

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson

"The Way Home"

Exodus 32: 7-14

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Moses pulled out of Egypt with a nation in tow... You remember the scene from the movie... Everyone's lined up behind Charlton Heston. And they're just beside themselves. Free at last, free at last, and on their way to some promised land and away from that stinkin' desert.

It's got milk and honey flowing out of the ground.

You don't even have to milk the cows

or harvest the bee hives.

It just flows right out of the ground. What an amazing place. Milk, honey, cooler weather, land ownership... and most of all NO PHAROAH AND NO PYRAMIDS TO BUILD.

So... they head out with visions of promised lands dancing in their heads. And then Moses tells them, that Yahweh wants them to take a detour. Instead of heading straight for Canaan as the crow flies, he wants them to stop off at some mountain and meet God and pick up something really important.

Well, they're not really excited about the detour... but hey, it's the least they can do for this God who set them free. And besides, they ought to get better acquainted. They'd been passing a few stories around for years about Abraham and Isaac and Jacob... but other than that, that's about all they knew of him.

Well... He did seem to be able to control the weather and insects and frogs... and even the angel of death. So... this seems like a God you ought to respond to when called.

So, off they go following Moses and that rod of his...

Into the desert.

To this desolate mountain.

It's an interesting move on God's part. I mean, if you were going to liberate a nation (something we've been talking about recently), you probably wouldn't take them out into the desert where there's no running water, much less running milk and honey.

There's no infrastructure...

No way to get an economy going...

Sort of vulnerable to the elements and Pharaoh's whims.

I'd have had them make a bee-line for the Promised Land... were I in charge of the Exodus. But assuming God knows best, there must be something about the journey there that is as important as the arrival.

And in particular something important about a journey through the desert.

The desert isn't good for much... (outside of that energy source buried deep within it) The desert is sort of useless. You can't exploit sand... can you? You can't manipulate it for your purposes. The desert mothers and fathers said it was spiritually an invaluable place precisely because it had no value to humankind.

In the desert... there's no currency... you cannot be self-sufficient out there.

And what's worse, in the desert people can lose their minds... It's a place of madness. And what's more, it's a place where the demons show themselves for what they are. Not much room for subtlety out there.

So it's odd to me, that Yahweh leads them there but that's what happens and we have to assume that something can take place in a desert that can prepare you for a Promised Land.

What is wonderful... beautiful... eternal... takes some getting ready for. You don't show up at the symphony and get it having listened to a few Hank Williams tunes a long the way. You don't understand Wordsworth if you've grown up on South Park. And you can't blouse through the gates of any Promised Place and enjoy all that's there a part from making a good journey to get there.

That's what I assume anyway, because God's people had to walk for miles and miles through useless sand to this Mountain.

And when they get there... when they get there, it's the oddest thing. You'd think Yahweh would have a big party for them. Kind of a welcome back to Me party.

"It's been so long but I never forgot about you down there in Egypt."

"I've always loved you... like a child."

"Come over here and give Yahweh a hug."

Nope... no such welcome. They get to God's mountain and it's all covered up with smoke and fire... it's shaking and rumbling... and scaring all the people right out of their sandals.

And God even says to Moses, **"Tell them not to touch this mountain. And if they do... if they lay so much as one finger on it... they're dead meat."** It's sort of a Wizard of Oz kind of set up... only it's not a fake Wizard hiding behind a curtain... It's Ultimate Reality looming up on a Mountain.

So Moses puts up **"Beware of Yahweh"** signs all around the Mountain... and tells all the people to stay back or else. And of course, the folks are all thinking, **"Dude, and we thought Pharaoh was a little touchy."**

See... I wouldn't do the fire and cloud and earthquake thing if I'd been running the Exodus. I'd be doing the benevolent liberator thing. But God doesn't...

And I'm assuming God knows best. God knows how badly we need the sacred. God knows how badly we need something that is beyond us. Thomas Merton says, **"our life is maintained and nourished in us by a vital relationship with realities outside and above us."**

Apparently, gods easily handled can't really give us something new and vital... they can't lead us into some new realm. Can't create a people good enough to bless the world, which is what this whole "exodus deal" is about, don't forget. For that, we need a God who leads us into strange places and who reveals Himself on His own terms.

We need what is sacred. And the sacred always... always emerges from what is beyond us and out of our control. It comes out of chaos... and the dry nothingness of deserts... and even from frightening, mysterious mountains.

Would you really want a set of tablets... a map for life that emerged from your own smallness? Something you can handle? Don't answer that too quickly. We'll come back there in a moment.

For now... we're just picturing this first meeting that Moses set up. **"Yahweh... Israel. Israel... Yahweh. This is your God... this is Your people."** And God says **"Hello"** via some smoke and fire... and the people are shaking and thinking, **"Man, Moses, you take care of this... you talk to Him. We're not going up there... we don't even want to go near him. If He speaks to us it's liable to kill us."**

So, Moses goes up on the Mountain... And again, God doesn't do what I'd do. I'd of handed him those Ten Commandments lickety-split and gotten Moses back down the mountain so he could keep an eye on things.

It takes him forever...

He's up there for seven Chapters.

And Moses is taking divine dictation.

I swear... that's what he's doing.

God's going on and on about this and that... Mostly about the tabernacle (that big holy tent) and how to build it. God gives Moses all these details about the ark and the table... and the altar... and the lampstand. He even describes how the priests are to dress, right down to their underwear.

This just goes on and on... incense... Sabbath rules and regs. I'm thinking that Moses, who getting to know his people pretty well, is getting nervous. He's looking over his shoulder and back down the mountain anxiously, like a parent away from a mischievous preschooler. He wants Yahweh to speed things along... I'm thinking.

"Okay... make a bronze basin for washing... and a bronze stand... check... next."

And Yahweh's just being so deliberate... on and on He goes. And so Moses starts jingling his keys. You know, like some of you husbands do in the Narthex after church. **"Give up... it'll never work."**

It didn't in this case. God's in charge and God is taking His own sweet eternal time. Like He wants the people to have to wait... huh? Some of you aren't surprise by that. 'Cause you've waited plenty.

And you know just how the folks down at the foot of the mountain are feeling.

Moses had said, **"Okay guys... um... I'm headed up that mountain now, into that fiery looking cloud to get a couple of tablets... and I'll be back shortly. I promise. I think."** Only he wasn't... back shortly. Everyday they'd post lookouts to see if Moses was making his way back down but they saw nothing.

At first, bunches of them would gather out there with horns and big bags of confetti and banners that said,

"Way to go Moses,"

"Welcome Big 10,"

"On to the land of the Hittites,"

that sort of thing. They were going to whoop it up as God's law was delivered into camp.

But Moses didn't show, so everyday the "Welcome Home Moses Committee" got smaller... and pretty soon they weren't waiting on tiptoes... they were just waiting.

And waiting...

And waiting...

And waiting. God made them wait.

And like I said before, I wouldn't have done that... but God does... and assuming God knows best, the waiting must be important. Something must happen to us in the waiting.

If we can bear it... something happens that's good.

But waiting is hard and it's risky business for us. People who are made to wait are vulnerable. Particularly when God seems so absent, idols can be so tempting.

They can't stand it. They fashion a god with their own hands... with their resources... from what they already have... the stuff from Pharaoh's house... the gold. And the image, the calf??? It was right out of their spiritual past. This is "Ole Time Religion." They think this new journey can be made with an old god and that is never the case. Jesus talked about this in fruit of the vine terms. **"You can't put the new stuff in the old wine skins."**

But they're comfortable with this god, they like this god. Everyone does... it's popular as gods go.

It's a god they can see...

and define.

A god they can manipulate.

Then they even create a new story... a false narrative... **"This golden calf is our god and it's this bovine that led us out of Egypt. Yeah, that's what happened, that's the ticket."**

Someone preached a little sermon and most everyone just went wild. When folks are waiting and anxious, when they're hungry... they'll swallow anything.

There were a few probably who held back. You can imagine some older, wiser folks saying, **"Here we go again."** They'd seen this shallowness before. They know what's next... Won't be long before they have a bookstore and they're selling little trinkets. Golden calf key chains. Golden Calf bookmarks. The Prayer of the Golden Calf sunglasses. It's pop faith. Forty Days of the Golden Calf workbooks.

I'm sure there were some thoughtful, reflective types that were saying, **"You know, waiting is hard, but the mystery on the mountain is more promising than this silly thing."**

Some of the kids probably saw right through it... **"The cow didn't save us, that's dumb."**

There are always a few folks willing to see. But it's rarely a majority position. Wisdom and righteousness and depth aren't easy sells, they don't market well. Historically and religiously speaking, truth generally doesn't get perceived or proclaimed by the mob. Jerusalem always kills her prophets... on the way to the bookstore to buy some trinket religion.

Idolatry is the result of an inability to wait... to be content with what God reveals. Idolatry takes control... it's easier...

It requires no thought...

No need to question your assumptions...

Or your egocentric point of view.

Idolatry requires no soul work... no inner change. No growth... no patience... why wait when you can fashion a savior that will save you in the way you want to be saved. A shiny, slick looking calf... Now there's a god everyone can see... **"Now, there's a god you can get hold of."**

Everyone at the foot of Sinai was all excited... the anxiety has been relieved. This is what idols or for. No more anxiety.

There's a big pep rally. Aaron gets up there on the altar. **"Give me a C – Give me an A – Give me an L – Give me an F... what's that spell?" "We don't know we don't speak English. But we'll cheer anyway... 'whoo whooo'... we'll worship anyway."** That's how silly folks can be... and the text wants us to see that. This is a tragic comedy.

Later when Aaron is confronted by Moses... Aaron says, **"It's not my fault... Ah... Uh... we put some gold in the fire and out popped this calf... It just popped out of the fire."** When we don't trust God we do dumb things but we can't really see ourselves doing them. Idolatry has a way of covering us up.

Merton says that we're in great danger spiritually when we are immersed in unreality. When we believe a bad story and bow down to something that can't save us. Good faith takes us to what is real... makes us see what is real. Unreality will feel better for a time... It allows us to avoid bearing the mystery and waiting on an authentic divine word. And it apparently most always involves a waiting. What none of us would choose. We'd never choose it but God always insists on it.

Well... I've said a lot this morning, mostly about this mysterious God. I haven't said much about you and how this might impact you tomorrow morning. Quite frankly, I just don't know. You'll have to figure that out.

But I do know, that in the process, this seems to be the kind of God you're going to have to deal with... One that has a preference for the desert. I do know that. And I know that we follow One who spent a lot of time out there himself.

I also know that you are a unique creation... a one of a kind expression of the Divine Heart... Called to be free, but you're not yet there. You're being delivered... out of some bondage, but you're not yet home. I know that.

And I know that you've been invited to go on a journey to a Promised Land... a realm, a way of being... It looks a lot like Jesus, by the way.

It's going to involve detours into hard, dry, and scary places. It's going to involve dealing with a divine that can be demanding. A God that makes no bones about what's best for us. It's going to involve waiting... and trusting ever deeper in the Mystery who is reveal... on it's own terms.

We don't want it that way... we wouldn't plan it that way. But that's the way it is. That's the only way home. Amen.

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