

“Calling for Change”

Valley Presbyterian Church – October 11, 2020

19th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 106:1, 19-23

Rev. John Wahl

Exodus 32:1-14

What do you do when the only world that you’ve ever known has been torn out from under your feet? When everything familiar seems to have crumbled and you’re left standing in a desolate place with an uncertain future before you? How do you respond when you feel alone; when the One you’ve trusted has disappeared?

This is where the Israelites find themselves today. Everything that was recognizable about their previous life in Egypt – good and bad – is gone. The God of their ancestors, silent to them for so many generations, has seemingly come to re-establish the relationship, and a leader has emerged to speak of God’s behalf. But now...God and Moses have departed from them.

Last week we heard about instructions for the Passover meal that the Israelites would observe the night before they escaped from Egypt. After that night, they travelled to, and through, the Red Sea, and then into the desert, with God leading them to Mount Sinai, where Moses made several trips up the mountain to speak with God, receiving the ten commandments and many other laws and instructions for how the people should become a community. Today’s story happens during the fourth trip up the mountain, lasting 40 days. Among the many instructions given to Moses was the call for the people to make an offering of precious metals and stones and fabrics for the building of a tabernacle—a moveable temple where God could dwell with the people.

This is a budding relationship; each party is just learning to trust the other. The Israelites have witnessed the power of God in the plagues, the parting of the Sea, and the daily provision of manna and quail. God has made a covenant with the people, saying: *You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagle’s wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.*

But like a wounded animal or victim of abuse, God’s people are suffering from trauma. For over four centuries, they lived in poverty, scarcity and slavery. It’s hard to blame them for having a difficult time letting go of the oppressive

regime they just fled. At the very first sign of God's absence, the Israelites consider returning to their abuser.¹

Moses had been gone too long and so the people began to doubt. What happened to him on the mountain? Did he desert us? Did a wild animal devour him? What to do now?

A false but familiar answer emerges: when in doubt, return to what you know. When you are afraid, go back to the old ways. Build a golden bull – just like the idols they had seen their neighbors worshipping back “home” in Egypt. Because, what was familiar was something that was tangible, which they could relate to; rather than an invisible God that told them to practice worship without images.

The people gather around Aaron and ask him to create other gods for them. Clearly this is the wrong thing to do, and yet Aaron concedes to their request, collecting an offering of gold from the people that will be fashioned into the bull. He then builds an altar and proclaims that there will be a festival the next day. Maybe he is pacifying the people, or trying to steer them back in the right direction, or just stalling; hoping that Moses will come back down from the mountain and take back the reins of leadership. So, the next day, the revelry begins.

The first sign of God's anger is that he says to Moses: *Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely.* It's a little like when our pets misbehave, we say to our family members: *look what your dog did!* God seems unambiguous that the people have sinned, breaking not only the second commandment about forming graven images, but the first commandment as well, saying: *they have worshipped it and sacrificed to it.*²

This anger is so great that God asks Moses to be left alone, so that a back-up plan might be put into action: God would destroy all people and start all over with Moses; much as had been done with Noah and the flood. This serves as a reminder that God is not to be tamed; that mercy only has meaning if God's passion for us to be in good and right relationship is real.

Moses chooses not to let God alone, but instead to remind God of all that the people have been through and all God has done and promised. God – not Moses – is the one who has brought them out of Egypt; God is challenged to remember the

¹ Katy Drage Lines, “Learning to Trust”

² Amy Peterson and Robert Williamson, *Bibleworm Podcast*

covenant that was made so long ago with their ancestors; to allow the longevity of the relationship to lower the temperature in this crisis of the moment.

God knows that the Israelites are a wounded people; slavery is built into their memories, rooted in their being. They built an idol because they trust in what they can see, and in what they know. Maybe the simplest solution would be for God to cancel the covenant and start over with Moses; maybe he would get right what the Israelites seem to always get wrong.

Instead, God's mind is changed. God cherished this chosen – yet impulsive and broken – people and desired love in return; but knows that coercion or manipulation will only replicate the long-suffering oppression of Egypt. Thus, God will show them what trustworthiness is like: to be a God who is faithful even to a people who can't be trusted.

This text reminds us that we – as individuals and as God's people – routinely make God disappointed and even angry. But God's commitment to us means that when God steps back and reflects on this covenant relationship, God often chooses not to act on that anger, but to exercise patience instead; rather than giving up on us, God shows persistence. Ultimately, this patience and persistence of God will find its way to the cross, where the death and rising of Jesus reveal how God refuses to give up on us.³

Some of us might have trouble grasping the concept that God's mind could be changed; the New Interpreter's Version of this text reads, *Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened*. Whether you understand this to mean that God's mind really changed or that God always knew what God was going to do, it's clear that in response to Moses' plea, God does not do what God originally said. And so – as when Abraham pleads with God to spare the people of Sodom and Gomorrah – the Old Testament provides us with examples of humans who understand prayer to be a conversation; and a God who listens to humans. While God is God – and we can never fully know the mind of God – we can be assured that God is with us and God is for us.

As we said before, this is a budding relationship; God and the Israelites are still figuring out the terms of their covenant; the expectations on each side might still need to change. If God is just going to do what God wants, then what role does Moses – or any person of God – have to play? Here, we see Moses actually helping God to keep God's plan by calling God to remember and fulfill promises made.

³ Dave Daubert, "God Won't Give Up"

And while melting down their gold to fashion the graven image of a calf may seem like a big no-no, this story also reminds us that the covenant relationship between God and God's people is bigger than any momentary mistake or misdeed. Messing up – in this or any other way – does not blemish the relationship forever.

Still, while God might recognize how broken and prone to taking the wrong path we may be, God remains insistent that the creation and worship of other gods – whatever idols they might be – is not acceptable. This is because any one image of God is an oversimplification; it serves to limit God to particular situations and locations – usually of our own choosing. The mind – and the power, mercy and love – of God are greater than our imagining.

When all that is safe, comfortable or familiar seems to shifting under our feet; when we find ourselves in the wilderness of the desert; when we feel abandoned or alone; the temptation to form a visible, tangible image of God can be great. What God appears to want from us – and especially of us in those fear-filled, desperate times – is a living relationship; one that acknowledges that as God was called to change, sometimes we must remember to do so as well. Amen.