

THE GOD WE NEED, NOT THE GOD WE WANT

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Exodus 32:1-14; Philippians 4:4-9

I have been preaching for several weeks on the texts that tell the story of the Exodus of Israel from Egypt, their travelogue to something new that God had planned for them.

Now you know why I have been planting seeds in that rich soil of Israel's history, that time of change that God was bringing about for that community of faith.

That is our story, because that is where we are as a congregation now. We are a community of faith being led out of one land, which is familiar, a place we like and don't want to leave, into a promised land that we are not sure about just yet. Haven't seen what it looks like, haven't been there before, not sure we'll like it even with all this talk of "milk and honey," and all the good things that lie ahead.

So the story of God's people and their adventures traveling in the wilderness between what was and what is yet to be is particularly timely for a congregation like ours in these days, especially when you now know that I will not be making the journey all the way with you.

Today's lesson from Exodus is a story about a God who has led the people Israel into the wilderness as their guide and helper. But they are a tough crowd and Moses has a hard time keeping them on the straight and narrow. The God that has led them into the wilderness is the God they need, but, they quickly find, is not necessarily the God they want.

They were shaped by an image and an expectation of what they knew of God, and wanted of God, and needed of God. We all of us have some idea of the God we think we want, or the one we think we need. We want God to be all powerful. Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings with a single bound. And we want our God to be near, close by and available, like room service, responsive to our particular needs above all the other needs in the world. But is that really the God we need, or only the God we want? Can we ever really say that we understand God fully in that respect? I mean, really.

Just how powerful and directive do we expect God to be?

I'm not sure I am a person who believes very much in divine causality, the kind of confidence that some people have that things happen precisely because God makes them happen. I fell down in my hotel room a week ago and hit my face on a piece of furniture. Did God cause that for some reason that escapes even me? Or was that just dumb luck, the inattention of a person wandering in the dark of the room not seeing the chair in front of him?

A fire breaks out in California and nearly the entire Sonoma and Napa Valley vineyards and countryside are burned to a crisp. Is that something that God intended and planned, or is that the result of high winds, too little rain, dry crops and a perfect storm of unfavorable conditions?

It is a little easier to see God's hand at work, if you will, when those events are farther in the past rather than being interpreted as they are happening.

I have told before the story of the woman from Central Europe, who discovered that her horse was missing. Her neighbors said, "What a calamity. Your son cannot plow your fields without a horse." The woman responded, "Who knows whether it is a terrible thing or not."

Two days later the horse returned accompanied by a second horse. The neighbors rejoiced, "What a blessing," they said, "now you have two horses." Again the woman answered, "Who knows whether it's a blessing or not."

A few weeks later her son was riding the new horse, and it threw him, breaking his leg and crippling him. The neighbors were quick to offer their sympathy, “What a terrible thing, your son will always walk with a limp.” And she replied, “Who knows if it is a terrible thing.”

Not long afterward the king’s men came through conscripting men for service in a bloody war. When they came to the son and saw his limp, they did not take him. And the story goes on.

The story, in fact is played out in the passage we read this morning from the book of Exodus which is a story of fortune turning on a dime, *or* is it the willful disobedience of Israel that is the heart of the story?

We know this much. Moses was having a séance with God up on the mountain out of the range of hearing and seeing by God’s people.

And down the mountainside, folks were getting restless. Remember that’s who they were, restless.

Complaining and whining at Massa and Meribah wanting for water and longing for a good steak and a baked potato. No sooner were their wants supplied in the form of manna and quail, than they began to complain about a lack of attention from Moses. “He sure is taking a long time up there on the mountainside. Wish he’d send down some word”.

“How long is he going to be up there? Anybody see any Facebook postings? We need to get a better god working for us, one whose cellphone number we know, one whose availability and communication skills are stronger. What good is it when you don’t hear from this God who only talks to Moses?”

So the people demanded (according to one of the Exodus storytellers) ... demanded that they make a god; one they could see and maybe even touch. And they forced Aaron, Moses’ assistant, and trail boss for the trip to help them make a god. Something they could see. Kind of a fake god, but god enough for their purposes.

So Aaron told them to gather up all the Rolex watches and gold bracelets and locket and earrings and neck chains from Tiffany’s and start melting down all these valuables. “Don’t hold back,” he said, “I know you have some things hidden in your purses and pants pockets – those gold watches dangling from the fobs – the ones with the inscriptions – let’s get those out.”

So they came forward *en masse* and contributed what they had (and I know you may be wondering how these poor enslaved captives were able to sneak out of Egypt with all that booty hidden in their backpacks) but let’s just go with it for a while.

So they melted down all the bling that they had sneaked out of Egypt and they built a fire and a few of them must have had skills to make a golden calf big enough to be respected and they fashioned it according to the instructions of Aaron, and (voila!) they had themselves a god.

And they made offerings to the cow god that they had made, and they had a party, and they danced and they lit incense and celebrated this god of their own making.

Meanwhile, the smoke alarms were going off up on the mountain and God could hear the reveling down the mountainside. So God told Moses to get on down the mountain trail and get rid of that golden calf and stop worshipping this idol of their making.

So Moses went down the mountain and threw a fit, and so did God not far behind, threatening that holy anger was at a fever pitch and God was going to let divine rage rain down.

What happens next? Moses, who is the hero of this story, talks God down off the ledge, reminds him of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and the promises made to them, and how it would not help to destroy these poor misguided folks so desperately in need of all that God had promised.

And according to the Exodus storyteller, “the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.”¹ That’s a direct quote.

And if you think about that it is one of the most telling and amazing sentences in the Bible. “...the Lord changed his mind.”

We have a God who is able to change God’s mind. It is more the Jewish mindset to argue with God than it is the way of we mild mannered Protestants. Think of Abraham bartering down God for an acceptable number of the righteous in Sodom from fifty, to forty, to thirty, to twenty, to ten righteous ones to save the city. God in the Old Testament is willing to barter to do the right thing.

But it’s not easy arguing with God. It takeschutzpah, and love, and a sense of balance not to lose sight of the larger purpose which Moses knows God shares with him.

God is not a God who does what the last person in the room argues. That’s not what happens on the mountainside as Moses appeals to God’s better angel.

God is a God with a larger purpose in mind and a destination for Israel, and while God’s anger may have burned hot at these stiff-necked people who were willing to settle for a golden calf rather than the real and mysterious Holy One; Moses reminded God of what God intended for Israel. The vision God had, that “I will be your God and you will be my people.”

So God calmed down (thank God) and as the story unfolds (made all the more difficult to interpret because more than one writer is telling the story in Exodus), eventually the tablets come out and the law is given and while there’s yet another flare up with God in the next chapter, eventually Israel gets the God they need, as opposed to the God they want. And it is better that way.

The God we want is of our own making, fashioned with our own hands, built by our own cunning and imagination. Responsive to our own needs. But that is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and Sarah and Leah and Zipporah. Not the God who is teaching and guiding Moses, nor the same God who has brought Israel out of slavery through the Red Sea.

We know God’s name. It is a name Jews do not speak, that four letter name. In English it is simply represented by capital G, blank underscore, “d”. We Christians are more casual in our use of God’s name, but there is no harm in translating the name that God gave Moses from the burning bush.

“Who shall I say sent me?” Moses asked? Tell them “I am” sent you. I am who I am. I will be whom I will be. Tell them “I am” sent you... because wherever they are I will be, said God.

I’m wondering what kind of God you would like to make in these days when it seems that things are getting shaken up, the promised land delayed, Moses up on the mountain instead of down with Israel, and unable to make the whole journey? If you could decide, what kind of God do you want to fashion after your own image?

I know the kind of world I would like God to create. A world of peace in which no madmen press any buttons to destroy fake or real enemies. I would like cancer to be cured, and everyone who’s depressed or anxious or doesn’t know what to do next to have peace of mind. I would like when a disaster befalls a people as it has in Texas and Louisiana and Mexico and the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, that all resources be put to work, and make right the destruction that has happened. I would want a God who puts out fires in the California countryside; a God who will not allow a 91-year-old man and his 100-year-old wife to have their home invaded causing him to have a heart attack and die.

I would make a god who hits the re-set button and keeps us from destroying ourselves. But then I guess things were that way once upon a time, in the beginning, in the Garden where there was only one tree the fruit of which we could not eat, and we ate. And it’s been up and down ever since.

Even with the best of intentions, we don't get the god we want, the god who makes everything right and prevents all falls and makes peace the way we want it, and creates a kind and cozy future that makes us feel better going into it.

But instead we get the God we need. The God who promises to travel with us, who is on the journey alongside us, who is sitting with us in the doctor's waiting room, the God whose tears are the first of all our tears to fall, the Holy One who will be whom God will be.

It is not ours to dictate the dimensions of that God, the directions or the outcome of where God will take us. It is only ours to follow, and stay nimble. Because the God who claims Israel sometimes takes us where we do not want to go.

There is, a very elastic image of God that we see in scripture. A God who allows a great deal of freedom to Israel to choose the good or the evil thing. This is the God who liberates Israel even when they do not know what to do with that liberation. A God who promises to be by our side in good times and in bad, in the hard things of life and the easy things as well. This is the God whose son, Jesus, even faced a cross and a dying hill and cried out in agony, asking why God had forsaken him, and yet God did not forsake him.

I look at these little ones that we are about to baptize, and wonder what they will see and how life will treat them, and what will fill their hearts to overflowing, and what will shatter them as well along the way.

The promise of the story we have read from Exodus is that cantankerous, difficult, impatient and stiff necked as we are, God will not abandon us, nor leave us alone.

God will see us all the way to the Land of Promise, and it will be a time and a place not of our making but of God's.

One of my favorite verses of literature comes from W.H. Auden's Advent play, *For the Time Being*. I heard it first many years ago in the James Chapel of Union Seminary as a benediction at the end of the service. It is, I suppose as honest, and mysterious, and as inspiring a blessing as I've ever heard.

Auden's words:

He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy."

May we come to know and follow that God, whom we have seen in Jesus Christ, to whom be honor and glory, wisdom and strength, both now and forever. Amen.

¹ Exodus 32:14