

STANDING in the BREACH
by
R. Charles Grant, D. Min.
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, PA

Texts: Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23
Exodus 32:1-14
Philippians 4:1, 8-9

October 9, 2011

Exodus 32:1-14

¹When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." ²Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." ³So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" ⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD." ⁶They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

⁷The LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" ⁹The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰Now 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."

¹¹But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³Remember

Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" ¹⁴And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23

¹Praise the Lord!

O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good;
for God's steadfast love endures forever.

²Who can utter the mighty doings of the Lord,
or declare all God's praise?

³Happy are those who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times.

⁴Remember me, O Lord, when you show favor to your people;
help me when you deliver them;

⁵that I may see the prosperity of your chosen ones,
that I may rejoice in the gladness of your nation,
that I may glory in your heritage.

⁶Both we and our ancestors have sinned;
we have committed iniquity, have done wickedly.

¹⁹They made a calf at Horeb and worshiped a cast image.

²⁰They exchanged the glory of God
for the image of an ox that eats grass.

²¹They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt,

²²wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.

²³Therefore the Lord said he would destroy them—
had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him,
to turn away his wrath from destroying them.

Philippians 4:1, 8-9

¹Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Mary Mapes Dodge's novel *Hans Brinker* depicts farm life in 19th century Holland. The novel includes that classic story of the Dutch boy who notices a leak in the dike that shields the Dutch lowlands from the North Sea. Hans sees the seawater trickling in through a small hole. The boy knows the trickle would soon become a stream, and the stream would become a gusher, and the gusher would so compromise the dike that it would fail and the village would be flooded. So, even though he knew he would be in trouble if he were to be late for school, the boy pokes his finger into the hole and so stems the flow of water. And then he waits. Waits for someone to come by and assist him. Eventually some men come by who were able to effect repairs on the dike and seal up the leak and save the town.

The story of the little Dutch boy and the dike is a story about *standing in the breach*.

I have long been fascinated by that concluding line of Psalm 106 which summarizes Moses' role in the episode of the building of the golden calf:

The Lord said he would destroy the Israelites – had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them.

Recall the larger story: Under Moses' leadership the Israelites have been delivered from enslavement in Egypt through the great Exodus. Now in the wilderness, Moses goes up Mount Sinai, where he receives the Ten Commandments directly from God. When Moses stays up on the mountain longer than the people thought he should, they become anxious. In their anxiety, they fabricate and worship an idol of a golden calf.

God tells Moses to return to the people. In his wrath over the people turning their backs on him, God declares that he will destroy the Israelites. Formerly God had promised Israel he would make them a great people. Now, God declares that it is only from the descendents of Moses that he will make a great people.

Moses pleads with God to change his mind and not destroy his people. Moses suggests to God that destroying the Israelites would only serve to delight the Egyptians. And he reminds God of the promises he had made to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob before him. Then, as the Psalmist writes, Moses literally throws himself “in the breach” between God and the people. God changes his mind, and the people are saved.

Moses was among the pantheon of the greatest heroes of ancient Israel. And perhaps more than even Abraham who preceded him, and Elijah and David who followed him, Moses stands as an approachable yet heroic figure who inspires faithfulness. Like all heroes, Moses teaches us something very important about life. And like all Biblical heroes, Moses is a model for faith in the God of Israel, the same God we know in Jesus. Moses standing in the breach shows us what real Biblical faith in God demands.

And what does it mean to stand in the breach? In Moses’ case, standing in the breach means to intercede on behalf of the powerless. Standing in the breach is a defensive, even conservative action. Ancient cities were enclosed by walls for protection. A breach in a wall was a weakness, a gap, a compromise in the city’s defenses. So we read about *repairing* a breach, or in battle *defending* or shoring up a breach.

One of the more famous defenses of a breach was at the battle of Gettysburg. Confederate General Pickett led his famous charge, attacking a breach in the Union defenses – only to be repelled by the Union troops who stood in the breach. Later, after the war, even General Pickett recognized that it was the union soldiers who held the breach that carried the day. When asked why his charge at Gettysburg failed, General Pickett replied: "I've always thought the Yankees had something to do with it."

Standing in the breach is putting your life on the line.

Standing in the breach is giving life to save life.

Standing in the breach is what Moses did.

Standing in the breach is what the young boy David did when he picked up his sling and went out to do battle with Goliath.

Standing in the breach is what Daniel did when he refused to bow down to pagan gods, offering his witness in the lion's den as to the demands of God.

Standing in the breach is what Jesus did when he lay down his life so that we might live.

And standing in the breach is what we who would follow Jesus are called to do.

Standing in the breach may take different forms in different times, but standing in the breach always involves placing yourself between evil and those who are innocent and powerless. Standing in the breach involves injecting yourself into an uncertain or dangerous equation, so as to effect a good and just outcome. Standing in the breach is standing up for those who cannot stand up for themselves. Standing in

the breach is always a form of taking up the cross of Jesus to protect those who are defenseless.

Later this next week Martin Luther King memorial will be dedicated. The memorial is a symbolic expression of the way Dr. King “stood in the breach” for civil rights. As you enter the memorial you pass through a breach in the “mountain of despair” – and then approach a sculpture of Dr. King emerging from a massive stone – depicting him as standing in the breach, protecting the innocent and leading the way to justice.

Standing in the breach for the integrity of Christian faith is what the German reformer Martin Luther did in 1517, when he recognized the church of his day was robbing faithful people of the joys of the Christian life.

Standing in the breach for the poorest of the poor is what Mother Theresa did when she took up a life of poverty, offering compassion and hope to the starving, the sick, and the dying of Calcutta.

Standing in the breach is what all heroic saints do.

And standing in the breach is the calling of every disciple of Jesus Christ.

Standing in the breach for the gospel of Jesus Christ is what you and I are called to do.

And standing in the breach can be done in so many different ways.

I grew up in a fairly large church in Orlando, Florida. In its early days the congregation had struggled to make ends meet. As a little boy I remember this old man in the church named J. O. Ellis. He was a working man who wore wide lapelled suits and funny hand-painted ties. He didn't talk about it, but the story was widely known

in the church that early on in the congregation's history J. O. Ellis took out a mortgage on his home to keep the church from going into default on its loan. I call that standing in the breach.

You stand in the breach when you protect and nurture and teach a child. As it is said, no one stands so tall as when he stoops to help a child.

You stand in the breach when you feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the imprisoned.

You stand in the breach when you resist gun violence at a *Heeding God's Call* rally.

You stand in the breach when you take the time to write to one of your elected officials, asking him or her to join you in defending those who are powerless or weak or being taken advantage of.

You stand in the breach when you welcome into the church and into your lives any whom others would shun or turn aside.

You stand in the breach whenever in the name of Christ you place the common good above your own gain and needs of others above your needs.

And yes, you stand in the breach when you make your financial gifts and offerings to the church.

Standing in the breach. The apostle Paul put it this way: *Stand firm in the Lord.* Stand firm in the Lord by pursuing whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, and whatever is commendable. Such virtues are worth defending. Such virtues are worth advancing. Such virtues are worth attaining. For truth, honor, justice, and purity are the attributes of God – and the attributes of the Godly life.

Standing in the breach. Sometimes standing in the breach is as dramatic as defending the chosen people of God from certain destruction. Sometimes it is as simple but profound as offering a kind word or performing an unnoticed compassionate deed. But standing in the breach always advances the kingdom of God on earth.

Remember our little Dutch boy? The guy with the finger in the dike? His small act brought big results. His faithfulness saved his friends and neighbors.

So also, whenever we dare to stand in the breach, by God's grace, something remarkable is bound to happen!

Dear friends: stand firm in the Lord! Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen. And the God of peace will be with you!
Amen.