

“Hoped for a Stiff-Necked People”
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What is God to do with a stiff-necked people?

On Thursday, my daughter had early period at school, so after I dropped her off, I headed to the gym to get a quick, early workout in. Halfway to the gym, however, something shifted in my back and pinched my nerve. All of the sudden, on the left side of my back, anything deeper than a regular breath felt painful.

Knowing what a feat it is to begin with to find the momentum to get myself to the gym, I didn't want to turn back. So I hesitantly walked into the gym, and started stretching, but my back pain didn't get any better. The regulars were also at the gym— I have learned the names of only two people at the gym, and so everyone else I see coming at the same time as I do has nicknames I've made up in my head, such as Rhythm and Rows, who dances between each set of weights, and Burpee Girl, who one day had misread the Workout of the Day and did *100* burpees between each lifting set, when the chart actually just asked for 10; I debated telling her that she was overdoing the burpees, but she had airpods in and besides, I figured she maybe was being extra on purpose. But the cry of dismay— and agonized exhaustion— at the end of her workout when she realized that she had done *hundreds* more burpees than necessary made me realize that my silence was, in fact, cruel.

So on Thursday, as I struggled to move and breathe without my back protesting in pain, I looked over at Burpee Girl and Rhythm and Rows, to see if they would acknowledge my suffering and help me decide what to do. Nope, no validation from them. Maybe if I had interceded earlier for Burpee Girl on that day she was extra, she would be more attentive to me. Finally, I decided on my own to call it: my body was *not* in the condition to work out that day.

I spent the rest of the day on my laptop with a heating pad tending and loosening my stiff back. It took 2 more days before I was right again, and could move freely and breathe deeply.

God called the Hebrews a *stiff-necked* people. They were stubborn. Instead of looking around and understanding ways that are not their own, they could only face one direction. Who can blame them? They were wandering in the wilderness, without clear direction, for 40 years. If they looked backward, it was to Egypt, where they had been enslaved. Who can blame them for fixing their vision ahead, so they can only see one thing? Everything else felt painful. What else would keep them going, day after day, than a vision of a better future before them?

So when Moses disappeared up a mountain to converse with an unseen God, the people would not look up. They would not look around them. Their necks were stiff. They wanted to see— right in front of them— who this God is, so they could worship and experience God or gods in an

immediate way. For that reason, Aaron— Moses' brother who had been designated to help Moses lead the people— collected all their gold rings from their ears, melted it, and fashioned it into a calf, and told the people: Look, see! Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt! The people delighted in this god they could see. They worshiped it and reveled in its presence, and made offerings. Their fault wasn't in their faith; they *wanted* to worship the God who brought them out of Egypt. Their fault was in their **form**: they chose to make God into something with clear boundaries, a god that shone with wealth, a god that would passively stand while they admired, touched, and kissed him.

But the God of Israel is the one who gave to Moses the name Yahweh— I AM. This is the god with a **verb** for a name- a God without boundaries, a god that cannot be contained or defined by wealth, a God who is active and never passive, a god that is neither exclusively male nor exclusively female. This is a God who asked to be worshiped alone, not along with the god of greed or the god of militarism or the god of... well, what gods come between you, and the God who has made covenant with us?

How is a God like this to meet a stiff-necked people like the Hebrews? Not gracefully, it seems at first. God announced to Moses, "**Let me alone.** *Let my wrath smolder hot against them. I will **destroy** them.* And then you— Moses, I will make you the only heir to my covenant, and I will remake the world through you."

God had done this before. Remember Noah?

And Moses *could* have delighted in being the chosen one, the good one, God's favorite. Moses could have inherited everything himself: the nation, the people, the land.

But for Moses, it would not be enough to inherit all of God's blessings. He knew his future was tied up in the future of each of those people he crossed out of Egypt with. And so, Moses became a peacemaker. He asked God:

"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?"

"Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people." And then Moses went on to remind God who God promised to be, that God had made a covenant with these people, a promise that should mean something.

Does God change God's mind? Did Moses actually *talk* God into becoming a more forgiving God, a better God? Or was God just play-acting the kinds of things we humans are likely to say, to warm Moses up into the leadership role he would need to take?

Was it actually God who had the stiff neck, and Moses who talked God into looking at things more flexibly? For those who struggle with prayer, this instance of Moses convincing God to **change** God's approach offers a compelling reason why we should pray. Our words may in fact change God. As the apostle Paul instructed the church in Phillip, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

I was asked to speak at a Vigil for Israel that will happen tonight, and I confess that I have spent more hours preparing that statement and prayer than I have on the sermon I share with you today. I may be a better fit to speak at a Vigil for Peace or a Vigil of Lament. Maybe that is why my back felt stiff on Thursday and Friday— I feel the tension among people and places I care about, and it became embedded in my flesh. I hope I have exercised integrity in my preparation. I have tried to stretch my neck in more than one direction, to listen, to empathize, and to learn, so that I do not approach this moment like a stiff-necked person, but as someone who can speak with care and integrity. There is a time for silence, and a time when silence is cruel. I humbly hope I have discerned which is which.

Our scriptures today teach us that we need not go it alone, in living lives of faith and integrity. Moses was given that option, but he knew the promises of God would be richer when shared. Paul looked to two women he mentioned who shared in his ministry: Euodia and Syntheche, two women who struggled beside Paul in the work of the gospel. Praise Jesus that Paul gave these women a shout-out, considering he could, at times, be stiff-necked about women and their voices for ministry!

With our voices, and with our bodies, we are often calculating: where can I allow myself a grace? When do I need to be bolder, and push through? Who will be there to stand with me? We are now about to move into a time of anointing. If you choose to come up for anointing, you will be asked if you want to name a way you seek healing for your body, or in someone else, or for the world.

Our tradition says that we can pray to God, to let our supplications be made known. I don't promise to you that praying to God will fix your illness or the world's brokenness. But it can assure you, you don't have to go it alone. And maybe, such blessing with oil can loosen up our stiff necks and reveal to us the many reasons God gives us for hope. They are not always directly in front of us, so we need the flexibility to look around to find them. We need the time to pause from moments we are triggered to want to enter a state of doom and gloom, and instead be reminded of who God is and what hope God has promised.

May this time of anointing be the pause that we need in our prayers. May this oil be blessed to make our stiff necks limber enough to see the graces around us. May this oil, as much as possible, add to our sense of healing, of peace, and of connection in life.