
God Is Not A Fundamentalist

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
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*And the Lord changed his mind
about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.*
– Exodus 32:14

Did you hear what I just said? I was quoting from scripture! In one of the greatest chapters of the Bible, the Bible itself says that Yahweh changed his mind! Let's get into that today!

Many of us spend significant time in life trying to change other people's minds. We usually have good reasons to do so! Maybe we are a parent, trying to get our child to change her mind about something. Maybe we are a supervisor, trying to persuade an associate to change his mind about something. Maybe we are a preacher, trying to get sermon listeners to change their minds! Maybe we are even a politician trying to get a voter to change his or her mind.

When people do change their minds, we often applaud them. They got it, we say! They turned to the right side! They made the healthy choice! And it is true that changing one's mind can be a good thing.

Yet, somehow, we also tend to denigrate people who change their minds. When leaders change their minds (to a position we disagree with), we claim that they are wishy-washy, that we can't trust them. Politicians are especially susceptible to this accusation. The watchful media, and its massive archives, are ever vigilant, probing for some way that a politician is going against something he or she said previously.

What does the Church's own archive say? What does the Bible say? Well, Exodus 32 describes one of the most dramatic mind changes in scripture. Moses, up on the mountain with Yahweh, has been delayed in returning to his people. Somehow, the anxious, impatient, people throw their gold into a fire, and "out came this calf" (Those are exactly the words of Aaron at Exodus 32:24 – "out came this calf" – with the feigned innocence of a five year-old!). They had fabricated an idol. Yahweh is furious, and in an astounding moment, says to Moses that he, God, will annihilate those people, get rid of them all, and create from Moses a new people. In short, God tells Moses that he, God, will start all over again. Wow!

But, in an even more astounding moment, Moses begins arguing with Yahweh. Moses is trying to save his people. And the Bible actually says that Moses is trying to get God to "change his mind." In the next amazing development, God is persuaded by Moses not to destroy the Hebrew people. Finally, in a still more astounding moment, the Bible says quite clearly that Yahweh "changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people" (Exodus 32:14).

Yes, the Bible says that God changed his mind. In fact, if you read the old King James Version of that same verse, you will read that God "repented" of that possibility. That's because the word, "repent," in Greek, at least, is the word "metanoia." "Meta" means "change." And "noia" means "mind." Metanoia means to change your mind, translated always as "repentance." Now, we might think that it would be theoretically impossible for God to change his mind, or to repent! But the Bible seems to say otherwise.

That's because the Bible is not a fundamentalist document. The Bible does not teach fundamentalism. Some of us may sadly remember this day in history, September 11, as a day of fundamentalist terrorism. And it is.

But Christians gather to oppose fundamentalism, even when it is our own Christian fundamentalism. And our opposition to fundamentalism, any fundamentalism, is even more critical these days. I define fundamentalism like this. Fundamentalism, of any type, is the inability, or the unwillingness, to change. Fundamentalism is the unwillingness to admit change. Fundamentalists refuse to even think about changing their minds. And, fundamentalism can be conservative or liberal!

Religion, as we all have seen, has often been the transmitter of fundamentalism. Religious fervor seizes on a law or principle or idea that should never be changed, we say! But such laws are the wrong thing to cling to! It should be love that is unchangeable, not law.

And, in the Bible, it is love that never changes. Principles do change. Secondary laws do change. And here, here in Exodus 32, God actually changes. Yahweh changes his mind. It is an incredible biblical event! Fundamentalists refuse to even think about changing their minds. But God does. God can change his mind. Exodus 32 says he did. God is not a fundamentalist.

Some of you remember my “spiritual leadership principles,” which I hope have been helpful guides over the years. One of my favorite leadership principles goes like this. “If you want people to go somewhere, go there first.” It applies to lots of principles. But it also applies to changing someone’s mind.

If you are someone who wants to change peoples’ minds, whoever you are, the best way to do that is to show them how. The best way to show people how to change their minds is to change your mind yourself.

If you, a parent, want your children to change their minds, show them gracefully and honorably that you can change your mind, too. If you, a supervisor, want your people to change, show them yourself how to change gracefully. If you a leader of any sort, want people to change their minds about things, show them that you can change your mind, too.

If you are God, if you are Yahweh, and you want your people to change their minds, the best thing you can do is to show them that you can change your mind, too. It’s right there in Exodus 32. The story is another instance of the principle of Incarnation: God loves humanity so much that God becomes humanity. God changes, so that we can change, too.

AMEN.