

God goes on a tirade

By [Shauna K. Hannan](#)

September 9, 2013

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Hannan's current *Living by the Word* column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

Exodus 32 is too monumental not to mention. And while the lectionary assigns 32:7-14, it's important to include verses 1-6 as well.

I suggest we stop calling this text the "golden calf" incident and begin calling it the "God changes God's mind at the request of Moses" incident. Incident? Yes. Incidental? No. By this point it is not shocking that the Israelites' impatience while waiting for Moses leads to idolatry. What is shocking is God's anger and, even more, Moses' ability to quell God's anger.

Given God's own admission of jealousy (Exodus 20:5), perhaps we should not be too surprised at God's anger. But the tirade in verses 7-11 is not for the meek. It is a good thing the Israelites were not privy to it, as they most certainly would have run to their gods for protection against God.

God refers to the Israelites as those whom Moses brought out from the land of Egypt. That is interesting since elsewhere God says *God* brought them out of the land of Egypt (Exodus 20:2). God calls them names. Worse, God want to be left alone to wallow in anger and to "consume" the idolaters.

If that is not enough, God seems to bribe Moses to leave him alone (v. 10). If Moses does so, God will make of him a great nation. Anger, tirade, blame, name-calling, destruction, bribery; this is not God at God's best. The bottom line is that idolatry is a serious offense that God will not ignore.

This resolute behavior, seemingly unfit for the divine, makes it even more shocking when Moses is able to change God's mind. He does so by reminding God that it was

God who brought the people out of the land of Egypt. He reminds God of God's power and might. He reminds God of the promise to Abraham, Isaac and Israel to multiply their descendants. Killing the Israelites now would not foster offspring and certainly would give the Egyptians the edge.

Moses's threefold imperative—"Turn from your fierce wrath," "Change your mind," "Do not bring disaster on your people"—is bold but effective. God does change God's mind.

A stimulating exercise for this week's preacher might be to consider how this depiction of God gels or clashes with the God depicted in Luke 15.