

“Thriving in Community” by Pastor Leah Rosso
Week 1, October 11, 2026
Exodus 32:1-14

Does anyone else need to take a few breaths after that scripture? While our theme for Stewardship is “Thriving in Community,” the lectionary pick for this Sunday gives us a picture of the opposite. It’s one of those weeks I wondered if we should look beyond lectionary and choose something else; something, well, a little more... hopeful. The editor in me was really tempted to cut the story before we get to God’s wrath, but that also felt a little like cheating. So here we are. It’s too late to ignore it. So we could try to explain it. It seems fairly likely to me that Moses comes down from the mountain and is devastated by being betrayed by his people and his brother, is overcome by his feelings of anger and projects his feelings onto God. That’s not hard to believe. You see I find it truly difficult sometimes to reconcile a God who wants to obliterate the people with a God that we call love, which makes me really uncomfortable with this passage and passages like this one. Anger has its place, of course, but when we join anger and power, especially the power of God, history tells us that nothing good happens. It is the opposite of the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. So what do with this story? What does this story tell us about ourselves and about God?

Gratefully, this fall I started rereading Cole Arthur Riley’s book, *This Here Flesh*, and she has a chapter on anger. Riley brings up the story of Jesus getting angry in the temple, turning over the tables in response to the abuse of power in the temple, and she writes that it is a relief to her that **“God doesn’t play or talk nice to the hands of injustice. What freedom it is,” she says, “to witness a God whose primary concern is not for how he makes the oppressor feel, but for feeling alongside the oppressed and telling the truth about it.”**

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Have you seen this happen? I immediately thought of a woman I know who was so enraged by the extreme sexual violence at Cornell University that she called up a local coffee shop and asked if they could be open on a Sunday afternoon so that women could come together who needed to vent and cry and be angry together. In short, she chose not to be consumed by her rage of the deep injustice, to not be consumed by her fear, and instead reached out and created community.

I thought of a man I know who has loved ones in Ukraine. And even though he lives here in the US, he feels alongside those most harmed by this war and has flown over many times, channeling his anger into action of care.

I thought of the woman I just met in our community who longs for a regular old boring life but tragic circumstances brought her here to St. Cloud where she now isn't sure what to do because her husband was recently deported and she has very few resources to support herself and her infant. She needs to tell her story, to tell her truth.

We understand rage and anger when it comes out of the injustices of this life, don't we? If I asked you when you have experienced intense anger alongside someone who is facing extraordinary awful circumstances, I would bet that quite a few of you could tell me stories like these — stories of violence against the vulnerable; of betrayal and harm and needless suffering. And we all know that behind anger are other feelings: intense grief, sadness, despair, and hopelessness at not being able to stop the harm.

Which leads me back to God. How ironic, isn't it, that the God of the universe chooses to be limited in power so as not to manipulate us into doing what God wants, but rather tries over and over again to be in relationship with us, loving us and offering us grace when we fail. If we understand anger as an emotion that masks other emotions or is the empowerment of other emotions that make us feel helpless, then maybe what God is experiencing is also grief that the people have rejected God so abundantly. Maybe God is feeling despair that these people who had been learning to be God's people, to turn away from the violence they learned in slavery, have now returned to it. Maybe the wrath that God shows Moses comes from a place of wanting to protect the most vulnerable, knowing that this ridiculous golden calf made in the peoples' image will only lead to suffering. Who will protect the most vulnerable, provide for the widow and the orphan, welcome the stranger, when the people are focused on worshiping gold? Who will suffer the most in this scenario? It's not the powerful to created the statue, but rather the vulnerable, the poor, the ones who couldn't contribute to it.

It's telling, isn't it, that the people, in their anxiousness and fear that Moses has abandoned them, choose to abandon Moses and God first. They mobilize their fear, their insecurity, and their own anger into a golden calf. And even though they know it's fake, they choose this visible statue over the God who is mystery, even when that God has brought them out of slavery and is leading them to the promised land. Here is a profound truth - that when faced with fear, we often choose certainty, even when we know it's false, over the God who wants to be in relationship with us. We choose all kinds of golden calves — literal gold and money that we spend our lives chasing; addictions that keep us from healthy relationships; violence that makes us feel like we are in control; comfort that becomes more of a crutch than a peace; risk for risk's sake, gambling away what we have— there are hundreds of gold calves. And like the Israelites we almost always know they are not god; and yet we choose them over God anyway.

How tempting it is, as a community, to think that when we have beautiful plans and resources that we don't really need God. We wouldn't say it out loud, of course, but we can begin to use God, to use Jesus, as our mascot instead of the one who calls us to follow. We can turn God into the avenger of our hurt instead of the one who calls us to feel alongside the oppressed and tell the truth. I don't necessarily know what to do with God's anger, but I do know, through Jesus, what God calls me to do with my anger — to speak truth to power; to forgive my enemies; to work towards a day when everyone will know and experience the fruits of God's Spirit for themselves.

This month of stewardship is all about prioritizing our lives. It's about taking intentional time to pray about how God is inviting us to give of ourselves and our resources in order to make this world into the one we want for our children and grandchildren and for the strangers we will never meet. It's not about a quick fix or an easy solution — that's what the Israelites longed for; it's about waiting on God, listening well, taking real steps to be generous with God through this community of faith. It's about looking our golden calves in the face and telling them that they are just fake idols, and then turning towards the One who offers us life and invites us into ministry of justice and love. Stewardship is about orienting our lives towards God's love, with God's love, for God's love so that everyone will thrive in community.

Resources Cited/Consulted:

workingpreacher.org - blog on lectionary texts

This Here Flesh by Cole Arthur Riley