



“For the Kids’ Sake”

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Exodus 32:1–14**

In 1974, my elementary school arranged for all three classes of the sixth grade to go to a theatre in downtown Portland to have a very special multicultural experience. In one of those grand but slightly faded theatres of the past, we sat in the balcony and watched the film adaptation of the play *Fiddler on the Roof*. For the seventy-five of us white, working-class kids, who had not had a Jewish person or any person who was not white or working class in our grade since Robin Weinstein’s family moved away, it was like opening a door into a wholly different and new world, a world where faith and religion and, most importantly, tradition dominated a community that was coming quickly into conflict with the world around it.

The central character in *Fiddler on the Roof* is a father named Tevye, a poor Jewish milkman with five daughters, three of which are rapidly approaching the age of marriage. Tevye and his family, including wife Golda, live in a community of Jews in Tsarist Russia. Like his neighbors, Tevye clings to tradition because it defines who he and his people are and gives shape to their daily life. Tradition also reinforces their separateness from the local Russians, who, from pressures of their own, are growing increasingly hostile to them.

Now, the odd thing for me is that although we kids were separated from the story by about 70 years and were light years away in cultural differences, I found the character of Tevye remarkably similar to my own father. Tevye was a big man who was big on being the head of his family. He wanted to make the decisions and he wanted to make them in accord with tradition, which in the case of his daughters meant that they would marry the men that he and Golda chose for them. It also meant that when things didn’t go his way, like when his three oldest daughters brought home men they wanted to marry, choosing love over matchmaking, Tevye yelled a lot. And, as becomes pivotal to the message of the film, Tevye relented a lot. And he relented for the sake, and love, of his daughters. You may remember the lyrics. After he has thundered on about how unthinkable it is that the girls have chosen their own partners, Tevye looks into their eyes and see their love for their men and cannot bear to deny their hope.

Now around this same time, there was another depiction of a blustering and angry, but loving, father that you may remember. From 1971 to 1979, from third grade to my last year in high school, the television sit-com “All in the Family” became one of the most popular television

shows in America, ranking first in the Nielsen rating for the first five years it was one the air. The main character was Archie Bunker, an outspoken white working class man who lived in Queens, New York. Archie was vocally prejudiced against everyone who was not U.S.-born, politically conservative, heterosexual, white, working class, and Protestant. Now to my father's credit, I remember thinking that my Dad was exactly like Archie Bunker, except "not that bad." And Archie shared an important characteristic with both Tevye and my dad. Behind his bluster and yelling, Archie Bunker loved his wife and daughter and, even, eventually, his son-in-law, Meathead.

Today's scripture reading shows us that the character—or archetype—of the blustery, angry father with the understated ability to love and to relent in his formidable opposition is far, far older than these two 1970s examples. Scholars tell us that the Book of Exodus was compiled about 600 years before the birth of Christ by Israelites exiled in Babylon, and tells the narrative of how the people came to leave Egypt and occupy Canaan. When we join today's story in Exodus Chapter 32, God has already lead the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, parted the Red Sea so they could cross in safety, and provided them with water and Holy Manna while they wandered in the desert. Moses, their leader and go-between, has been to Mt. Sinai once and returned with an offer from God. In exchange for their promise to worship God and obey the laws and tradition given to Moses, God will make the Israelites a holy nation where everyone lives within God's mercy, grace, and steadfast love. The people agreed, with acclamation. But now, as today's scripture tells us, Moses is back on Mt. Sinai, working out a few details with God, when the people grow fearful again and demand that Aaron, Moses' brother, make them an idol to worship. Aaron melts their gold and makes an ox idol, which the people adore as their deliverer and they begin, if you believe the *The Ten Commandments* movie version, a rather raucous celebration.

Enter the archetype: God sees the reveling Israelites, realizes they have broken the covenant before it is hardly sealed, and announces their imminent destruction. God says to Moses: "Leave me now, so that my anger can blaze at them and I can put an end to them!" Moses reasons with God, reminding God of the covenant with Abraham, and God relents. God becomes the angry father that has the hidden heart of gold.

I want to offer a way of thinking about this God, this archetype that reminds us so very much of Tevye, Archie, and our own fathers, this God who storms, and punishes, and gives way for the sake of his children. Last week in my introduction to theology class, we were asked to work in small groups to rewrite the lyrics of the hymn, "Holy, Holy, Holy," using images of God that we had found in our theology readings and in our own imagination. Now, as you know, the first stanza of the traditional hymn goes like this: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty." As an alternative, the first small group to sing their original lyrics offered this: "Holy, Holy, Holy, First Cup of Coffee."

We laugh but thinking of God as our "First Cup of Coffee," gives us a great analogy for when we read encounter God as angry father. When we drink our first cup of coffee, is it the cup that gives us joy? No, the cup, be it a mug or china or Styrofoam, is just the container. What we love and desire each morning is the coffee itself. Hot, creamy, sweet, however we like it, it is

the coffee itself that brings us joy and satisfaction. If God is the First Cup of Coffee then God is not the cup, God is the coffee.

In today's case, the cup is the archetype. In story after story, the ancient Israelites have poured God in all God's mystery into a container that looks like an angry father with a heart of gold. And this is typical of their time and culture. Their God comes in an anthropomorphic container. God walks in the Garden of Eden, God wrestles with Jacob, God sits with Hagar. Mostly, we can safely say the Israelite God looks like a man and acts like a man and sometimes, though not always, acts in ways that may remind us of Tevye or Archie or our own fathers.

So, if we can get past all the problems we have with the angry God cup, the real question becomes, what is the coffee in today's scripture? For me, and it may be different for you, today's coffee is found in the conversation between God and Moses about whether God should destroy the Israelites or not. For me, the coffee is the question of why God relented. I like to think that God has a little "aha" moment when Moses reminded him of the night God took Abraham by the hand and pulled him outside and said: Count the stars! So shall your descendants be!

I like to think that, poised on the cusp of wiping out a branch of Abraham's descendants, God drifted off in a vision, a vision of descendants like children, generation after generation of children, appearing like glittering stars in the inky night sky of creation, all living within the covenant of God's mercy, grace, and steadfast love. In that moment, God is not an angry father at all but the infinitely creating Creator who adores Creation's children and wishes for every one of them to live within the covenant. We could say that for the sake of kids like stars, God relented.

A few years back, Carl Sagan got a good deal of ribbing about his distinctive announcement of how many stars are in the night sky. Billions and billions of them, he said. By Sagan's standard, we haven't quite met God's hoped for projection of children but we are getting closer. The latest estimate for the number of children worldwide is approximately 2.1 billion. That's seven times the population of the United States.

And sadly, we also haven't met God's vision that all of our star children live within God's covenant of mercy, grace, and steadfast love. Estimates vary, but some say a jaw-dropping one out of every two children in the world may live in poverty. According to the United Nations, about 30 percent of the children under five experience malnutrition serious enough to cause wasting and stunting of their bodies. As a friend said recently, "That's not living in poverty; that's dying in poverty." Living or dying, we can all agree that half of the world's children living in hunger is well outside God's vision and covenant.

Now, I'm not a huge believer in the compelling power of statistics, so let me offer you an image as unfathomable as the numbers. There are experts who say the Cherryland neighborhood around our church is a "food desert". A food desert is when you live in an area where the nearest full-service grocery store with healthy nutritious food is a half-mile or more away and you don't have a car. Getting groceries in a food desert is not a matter of jumping in the car and going to Safeway or Trader Joe's or Costco (or all three) each week, but a matter of

walking, often with children, and toting food home over a mile or more. That means for a significant portion of the people in this area and their star children, healthy food is about as near or as easy to get as Holy Manna without Moses.

In a couple weeks, we here at Eden will be kicking off our participation in the UCC's Mission: 1 campaign. For 11 days in November, starting on 11/1/11 and ending 11/11/11, we will be collecting 1,111 food donations for our local community food bank, Hope 4 the Heart. In keeping with the goals of our Compañeros Ministry, we'd like to focus on food items that our Latino neighbors favor, but which aren't typically available from Hope 4 the Heart. That means that if you have ever wanted to go shopping at that big La Puebla market on the corner of A St. and Hesperian or cruise the Latino section of your local grocery, this is your chance. To help you decide what to buy, we have a shopping list available today. You can get one from me on the way out or find it on the counter in the Church office. We'll also be asking for 111 letters to Congress, letters saying that we are confident that America can do a better job at making sure every child, both here and all over the world, gets enough food to eat, and grow, and become the star that God longs for them to be.

My friends, God is not Tevye or Archie. God is not the cup. God is the coffee and God is the vision of children like stars, too numerous to count, each and every one living in a covenant of mercy, grace, and steadfast love that only we can provide. Amen.