

# **“But, What Will People Say?!”**

***The Reverend Dr. Robert M. Zanicky***

***1st Presbyterian Church***

***Wilkes-Barre, PA***

***Exodus 32:1-14***

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Nine year old Joey was asked by his mother what he had learned in Sunday School. “Well Mom, our teacher told us how God sent Moses behind enemy lines on a rescue mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. When he got to the Red Sea, he had his engineers build a pontoon bridge and all the people walked across to safety. Then he used his walkie talkie to radio headquarters for reinforcements. They sent bombers to blow up the bridge and all the Israelites were saved.”

“Now Joey, is that really what your teacher taught you?” his mother asked. “Well no, Mom. But if I told it the way my teacher did, you’d never believe it!”

This morning I want to talk expansively about our world, and our place in it. Consider, Christians make up one third of the world’s population (over 2 billion), Islam one sixth (over 1 billion) and Judaism (14 million), Hindu (13%), Buddhist (6%). Of course there are others.

Consider: If you hear a story from another faith – you will probably react like 9 year old Joey, with incredulity, and skepticism, “you’d never believe it.” (Please allow your Christian sentiments to filter all of this, this morning.)

You know this - we are living in a much smaller world today. In formation, news, cultures are but a “click” away. Cultural tribalism’s narrow vision is constantly buffeted (or buffered). Our own faith must come to terms with all those “others.” We can no longer ignore our neighbors. “Why?” Religion is too serious a business to huddle cloistered, singing “Kum ba yah” among ourselves as the world convulses over, divisions that instead of being destructive could be at least mitigated by shared positions of justice, freedom, equality and love.

Among other reasons, the new-atheist books are out there, from Dawkins to Hitchens – due to the fact of the destructive and myopic tendencies of religion in our world today, they have an audience, in part because of many religiously uncommitted people – wondering about the behavior of religious people (and of course, it goes the gamut from horrible evil, to bland ignorance of science).

Many of us who are religious (Spiritual if you like) are concerned and are asking ourselves, in regards to religious behavior; But, what will people say?! I can assure you, contra Hitchens, et al. – religion is not going away. What I cannot assure you, are the types of religion that are developing. Every Christian should be intensely concerned and committed to expressing our religion through high ideals of justice, mercy, liberty, freedom and love (to name a few).

Dialogue is a must!

Openness and respect are necessary!

We must do our part!

I'm guessing, but you young people are probably ahead of the curve on this subject, compared to your parents and grandparents generations. You have been immersed almost from day one with multiplicity; in cultures, ethnicities, denominations, religions and more. I hope you will address these important issues, with study, insight and determination. Religion that uplifts the human individual and society is a worthy and necessary goal. Religion that eclipses the human spirit must be withstood. Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, et al. must form alliances for the health and benefit of our world. We followers of Christ must be at the table with respect, and concern for all of God's people.

Let me set the Ancient Biblical text up. The people of Israel have made their exodus from slavery in Egypt. They have been traveling toward the Promised Land. They get grumpy over things like "water." Rules, regulations, laws are being given to Moses from Yahweh, their God. Moses is up on a mountain (this is where God lives, or at least spends most of his time – the higher the better – I'm referring to elevation), speaking with God. God has given Moses the two tablets of the testimony, "written by the finger of God." (I'm reminded of Theologian Mel Brook's translation of this event. Actually Moses came down the mountain with three tablets of stone, 15 commandments. Just as he arrives to the people, Moses calls out; "15, 15 Commandments, and quickly drops and breaks one of the tablets of stone. Without missing a beat, Moses, calls out; "10, 10, Commandments..." I believe you can find the interpretation in the film, "History of the World, Part II")

Well, back to the text's story. It appears that the people, the "polis" got a bit antsy while Moses was up the mountain talking with God. He was taking too long, getting God's laws, rules. So they decided to take things into their own hands. "Hey, Aaron, you have a flair with images, form us some very nice gods to lead us. This upstart 'Moses' has abandoned us. We've decided to cut him loose." Off to work Aaron went. He did a great job! They now had representations to look at, to focus on, and they were happy! But, Yahweh saw all this activity and reports to Moses his anger and disgust with the people, with making images to worship and follow. In fact Yahweh is so mad, he informs Moses, "Don't bother me, I'm going to destroy all of them! But, I'll make of you, Moses a great nation." Now Moses could have been quite pleased with himself ("hmmm, little old me, a great nation!"), but Moses would have none of that. And I love this text! So human, so divine! Moses argues with his God! He reasons with his God! "Yahweh, listen to me. Calm down. Let me remind you, what you've done for this people. Remember Egypt? The Exodus? Those Egyptians will have a great laugh on your behalf if you now destroy the Israelites. Yahweh – focus, repent from this destruction position! Remember Abe, Isaac, and Israel – what you promised them?"

"Yahweh, but what will people say if you do this? Surely, this is not good P.R. for You and Your ways!" And Yahweh changed his mind! Now, there were strong consequences to the people's actions, but Israel was not destroyed!

This ancient story, grappling with a divinity that can change his mind, unlike philosophical Greeks' Unmoved Mover – gives us a glimpse of this continued struggle over needing "images," "metaphors," "doctrines," "human figures" to help us focus and live our lives. And how there are times when even what we interpret as our highest ideals – perhaps need to be reconsidered. We need Moses' to jar us to consider;

But, what will the people say?

"My God declares this is the only way! There is no room for any other image, doctrine, belief! Either you are in or you are out! It's either life or death! My tribe – or else!! You see, even in the Hebrew Scriptures, God, Yahweh is evolving – for humans are mapping out their understanding of this one true God!

A moral God!

A merciful God!  
An ethical God!

Moses is right about this type of destruction;

“But, what will the people say?”

What kind of God is this that would do such a thing? That would do what is so understandably wrong?

In a way, we humans haven't evolved all that much. But, we have a little. We still need our images, our paths markers, our cultural directors – that help us live our lives, as we pursue the ineffable, the spiritual.

Certainly, Judaism has always snubbed “images,” understood as wrong and harmful - and some are! But, “Torah” guides them in their lives!

A blank slate will not do!

Christianity also eschews “graven images” – harmful, hurtful. But the icon – image of God is Jesus Christ!

Even Islam – with no images anywhere! Uplifts The Koran as the very word of God! It can be seen, felt and held!

But, when any expression that declares itself Divine, Word of God, Truth, and then declares destruction over disagreement of images, doctrines, cultural habits (that do not themselves destroy a needed caveat) – even the “divine” must be challenged!

“But, what will people say?” What kind of God would this represent? What kind of belief is this that would be so destructive, so narrow, so unwelcoming? What kind of God would be less merciful than we humans?

What will people say?!

If one can question the deity – surely one can question His minister, priest, rabbi, Iman, follower, when it comes to rules of justice, mercy and peace! That's what I hear from the ancient text!

Certainly I am a Presbyterian, I am a Christian! I am proud of these traditions! How about you? “Know thyself,” it's been said. But, also from where you stand, learn from others. Draw from the depths of your own faith tradition, and open yourself to the possibility that God – speaks in many tongues and traditions!

Again, if Moses can correct Yaheweh, can we not correct religious and denominational missteps, mistakes and more?

Commitment. Strength. Resolve are musts! We want the world to believe in our stories of justice, mercy, liberty and love. All religions worth their salt should be concerned with how the world looks on one's faith, “But, what will people say?”

Moses made his point!

We must do the same for the sake of our world!

Amen