



*Exodus 32: Now What?*  
*Second Sunday in Lent, Sunday, March 8th, 2020*  
*First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois*  
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Have you ever noticed people do interesting things when leaders are gone or delayed? We have two sons, Ethan is 11 and Seth is 9. When they were quite a bit younger, I always knew something was up when it got “too quiet” in the house. Just recently, our family was remembering a morning when I was upstairs getting ready for the day. It was one of those “a bit too quiet downstairs” moments when I discovered they had taken out every box of cereal and made their own creative concoction of breakfast all over the floor, complete with milk and juice...and not a bowl in sight! Mama was upstairs getting ready and boys were downstairs creating new boundaries for breakfast!

My guess is we can all point to times when we’ve pushed the envelope when the leader is absent; it isn’t just a “kid” thing. Whether it’s a parent or a boss or a pastor or a teacher, when the leader is absent or we think no one’s watching, we run hard yellow lights and we raise our voices more than we would if we knew someone else was listening in.

Like I’m doing with this rubber band, leaders stretch and challenge us, sometimes even putting us in positions that are uncomfortable because they know it is what we need to grow or be formed into someone we’re not at that moment. But in the absence of that push and pull of growth, we often “rebound back” to what’s familiar, what’s comfortable and doesn’t require much of us.

Moses has led God’s people out of slavery in Egypt and toward freedom in the Promised Land. It’s been many months since the Red Sea parted and all the Egyptians drowned while the Israelites walked into safety. In that time, God has been speaking to them through Moses about what He expects of them. Laying out what matters most in their new life together.

Most of the Israelites who left Egypt had only ever known life as slaves, surrounded by lots of different religions and practices, and being bossed around by slave masters who don’t care much about their welfare. They had little or no freedom to worship the God of their ancestors Abraham and Jacob and Isaac.

Because of that, they’ve received very specific instructions about how they are supposed to live as God’s chosen and beloved people. Through Moses, they’ve been taught about how to worship God, and how distinctly this life and worship would represent who God is, what God is like and who they would become as God’s people bearing witness to the rest of the world.

All these rules and restrictions we read are part of God shaping and forming people who were slaves, into freed children of God called to worship and love the One who gave them life.

Much of the Old Testament, and especially the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers...gives is a picture of a deeply holy God, who out of His mercy has chosen an unholy people to represent Himself to the rest of the world.

This is where we find the Israelites. An unholy people called to serve a holy God. Their leader has been up on Mount Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights. While Moses is hearing and receiving God's instructions for their life together, the people have lost their footing and already bounced back from their repeated commitment in Exodus 24: "We will do everything the LORD has commanded."

So let's hear from God's Word, picking things up in Exodus 32. Read Exodus 32: 1-8, summarize Moses pleading with God not to wipe all the Israelites out for their worshipping the golden calf, 15-25.

So what went wrong? Why did God's people who had just promised a few chapters before to "do everything the LORD commanded" fall so far and fall so quickly? And what might God be telling us this morning through them?

When the Israelites gathered around Aaron and demanded gods they could see, their focus was on who they didn't have in front of them. Over and over again, Moses made it clear it was the mighty hand of God who brought them out of Egypt and delivered them to safety.

The whole time they were travelling, Moses made sure people wrote down what God had done and how God had intervened so the people could remember. So they could keep telling the stories of God's might and God's power, of God's love and God having chosen them.

But the Israelites had become so dependent on the leader they could see, when Moses was out of sight, they ignored the God Moses had been pointing to all along. Stories of God's deliverance and intervention weren't the stories they were focusing on. These weren't the voices they were listening to.

When Moses wasn't there to keep them on the "straight and narrow," they filled themselves...with themselves. Everything else mattered to them, except for the God who had actually just delivered them. "When the people saw how long it was taking Moses to come back down the mountain," they gathered around Aaron and demanded gods they could touch and see and feel. The Israelites shaped a god to their liking. A god they could control when they were too tired of waiting. A god they could worship on their own terms. A god who was convenient and easy to ignore or replace when they had other things to do or were being pushed or stretched or challenged.

So what went wrong? How did they fall so quickly? Everything else mattered. Not the instructions of the real God who had actually chosen them and delivered them. Not the parameters of protection God gave them through Moses. God Himself, simply didn't matter to them as much as their plans and their priorities mattered to them.

I would guess not a one of us has a golden calf made out of earrings from our children set up for worship in the living room. And we probably don't prostrate ourselves in front of some man-made object we think brings us salvation.

But as we enter this Lenten season of reflection and confession, I think this passage asks us how often do other things matter in our lives, more than the One who gives us this life? We've all been there, and may still be there, when things in our life simply take precedence and priority over following God Himself...

Maybe the priorities we set for our families, a job, a phone, our schedule, clubs or associations? Maybe something shiny sitting in the garage or on the mantel? Maybe it's a deeply ingrained need to control people, or our surroundings or our circumstances...things we give ourselves over to or allow ourselves to become dependent upon, a marriage, a relationship, an honor, a position...things we give lots of energy and loyalty to before and often in place of giving ourselves to God Himself and the life His Word calls us to.

For the Israelites, God's timing was inconvenient and it challenged their patience. God's intangibility pushed for a faith beyond what they could see and feel. God's rescue of them required a new direction and a new purpose that had vastly different parameters than what most of them had grown up with.

What I think God wants us to see this morning is when everything else matters, we lose who we are, at the very core of our being. God's own people were focused on the wrong person, the wrong things. They attributed their newfound freedom, their heart's great desires, to someone and something other than God.

And that focus not only caused them to miss relationship with God, but for many of them as we read at the end of Exodus 32, it cost them their lives, literally.

(Ex. 32:25-29) "So Moses stood at the edge of the camp and shouted, 'All of you who are on the LORD's side, come here and join me.' And all the Levites gathered around him.

"Moses told them, 'This is what the LORD God of Israel says: Each of you, take your swords and go back and forth from one end of the camp to the other. Kill everyone—even your brothers, friends and neighbors.' The Levites obeyed Moses' command, and about 3000 people died that day."

This is gruesome and hard and ugly. And I'm sure it's why so many think of us have seen the so-called Old Testament God as vengeful and wrathful. But "God responds with great anger when his mercy is trampled on. The gods we create blind us to the love our loving God wants to shower on us. And God cannot work in us when we elevate anyone or anything above Him."

We want God to behave on our terms. We want God to "let things slide" and as Aaron said to Moses, "Don't get so upset my lord!" What's the big deal?! The big deal is for God to "let things slide" would mean certain slavery again for the Israelites and it would be no more loving than a parent who has no standards and lets their kids do whatever they want, when they want and how they want. We all know how these kids turn out, barring some major intervention on God's part.

What was true of the Israelites, is also true of us.

God is writing this incredible story of redemption and rescue, of mercy and grace. But because God is holy and just, that story has to be on His terms. What God requires and lays out for us has to matter more than everything else.

Because of Jesus and the blood he willingly shed on the cross, we don't experience judgment from God like the Israelites did. Jesus became the means of justice on our behalf, so that literally God's holiness doesn't consume us.

But it doesn't mean we can take that lightly. This is where our choice and our free will comes in...who or what will matter the most in your life? God has set the parameters. The terms of this life are His. We get to decide what we are going to do with them.

Verses 5 and following tell us "Aaron saw how excited the people were [after he had molded the gold into a calf]. So he built an altar in front of the calf. Then he announced, 'Tomorrow will be a festival to the LORD!'

"The people got up early the next morning to sacrifice burnt offerings and peace offerings. After this, they celebrated with feasting and drinking, and they indulged in pagan revelry."

On the surface, it seems like Aaron is trying to make something good out of something he may even have realized was not good when he created the golden calf. But what Aaron is doing is blending a little of this religion and a little of that one. A little of the God Almighty he was trying to follow, along with a little of the gods the Egyptians worshipped back when they were slaves.

But God won't be paired or partnered with any other religion, or its parts. It was true of God's relationship with the Israelites and it's true for our relationship with God today. God is a jealous God and will not share a platform with anyone or anything else. That's who He is.

For the Israelites, it took 40 years wandering in the desert before their children were ready to enter the Land God would have given them many years before were it not for their stubborn hearts. It took all that time for enough of them to make the long journey from slavery to everything else to freedom in life with God Himself. For some us, it may take that time or even longer to make that journey FROM everything else TO God mattering most.

But it is without question the most important journey we are each invited and called to make, whether during Lent or otherwise, whether with strong leadership at the helm or not.

There's a song by Cody Carnes called Nothing Else. Every time I came back to studying this passage, I heard the words to this song over and over again.

*I'm caught up in Your Presence  
I just wanna sit at Your feet  
I'm caught up in this Holy moment  
I never wanna leave*

*Oh, I'm not here for blessings,  
Jesus You don't owe me anything.  
More than anything that You can do,  
I just want You.*

*I'm sorry when I've just gone through the motions  
I'm sorry when I just sang another song  
Take me back to where we started  
I open up my heart to You*

*I'm sorry when I've come with my agenda.  
I'm sorry when I forgot You're enough  
Take me back to where we started  
I open up my heart to You.*

*Chorus*

*I just want You and nothing else, nothing else  
Nothing else will do x6*

In the official YouTube version, Cody repeats that last phrase 6, maybe 8 different times: I just want You and nothing else, nothing else, nothing else will do...

What if this Lent, nothing else will do but being in God's Presence? What difference would it make over the remaining 5 weeks of Lent to have that phrase "Nothing Else" [but You God] running through your mind? I don't mean holding yourself up in a quiet room, meditating and reflecting for 48 hours at a time. Not that kind of nothing else. Truth is, we all do have commitments and priorities that walk with us toward Lent.

But what if, as I was reminded yesterday when I was in the middle of being angry about something, what if this Lent, you and I invite God's Presence into the midst of that anger, into the middle of that challenging choice to spend time in God's word or watching a ball game or some TV show first? What if rather than praying and asking God to bless our plans and priorities this week, what if instead we ask God what His plans and His priorities are for the days we are given? What if, instead of going through the motions of following the rules and doing what we're "supposed" to do when leaders are around or rebelling against the rules and doing whatever we feel like when leaders aren't around, what if instead, we see beyond all the rules and restrictions the God who is forming and shaping us into a people who not only reflect Him to the world, but reflect back to Him a life that's been moved from slavery to freedom through His son Jesus Christ.

Aaron has never been someone I paid much attention to in Scripture. I mean, his weak leadership resulted in a golden calf and the deaths of 3000 people. Later in his story, he accuses Moses of hogging all the limelight and complains: why should God only speak directly to you? But sometime later, after having watched God provide and intervene AND respond to rebellion and the hardening of people's hearts against God's given purposes, after all that, Aaron is anointed and outfitted with the priestly garments, designed by God and prepared by God's people. In Numbers 17, God made clear that Aaron was his choice to intervene with God on behalf of the people.

For a time, everything else is what mattered most to Aaron. Recognition, honor, position, priority. But in God's Presence and with God's Presence at work in his life, time, Aaron was able to let all those things go as he gave God full access to his life. Aaron stepped full on into the work God had given him to do as priest and leader. Not at all perfect, but depending more and more on God's Presence at work in Him.

A pastor recently said something that really caught my attention... “Your proximity to God and His Presence is NOT a mystery. It’s obvious to everyone around you.”

At some point, what matters most in our lives becomes really clear. It was true for the Israelites when their human leader stepped away, and it cost them dearly. And thousands of years later, it is also true of us. What matters most in our lives becomes really clear.

As I’m sure Frosty laid out last week, Lent is that time when we are called to give God more access, more full access to our lives. It is that unique season that calls us again to make that journey from everything else to nothing else but God.

So now what? This Lent, what is your proximity to God going to be?

Please join me in prayer...