

## “Rebellion!”

Exodus 32:1-14

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

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We turn our attention this morning to one of the most significant and memorable instances of rebellion anywhere in the Bible: the creation of the golden calf by the Israelite people at the foot of Mount Sinai. “The people gathered around Aaron” – that’s the brother of Moses; he later becomes a faithful priest in the service of God Almighty – “and said to him, ‘Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us.’” Aaron does *exactly* as they wish. He has everyone bring their gold earrings to him. He melts it all down, and re-forms it into the likeness of a calf. A golden calf, a sacred cow. The people declare that *this* is their god, who delivered them from slavery in Egypt. Aaron builds an altar for the calf and proclaims a festival day; they offer sacrifices on the altar; they eat and drink; they “rose up to revel.” There is feasting and dancing and who knows what else, as they celebrate with wild abandon.

It is all a flagrant violation of the divine law that had been given to them not long before: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.” The Israelites had *heard* all those words; they had cowered in fear; they had asked Moses to mediate on their behalf – and now he’s still up on the mountaintop with God, they have given up waiting for him, they have apparently lost their faith in God, and they indulge their selfish appetites and selfish desires.

Up on the mountain, God realizes what is happening; he threatens to destroy the entire Israelite camp; Moses talks him out of it; but when Moses descends from the mountain and sees the wild revelry, he is so angry he destroys the two tablets containing the Ten Commandments that God had given him, then he destroys the golden calf, grinding it to powder, scattering it in water, and then he makes the Israelites drink it. He confronts his brother Aaron, then sends the faithful Levites out into the camp, to kill their brothers, friends, and neighbors. Then, the next day, God sends a plague upon the camp. The rebellion ends in bloodshed, misery, death, and heartache. The rebellion is utterly *crushed*.

What I’d like to do today is spend a little time exploring this concept of *rebellion*. This rebellion was clearly bad, in no uncertain terms; God had liberated the Israelites from oppression and slavery, and they repaid God with disobedience and betrayal. But are there times when rebellions may be justified, like when good people fight against evil tyrants? What makes some rebellions *right* and others *wrong*?

Consider the American Revolution. Our whole nation came into being after a bloody rebellion.

The Declaration of Independence listed 27 specific grievances the American colonists had against King George III. "Governments," asserted the Continental Congress, derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed." The purpose of government, they said, was to "secure" the "unalienable rights" of "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." "Whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness." In short, they put forth an argument articulating *why* their rebellion was justified. But from another standpoint, what they were doing was *illegal*; there was no principle in British law that allowed a group of citizens to throw off British rule and establish their own laws. If what matters is what the *law* says, then by rights every single person who signed our Declaration of Independence should have been hanged for treason – John Adams, Ben Franklin, John Hancock, Thomas Jefferson, and all the rest. Yet we look back at those people as heroes. I think most of us would say that what they did was *morally* right – even if it was *legally* wrong.

Or consider the Civil War. Eleven states seceded from the Union. Or, at least, they tried to. They believed they had the *right* to throw off American government, the same way the colonists had the right to throw off the British government. There was another bloody war; this time the rebels lost; they were dragged – kicking and screaming – back into the Union. Set the issue of slavery aside for the moment. Did they have the *right* to rebel? Abraham Lincoln's position was that the Constitution provided no means by which states could secede from the Union, so the Confederate states had no *legal* grounds for separation. King George could have made pretty much the same argument about the thirteen colonies. In the American Revolution, it was the rebels who *won*; in the Civil War, it was the rebels who *lost*. Does the question of "who wins" determine whether a rebellion is justified or not?

Or take the case of Susan B. Anthony, the tireless advocate for women's rights. In 1872, Anthony convinced election officials that she could vote in the Presidential election, on the grounds that she was a citizen of the United States, citing specific language in the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment that she believed supported her argument. She was arrested a few days later and charged with illegally voting. She was tried in a federal court, found guilty, and sentenced to a fine of \$100 – a fine which she refused to pay. In a fiery speech at her trial, she called herself a "rebel." 48 years later – and 14 years after her death – the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution was adopted, guaranteeing women the right to vote. She never had paid her fine. The judge could have put her in jail for that, but then she could have taken her case to the Supreme Court. So, to her dying day, she owed the United States of America a hundred dollars. In 1979 her face was emblazoned on the Susan B. Anthony dollar. The League of Women Voters had advocated for her selection, saying that she "contributed immeasurably to the advancement of human dignity in this nation." Yet she fought against the established laws of our country; she refused to pay her fine; she even rebelled when the judge ordered her – several times – to stop talking. Under what circumstances is rebelling against the established laws *appropriate* and *necessary*?

So when is rebellion justified? When is it *right*? When is it *wrong*? Who gets to decide?

Now I was already working on this sermon when we heard the big news on Thursday: thirteen men have been arrested, accused of plotting to kidnap our Governor and violently overthrow the state government. The suspects belong to a paramilitary group called the "Wolverine Watchmen;" the FBI has been tracking them since March, when they were thinking about targeting police officers. They are affiliated with the "boogaloo movement," a loosely-organized, far-right, anti-government, extremist

movement that is preparing for, or seeking to incite, a second Civil War, which they call the “boogaloo.” The name may sound funny, but this is no laughing matter; the U.S. Government Accountability Office – which is a government agency – and the Center for Strategic and International Studies – which is an independent think tank – both say that the biggest terrorist threat to the United States comes not from abroad, nor from Islamic extremists, but rather from militant far-right groups within our own country, and that threat has been growing in recent years. They’ve both got tons of data to back that up. These are *rebel* groups, like the Wolverine Watchmen, willing to engage in violence to achieve their ends.

Now I think that most of us would agree that there is no justification for such extremists, or their use of violent force. But how are they different from the rebels in the Revolutionary War? I mean, seriously. Both groups had the goal of *overthrowing the government*. What makes one group “right” and another group “wrong”? When are revolutionary tactics justified and when are they not? In a broader sense, when is it okay to use *illegal means* to achieve a new or different set of laws?

I’m sure we could discuss this all day. If we wanted to go a little lighter and delve into the realm of fiction, we could talk about *Star Wars*, which is all about a rebellion against an evil empire. When you watch the movies, who do you root for – Luke Skywalker, or Darth Vader? The good guys – or the bad?

I don’t have fully-formed answers to these complicated questions. I do have three general thoughts that I’d like to share with you, and maybe you can help me finesse this further.

The first thought is, we have to consider what civil laws are already in *place*. The democracy that we have created allows for people to have *voice* in our government. We get to elect who leads us. We get to elect the people who make the laws. We have the right to freedom of speech, we have the right to peaceably assemble, we have the right to trial by jury. We sometimes stumble over some of the details, but, in general, we have a *tremendous* amount of freedom to *change* our laws and our government when it feels necessary and warranted. If the Wolverine Watchmen or other extremist groups are unhappy with how things are being run here, they have the right to have a voice. They can participate in a *peaceful* process to change things. The American colonists did not have that luxury.

Second: Laws that aren’t just are not good laws. One of the founding principles of our country is that we believe in “liberty and justice for all.” If the laws aren’t just, then they *need* to be changed.

Third: from a religious standpoint – from a *Christian* standpoint – there are certain things that *for us* are non-negotiables. Not everybody in this country is a Christian – and everybody, of whatever faith, or no faith at all, has a right to participate in the democratic processes of our country. But *for us Christians*, there is another law that ought to be more important than any civil law, and that is the *Word of the Lord*. For the ancient Israelites, that Word manifested itself in the form of the 10 Commandments and the other laws in the first five books of the Bible. For us Christians, the Word of the Lord is our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It is *his* Word that needs to hold ultimate authority in our lives. Everything we do should be guided by *his* counsel and will. We can – and we should – continue to discuss and debate the finer points of the laws in our country, to make this country as *free* and as *just* as we can make it. But, for us Christians, the *divine* law as it has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ is unquestionable. It may need some discussion and interpretation at times, but its significance is paramount, and we have *no power* to change it. Nor should we. It’s *God’s* law. Our job as Christians is to *submit* to Christ’s authority, in *every* aspect of our lives. Under no circumstances should we *ever* rebel against *that* law.

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