

When the Covenant is Under Threat
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Exodus 32:1-14

Growing up a plumber's daughter, I remember the patience that I had to summon, whenever work would call my father away. It didn't matter that the entire family was packed into the station wagon on our way to a birthday party, if my dad got a call that someone's water heater was broken or a pipe had burst, he'd stop on the way. Then we'd have to wait FOREVER in the car while he either fixed the problem or made a plan to address it.

Moses sure was taking his sweet time, up there on that mountain. To be fair, he and God had a lot to talk about. The people have asked him to mediate their relationship with God, a role that he has already kinda been doing. God mostly speaks to the people through Moses, though God seems able to hear the people's complaints.

God and the people have set up a covenant, a promise they both committed to. God has demonstrated one end of that bargain by saving them from slavery and leading them through the desert. The people of God will live into their side by orienting their lives in accordance with God's priorities.

So God gave them, through Moses, a set of instructions on how to build this holy life. You've probably heard some of them before: You shall have no other Gods before me. You shall not misuse my name. You shall take a day of Sabbath for rest and worship. You shall not take money, property, relationships, or the lives of others. You shall not endanger others for your own gain.

God promises to be present with them, to never leave. God even instructs them to build a home, called a tabernacle, a space where God may dwell among them. The covenant between them is powerful, it's supposed to remain at the center of their common life.

Moses is right in the middle of all of this, acting as a conduit for God and a mouthpiece for the people. But then, Moses stays away for forty days and forty nights. A leader can't just leave the people indefinitely and not think some kind of chaos will ensue! It probably shouldn't surprise us when they begin to take drastic measures.

The people had grown accustomed to mysterious, but ever-present, reminders of God. Pillars of cloud and fire had led them away from Egypt. Bread was provided for them to eat, delicious signs of God's provision for them.

They had seen a foreboding darkness at the top of the mountain and knew that God was in it, and they had heard peals of thunder and cracks of lightning and knew God was speaking to Moses.

But, this time, for a really long time, they'd heard and seen nothing. How could they be sure that Moses was even coming back? they demanded that Aaron build them a sign, a symbol, something they could see, feel, and touch to help them be unafraid. So, caught between his allegiance to God and the demands of the people, Aaron did.

Does that surprise anyone?

Maybe the time away from his brother softened his resolve and pushed him towards the same fear that had shaken his people.

Maybe he was simply an overwhelmed faith leader who was trying to figure out how to placate a bunch of angry and scared people.

Maybe building a golden calf was the easiest way to get them to calm down, to buy a little time until Moses and God could get back and straighten everything out.

As slaves, the Israelites probably would not have much golden jewelry of their own. So how did they get so much precious metal for Aaron to work with? If we look back at chapter 12 of Exodus, we see that this jewelry came from the Egyptians themselves as a kind of pay off to the Israelites.

On the heels of an increasingly terrifying cavalcade of plagues, the Egyptians practically begged them to leave (even if the Pharaoh wasn't ready to do so). *"Get out of our land before you kill us all."* They said.

Moses told the Israelites not to leave empty handed: *"Ask for gold and silver Jewelry and clothes to cover your backs."* The Egyptians, having witnessed the terrible plagues, gave the Israelites whatever they asked for, including golden rings, earrings, and necklaces, just so they'd leave.

The Egyptians could afford gold, in part, because they had built their empire with so much unpaid labor. Every bit of gold the Israelites carried away from that place was a reminder of their history hardship. But they carried those

signs of their former lives away towards the new life that God was leading them into. They would use these tangible symbols of their bondage to shore up their fear.

But in so doing, they would break their promise to God. They would choose a deity they could hold in their hands over the all-consuming, overwhelming, and mysterious One who had been making promises to them.

They could count on gold. Who knew if they could count on God?

As you might expect, the Almighty is angry about all this and tells Moses to leave the mountain so God can get on with the smiting. But, Moses doesn't leave. Moses, who has been God's voice to the people, suddenly becomes the people's advocate.

Because for all of his frustration with his people, Moses cannot bear to think they will be destroyed. Moses, who was once so afraid, has found a bravery within him that allows him to stand up for the people.

So many of us have inherited a vision of the divine that claims God to be not only unchanging, but always right.

We have been told that if scripture shows God taking an action, it must be right, because God is always right.

We have been told that God is now as God always once was, and in our chaotic world, the one thing that we can count on is God not changing.

Those descriptions are common, but they are not rooted in the God we meet in this particular story.

Because in this story, Moses thinks God is wrong and sets out change God's mind. The miraculous thing is that he succeeds. Moses talks God down from a place of anger, and convinces God to not completely destroy the people.

Now, this isn't the end of the story. Moses gets pretty mad when he gets down the mountain and let's them know about it. And the story goes on to tell us that there is a still a little smiting that will happen. But, it's not utter destruction. It's not a total demolition and reboot of the covenant like we saw with Noah.

Their relationship survives, precisely because Moses is willing to stand up for a people who literally have no one left on their side.

So, church, what is the good word for us, modern day people, in this story?

I think there's probably a cautionary tale here about confusing gold for the presence of God.

And there's probably also a reminder that just because God isn't appearing to us in ways we demand, it doesn't mean God is not present or attentive to our lives.

And I hope we can also hear a call to stand up to the powerful, even to God, when we see a people facing utter destruction.

I mean, if Moses can do it, we probably can, too.

But, mostly, I hope we can see here the power of on-going relationship.

Had Moses not valued his relationship with his people, he would not have risked standing up to God. Had God not valued the relationship with Moses, God would not have listened to him when he asked for mercy.

How can we nurture relationships that help us be both more brave and more merciful, at the same time?

I have a hunch that you and I will always be tempted to create a god that we can manage with our own two hands. In those moments, may we be brave enough to remember that THIS God responds to our hearts, too. Amen.