after the passage we looked at last week, the one where Moses received the laws from God on the mountain after leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. In addition to the laws, God also gives God some building plans.

God wants Moses to select some particular craftsmen from the people. Those folks are to build a portable shrine that people can worship in on their way to the Promised Land. This shrine is an elaborate tent called a tabernacle.

God gives very extensive directions to Moses about how it's to be built, who gets to build it, and how it's to be run. God also tells Moses that his brother Aaron and his sons will serve as the priests in this tabernacle.

It took God a long time to give Moses all these directions. In fact, it seemed like such a long time that the Israelites down at the bottom of the mountain started to wonder if Moses had died up there.

In chapter 24 it says that Moses was up there 40 days. That's code in the Bible for a really long time. The thing is, the Israelites are pictured as a pretty fickle people in Exodus. They'll turn on someone in a heartbeat if they think they need to. Loyalty is something they have yet to learn.

They came to the conclusion that Moses was now gone, and that they needed a new religious regimen. So despite the fact that they just agreed with God not to make images of gods to worship, they tell Aaron begin making little statues of gods for them to worship.

At this point, Aaron should have said, "Wait, we just agreed not to do this. The God who brought you out of Egypt and gave you food and water in the desert told us not to do this. Why would you even consider turning on the God who just saved your hides?"

Instead, Aaron tells the people to take their gold jewelry off and bring it to him. He melts it down and reshapes the gold in the form of a calf. One of the questions that people haven't been able to settle is why he does that.

Some people think that he makes the golden calf as a way of going back to some earlier religious practice, certainly one that God has just finished telling them never to do again.

Another explanation is that the neighboring tribes in the Promised Land, where they lived before going to Egypt, worshipped a god who they pictured sitting on a calf. So the calf is kind of like a throne, but it's a throne for another god, not the one who saved them.

We may never know exactly what the golden calf signified, but in the minds of the author this act was a terrible betrayal of their God. It was a breaking of the agreement that they had just made.

It was them going back to earlier bad practices, rituals they knew were wrong, just because things got a little scary or a little unsure. God is aware that this is going on while God is on the mountain with Moses. And God says, "Hold up. These people are already rebelling on me. I'm not putting up with this."

God tells Moses to go away so that God can destroy the rest of the Israelites. God wants to start all over and make a new nation beginning with Moses himself. Interestingly enough, Moses takes up for his own people and actually causes God to reconsider.

Moses says, in effect, "If you do this it will be a really bad PR move on your part. What kind of God brings his people out into the desert and then just kills them? What will the Egyptians think of you?"

God sounds like some insecure young man whose ego just got bruised. Moses also reminds God that these people are the descendants of some really godly people whom God loved dearly, people like Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

He reminds God that God made promises to their ancestors, to give them land and make sure their people never died out. If God torches all these people God won't be able to fulfill those promises.

Despite the fact that earlier in the book Moses complains to God that he can't talk and can't speak to Pharaoh, Moses causes God to change God's mind. And God decides not to kill everyone.

But they were not out of the woods. Moses went down the mountain and saw the people partying. He became furious and threw the tablets on which God had just

written the law, and the tablets broke, symbolic of their breaking the covenant they had just made.

Moses burned the golden calf down and turned the gold into a fine powder. He threw the gold powder into their drinking water and made them drink it. He also made the people choose sides. He asked who was with him and who was against him.

Among those who stood with Moses were all the men of Moses and Aaron's tribe, the tribe of Levi, the priestly tribe. Moses commanded them to kill everyone who weren't willing to stand with them. They went through the camp and massacred about 3000 of their fellow Israelites. Others died as a result of drinking the water laced with gold.

Everyone who died was considered worthy of death for being involved with the whole golden calf debacle. Interestingly enough, the guy who seems to get off pretty easily is the guy who is probably the most liable: Moses' brother Aaron.

He's the one who made the golden calf. And even though he's allowed to live, he comes away looking totally unqualified to be their priest. The rest of the people who were in his tribe come away looking loyal to God, even if their views on capital punishment look a little extreme by our standards.

One point the author is making here is that even people in leadership, who ought to know better, sometimes revert to destructive behavior and practices and habits when they get desperate or afraid or disillusioned.

So if that happens to them, it happen all the more to the people they lead. I think that's really important for us to keep in mind as we think about our lives. All around us we see people who have dealt with a sense of being isolated, of feeling that God has abandoned them, by getting into all kinds of behaviors that will only bring pain, confusion, misery and death.

Some of the behaviors they revert to are aimed at others whom they consider to be to blame for a bad situation. For example, this week in Cork Ireland someone, who of course is not going to identify himself, took a video inside the University's chapel, which is a Catholic church.

The opening title of the video he posted says that it's a Satanic Catholic Church, despite the fact that he shows images on the floor and on the stained glass windows of Jesus on the cross and other biblical scenes. When he edited the video he put this really scary horror movie music in the background to make you think something's really wrong here.

Now most people who saw this video just had a laugh and thought the guy was a nut. But the problem is that there are people out there who don't have that kind of filter and will glom onto this kind of video and maybe decide that somehow they've got to cleanse the place, with violence if necessary. And they'll look to passages like the one we read this morning to support their actions. Remember that something similar happened a number of years ago at a church in Brookfield and some of our neighbors paid with their lives.

There was another example of people reverting to desperate, destructive behavior this past week and it had to do with the death of Apple Cofounder Steve Jobs. Jobs died of pancreatic cancer a few days ago and his death has been mourned all over the world.

His death was reported and his life was editorialized by almost every journalistic outlet imaginable. But one online journal called the Christian Investigator really crossed the line. Instead of focusing on how Jobs' innovations changed the way we do things, the author focused on the fact that Jobs was a Buddhist, almost inferring that his religion had to do something with his death.

The author went on to insist that Christianity is superior to Buddhism, and that only people who believe in Jesus can be saved. Now when you say that in an article about someone's death, and the person's death has nothing to do with which religion he espoused, the message people get is pretty clear.

Let me translate for you: "Steve Jobs is burning forever in hell right now because he didn't believe what we believe." When people read something like that, they perceive all Christians in that manner and can't tell the difference between people who would use someone's death as an opportunity to shove their own ideology down someone's throat and people who are just trying to make it through the day as followers of Jesus in the modern world.

Both of these examples demonstrate a sense that you have to be confrontational, offensive, and pitiless because somehow God's losing the war in the world. And when you come to that conclusion, despite the fact that you believe in an all-powerful God, you think you have to go out and try to win the war for God, by any ridiculous, insensitive means necessary, even if it means trying to model God's love in very unloving ways.

What we really need in situations like this is for people to take on the character of Moses, the slow, sure, steady handed one who asks everyone to take a step back, rethink their regressive behavior, and ask themselves, "What kind of God do I really believe in?"

Do I believe in a God who can't finish the job, who drove the vehicle toward a cliff, jumped out at the last second and now needs me to jump into the driver's seat and save everyone? Is that the kind of God we believe in?

Or do we believe in a God who will always be there, who's power is such that we do not need to threaten people or talk down to people or berate people because God is ultimately in control of things?

That's the kind of God Moses believed in. Moses' love is demonstrated through his compassion and concern. Moses saw the Israelites' pitiful spiritual illness and wanted to help them.

There was a yearning in his heart that they be spared -- even in their foolish state of mind and heart. Moses genuinely was touched by their lack of spiritual understanding and attempted to do something about it.

That's the kind of God Jesus was trying to show us when he said that the one who wants to be the greatest must be the servant of everyone else. We pour ourselves -- heart, soul, body, mind, and spirit -- into his cause because of our love for him.

We cannot work our way to heaven or make it happen here on earth. Compassion, meaning love for others, comes because of our love for God. The practical side of mercy helps us to admit our need of God; give people a listening ear; take time and give it away to someone else; feed the hungry; give blood; clothe the naked; shelter the homeless; minister to the prisoners of life.

Moses' faithfulness included a show of character. Character comes with acceptance of responsibility. Taking full responsibility for our God-given gifts and maximizing the opportunities he gives help us to reach our fullest potential in life.

Moses looked within himself and found a God who assisted in building his character for life. That same God desires to do that with the people of this generation! The question we face is whether or not that's the kind of God we believe in. And the way that we live our lives, the choices we make, the way we will respond to people this week, will hinge on how we answer that question for ourselves.