

Standing in the breach

By [D. Brent Laytham](#)

October 6, 2008

What a great party Aaron managed to throw while Moses was on sabbatical! (Perhaps Exodus 32 is a caution for associate pastors against starting new initiatives while the senior pastor is on vacation—even if the people beg.) Jesus too offers a parable of a party. Such festivity will likely be the last thing on most people's minds this week, however. The economic news is a woeful threat that inhabits parishioners imaginations like "outer darkness, where there [is] weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 22:13).

Our epistle lesson counsels "Rejoice in the Lord always"—even when financial institutions fail. "Do not worry about anything"—not even a weakening dollar or crashing markets or the threat of financial loss and economic ruin. And the earlier command to "stand firm in the Lord" seems especially helpful as the stock market crashes down around us and our financial foundations quake. Be careful though, for none of these admonitions is the gospel. It isn't gospel to tell the glum to rejoice and the worried to stop worrying and the shaken to settle down. The gospel, after all, is never an imperative; it always an indicative statement of what God has done and is doing in Jesus. Here the good news lurks in the prepositional phrases: stand firm in the Lord, be of the same mind in the Lord, rejoice in the Lord, don't worry and pray thankfully and be guarded by peace in Christ Jesus. Preach that if you want to offer comfort and hope to the fretful faithful!

If you want to engage the golden calf, you'll need to engage God's wrath staring us full in the face. Be cautious here. Don't silence the text by refusing to read it or by ignoring what it says about wrath in the sermon. Instead, be like Moses and stand in the breach on your people's behalf. The psalmist tells us that Moses stood in the breach for Israel that day (Psalm 106:23).

What's this breach? It's easy to read it as a fissure in the divine life. Over here is God's wrath against sin and over there God's love for sinners. Reading the breach as a gap in God's character forces Moses into the role of therapist to a divine schizophrenia. "Thank goodness Moses talks that hothead Yahweh down" this psychologizing anthropomorphism thinks. Yet this is no revelation that wrath and mercy compete in the divine psyche, with human well being hanging in the balance, even if Yahweh demonstrates a wild unpredictability here that knows nothing of the button-down regularity of the theologian's God.

What is the breach? It is the gap between God's holiness and Israel's sin, the tear in the fabric of fidelity caused by Israel's disobedience, the divide between God's love for Israel and Israel's refusal to be loved. It is another version of the breach that opened in Eden beside the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, a typical example of the truth that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Here is a revelation that God's wrath against Israel is but the flip side of God's love for Israel (and thus for us); it is so broad and deep that it cannot but burn white hot against the self-destructive, death-inviting practice of offering worship to what isn't God. In other words, God's wrath is utterly real and absolutely good precisely because it is God actively loving sinners by actively opposing their sin. Divine wrath is thus not so much a feeling that our behavior causes, but the form love takes in the face of sin.

That is the breach, and Moses steps into it for Israel's good and for God's glory. In Jesus of Nazareth another chosen one, a prophet greater than Moses, stood in that same breach for our good and God's glory. Indeed his cross marks the divide between God's will and our waywardness; it fills the gap between God's love and our refusal to be loved. Jesus pours out God's wrath against sin in suffering love and we are not destroyed but saved. He stands in the breach on our behalf, so that we can stand firm in him (Phil. 4:1).