

A Sermon for DaySpring

“The Gift of Absence”

Exodus 32:1-14

September 16, 2007

I've been thinking this week about what it means to be resigned... as in resigned to something. **“This is what is.”** And that typically sounds like such a negative thing... sort of an **“O Well.... I guess I'm just resigned”** But maybe there's another way to see it and hear it and see it. Maybe we can think of being resigning as some sort of re-signing onto God's way. The truth is, it's rarely a way that makes sense to most of us. God never does anything the way we would and we're not easily resigned to that... Pick a place in scripture and jump in and God is doing things in a way we wouldn't.

God, I think, behaves strangely in this story. You have this dramatic exit from Egypt and rather than making a bee-line for the Promised Land and all the milk and honey, God takes them out into the desert.

This is not good strategy. You have a vulnerable nation... unorganized, not used to governing themselves, lots of potential chaos and ideally, you want to get them settled and get the economy going. Get the national mood up, if you know what I mean. Draft a constitution.

God, it seems, has some other priorities. Apparently God knows the journey is as important as the destination and that Promised Lands require some maturing on our part, so they are led out further into this desolate place to this mountain. It's not an inviting place... nor is God an inviting God.

There, God appears to be a kind of smoky, fiery, frightening presence. Again, that doesn't seem like such good strategy. Bring folks out into the desert and scare the bejeebers out of them. But... that's what God does first... which means, I guess, that what God wants for them and from them first is awe... maybe even fear.

I'd want them to be comfortable, had I just liberated them. **“Great to see all of you. Welcome to my mountain... Hey, my mountain's your mountain. Is there anything I can get for you... anything at all?”**

Some milk and honey or a plateful of power?

A warm cup of self-esteem?

Or just a big divine hug?

I just hate the way mean ole' Pharaoh treated you and if you need anything... I'm here for you... I'm your man... uh... God.”

God doesn't do that... God keeps a mysterious distance and is saying clearly, **“Get this straight from the beginning, I am not easily handled. In fact, don't think you can grab hold of Me. I am a great mystery and that's where you begin.”** It might not be the move we'd make... but it's what God does.

Before they get a faith, literally carved in stone, they get mystery.

But at least they have Moses, right? Well, they did up until this story. They didn't really know Yahweh... couldn't see Him... or handle Him. But Moses seems to be His go-to guy. He had that staff... and he had that face of his that would be all aglow after a one-on-one with God. So, at least they had Moses.

But not anymore. And again... bad strategy. God hid the pacifier. You know what parents do eventually when they know it's time for the kid to give up that object of security... they hide it... or try to. They want the child to develop internally so that he can soothe and calm himself without a blanket or binkey.

Moses has been the pacifier...
the intermediary...
the conduit of God's guidance and power and presence.

And God takes him away... up on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights, of course. And here's the thing, according to the preceding chapters, God is dictating some pretty mundane things. They already had the Ten Commandments. It's not like God was up there debating with the heavenly host about amending them. **"Oh I don't know, maybe We should include that one about not being bigoted... or is that really more of an extension of the others?"**

That's not happening. God is going through details with Moses. God goes on and on... 'bout this and that. How big to make the tabernacle... how the priests should dress, right down to their linen ephod underwear.

On it goes... how to burn incense... where to put the lamp stand... again, very mundane stuff. Stuff that could have been handled by his assistant, Joshua. **"Joshua, take a memo."**

I'm thinking, **"Let's get Moses back down the mountain ASAP, because we know how people can be when they're left alone."** This is like leaving a bunch of 7th grade boys unsupervised in the camp dorm... good will not come of this, trust me.

Get Moses back down the hill. Not God.

God keeps him, 40 days and 40 nights. He withdraws the conduit of connection. Because...that's what God does. This is the way God seems to work... and it's a back-and-forth.

Dramatic presence... absence.

Great power... now vulnerability.

Consolation... and withdrawal of consolation.

Have you noticed that in your journey with God yet? How quickly the feeling can fade? How something once so meaningful can appear mundane? The spiritual fathers tell us that this is the way. God gives us gifts...

Feelings... security... meaning... things we need.

Relationships... community... callings... gifts of goodness.

People... leaders like Moses.

And in time... when we're ready... like a parent pulling a pacifier... it's gone. The Fathers called it "withdrawing the consolations." Of course... God needs our hunger and our longing in order to lead us deeper. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for..." Hunger is a great gift. We need what is finite to fail.

Why would you learn to pray intimately with God, if your marriage was perfect?

Why would you read about spiritual paths and truths, if your career were completely fulfilling?

Why would you contemplate the great mystery, if what could be embroidered on a bookmark and sold in a bookstore was enough. You need more. Pop faith won't make it through the desert. It's not enough for the journey. And that's a problem for us. So we cling.

Richard Rohr says, **"The last experience with God is frequently the greatest obstacle to the next."** Because we aren't letting it go. God knows this...so...

God withdraws, at some point, what has been the channel. That's the way God pulls us further. You get the high at camp... sing "Pass It On"... get all teary when you're 14 but go back at 17 and see it's not quite enough.

The mystics loved Song of Solomon... where the lover would knock on the door... pretend he was about to enter the room and so the passion could begin. His beloved would go to the door and the lover would have disappeared. And she goes out of her chambers - her confines - and goes out into the night and wanders the streets, **"Anybody seen my lover?"**

Moses stays gone and it's a chance for them to trust God.

But they don't, do they?
They can't stand the anxiety...
the not knowing.

When we have to wait on God, we get vulnerable. And they are... and they get anxious... and they turn to idolatry. Got to have something to remove the anxiety. Got to get things formed up again. When God seems absent, we are at the threshold of something good or bad, depending on what we do with it. Can we wait... bear it? They couldn't... didn't. They are still slaves... slaves to their own anxiety and dependence.

They make this calf and notice that it's made from the gold God told them to take from Egypt. That's interesting. The idol is constructed from something God had given them... something God had blessed. Idols are typically that way. Good stuff elevated to the best stuff. Some gift glorified in an inappropriate way.

In this story, gold, which might have come in handy in the Land of the Hittites, gets wasted on some ol' time religion. This was one of the gods from Egypt.

And they look so silly with it... jumping around. It's so ridiculous. But it's better than waiting, and dealing with God's absence.

Our idol-making is typically more sophisticated and our idols are harder to spot. But like these lovers of the golden calf, our idols are usually made from the gifts God has given us.

We're given some talent... a skill, perhaps... an ability. And we trust in it. **"It will bring me what I need."** The gift gets mistaken for the Giver.

We're in some relationship... and it brings us such joy. Does it? Or is joy a gift from God that is being channeled at this moment through this person.

It's very subtle what we're worshipping in place of the One True Mysterious God... all sorts of gifts being seen as the Giver.

The Bible... a teacher... an experience...

The Doctrines we believe...

Our ability to believe them...

Gregory of Nyssa said, **"Every concept formed by the intellect in an attempt to comprehend and circumscribe the divine nature can succeed only in fashioning an idol, not in making God known."**

Our ideas can be idols... our conceptions... our convictions... our righteous issues.

Anything can be idolized and I'll guarantee... you have some golden calves in your life. And they'll be betrayed... just start paying attention to your feelings.

What makes you jealous?

When do you get anxious... afraid?

Whom do you resent?

Are you angry?

There's a chance some idol has been shaped up from some gift God gave you and it's not saving you like you want it to... because it can't, of course... and your life, your God, is trying to make that clear to you.

Which is what happens here in our story. Moses comes back down the mountain and confronts the idolatry. And there's such a resistance to seeing it. Once an idol is in place it's hard to know it as one.

They'd created a false story. **"This is our god who lead us out of Egypt."** They can't see what's real. They aren't awake at all.

Later Moses confronts Aaron and it's just too funny.

"Aaron what were you thinking?"

“Well, you know how mean these folks can be... they made me do it. They brought me this gold... I threw it in the fire and out popped this calf. Just like magic. (Yeah, that’s the ticket...it jumped out of the fire.)”

Aaron can’t own his idolatry to the point of sounding like a 3-year-old caught with a hand in the cookie jar. And we laugh, not just at him but also with him. It’s just so hard to see and hard to own... all of what we’re looking to, to make us whole. All that we’ve fashioned because God is too mysterious and we’d rather have something handy and easy.

I said at the beginning that this is an important story for a church in our season of its journey.

It’s important because it’s been my experience that churches make really good golden calves. They become such gifts to us... conduits and bearers of great meaning and of such care. God has knocked on the door of many of our hearts through this church. We have much to be thankful for and to celebrate.

But we’d better not confuse gift and giver.

And if you’ve been blessed, remember who is the bless-er. And don’t be surprised if someday you find yourself saying, **“It’s just not the same.”** You will be tempted; this is what happens when we wait. Temptation... to complain... fuss, fight, fix something quickly. The temptation is a part of waiting and the waiting is to form you for the journey home. You’ll find yourself saying, **“It’s not the same... wish we could go back.”** It will happen and when it does... lift up your heart and open your eyes... God is about to lead you deeper.

Which is the end game... not “feeling good” all the time. Not “having our felt needs met” all the time. The goal is our transformation and it will always involve surrender and letting go... giving up even the felt presence of God. Every saint, just ask Mother Teresa, knew it to be so.

We’re after the Infinite and finite gifts won’t get us there. What we’re after, what we’re made for, involves a certain kind of journey. There are some things only absence can give us... only longing for God can create in us.

It won’t be easy and likely will hurt... but God may be doing an unbelievably redemptive thing when He seems most absent.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

“I look to the mountains,” the Psalmist says... we just do. But where is my help found? My help is found in the Lord.

I’m going to be resigned to that... I hope you will be too. Amen