

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Exodus 32:1-14

SERMON TITLE: Wrath or Mercy?

Can we talk? Do you ever just mad at the way the world is? This past week, the Dow Jones Industrial Average fell just over 1,874 points. That's 18% of its value. Wall Street lost roughly \$2.4 trillion. According to one report, *Concerns about the solvency of banks and financial institutions in recent weeks "had pushed the global financial system to the brink of systemic meltdown."*¹

And then we heard that one week after the world's largest insurance company, American International Group or AIG, received \$85 billion in emergency loans from the Federal Reserve, the company's executives took an eight-day retreat at a posh California resort at a cost of \$440,000. According to the receipt from the hotel, \$139,000 was spent on hotel rooms, \$147,301 was spent on banquets. Another \$23,380 was spent on undisclosed spa treatments and another \$6,939 was spent on golf. A full \$9,980 was spent on room service and food and cocktails at the hotel lounge.²

Do you know what this makes me think of? The Israelites taking all of their gold, melting it down, and using it to create a golden calf that they then worshipped. And after they worshipped, they had a party.

Jesus put a name to the rival god being worshipped today by so many who have brought us this financial crisis. He called this god—mammon—or wealth.

And while all of this has been going on, countless thousands around the world continue to die from starvation and preventable diseases, genocide continues in Darfur, and wars continue to

¹ Luby, Tami. "Crisis on world stage." [CNMMoney.com](http://cnnmoney.com). 11 Oct. 2008. CNN. 12 Oct. 2008 <<http://cnnmoney.com>>.

² "AIG Executives Blow \$440,000 After Getting Bailout." [FOXBusiness](http://www.foxbusiness.com). 7 Oct. 2008. FOXBusiness.com. 12 Oct. 2008 <<http://www.foxbusiness.com>>.

rage in Iraq and Afghanistan. By the way, CNN reported this week that *at least 900 Christian families have fled Mosul [in Iraq] in the past week, terrified by a series of killings and threats by Muslim extremists ordering them to convert to Islam or face possible death.*³

And when it comes to the power of sin and death at work in this world, all of this is just the tip of the iceberg! Doesn't it make you mad? And if it makes us mad, think how angry it must make God! And according to this morning's text, God does get angry. In response to that Golden Calf worshipped by the Hebrew people, God delivered the biblical equivalent of an indictment against the Hebrew people. God said to Moses: *"Go down at once! Your people [notice that God did not say, "My people."] whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt [not "that I brought up out of the land of Egypt"] have acted perversely; they 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 worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!' The Lord said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now 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.'*"

Now did you get that last part? God would spare Moses and make of him a great nation. But as for that "stiff-necked," ungrateful, unruly, unrighteous people"—they were to be obliterated—consumed by God's wrath! After all, what else can a just God do?

Come to think of it, in our anger, maybe we should do a better job of preaching God's wrath. Maybe it's time to get tough with all of the evildoers, the transgressors, the heathens, the perverts, the idolaters? Maybe we should be threatening every sinner with eternal damnation?

³ Tawfeeq, Mohammed. "Christians flee Iraqi city after killings, threats, officials say." [CNN.com](http://cnn.com). CNN. 12 Oct. 2008 <<http://cnn.com>>.

That's what the 18th century preacher Jonathan Edwards did. He preached a sermon in 1741 entitled *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. He threatened sinners with Hell. He said, *There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is hell's wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor any thing to take hold of; there is nothing between you and hell but the air.*

But wait a minute! What are we to do with Moses? As God stood ready to consume the Hebrew people with wrath, Moses intervened. The text says: *But 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?...Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people."*

Do you see what Moses was doing here? He stood up to God—he contended with God—he sought mercy for the people—even as the people were partying around the golden calf unrepentant of their evil and even unaware that they had done anything wrong.

And it worked! The text says: *And the Lord God changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.*

Now we may be wondering: What in the world was the matter with Moses? What got into him to make him stand before God and argue for mercy? Well, whatever got into Moses also got into Jesus: From the cross Jesus said: *Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.*

The same thing must have gotten into Stephen. His story is told in the book of Acts. Stephen said to the rulers of the Jews: *You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit.* But then, as they stoned him to death, Stephen knelt down and cried out in a loud voice: *Lord, do not hold this sin against them.*

So what does all of this mean for us? It seems to me that we are to stand with Moses and Jesus and Stephen. We're to stand on the side of mercy and grace. In spite of our anger, we're called to intercede before God and beg forgiveness. Jesus called us to pray for our enemies, to bless them, not to curse them—and certainly not to condemn them to the fires of hell. Besides, if God's wrath were to come against the sinners of our day, we might find ourselves on the receiving end along with all those other evil people.

Now does this sound hard to do? Well, it is, especially when we're so angry at the way the world is. And perhaps we're even angry at ourselves for being so much like the people who make us so mad. But my brothers and sisters, it is possible to follow Moses and Jesus and Stephen. It can be done. Let me illustrate.

Ravensbruck was a Nazi concentration camp for women located 90 kilometers north of Berlin. It opened on May 15, 1939. It housed Jews, Gypsies, Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, Germans and prisoners of other nationalities. The noted Christian Corrie Ten Boom was a prisoner there. All in all, more than 132,000 women and children were imprisoned in Ravensbruck. It's estimated that 92,000 of them died in the camp.

As you might imagine, the conditions in Ravensbruck were horrifying. Brutality and death were everywhere. Women and children died of starvation, beatings, torture, hangings, shootings and grotesque medical experiments. In fact, so many died at Ravensbruck that a crematorium was built in 1943 to dispose of the bodies more efficiently. In November of 1944, the SS built a gas chamber at Ravensbruck to kill even more people.⁴

Now surely, in the face of this monstrous and incalculable evil, God's wrath would be richly deserved and any talk of mercy is repulsive. But believe it or not, there were victims who

⁴"Ravensbruck concentration camp." *Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia*. 12 Oct. 2008 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ravensbr%C3%BCck_concentration_camp>.

displayed a different spirit. This prayer was found in the clothing of a dead child at the Ravensbruck concentration camp:

O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all of the suffering they have inflicted upon us.

Instead remember the fruits we have borne because of this suffering—our fellowship, our loyalty to one another, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart that has grown from this trouble.

When our persecutors come to be judged by you, let all of these fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness.⁵

My brothers and sisters, are we not to stand for mercy instead of wrath?

⁵ "Pilgrims' Prayers." Pilgrims' Prayers. 12 Oct. 2008 <http://www.clonard.com/pilgrims_prayer.htm>.