

20th Sunday after Pentecost; Proper 23 A
Sermon 10.15.23

Exodus 32:1-14

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD.” They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

The LORD said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’”

The LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.” But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’” And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Philippians 4:1-9

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (676)

When the voice of the psalmist in the 23rd Psalm turns from speaking about the Lord to speaking to the Lord: that turn: I love that.

Have you ever noticed that? Familiar as this psalm is, even to people who don't spend much time with the Bible, have you ever noticed this turn? In the first two verses, the voice of the psalm speaks of the Lord. He is someone to be spoken *of*: he is my shepherd, and for Him I want for nothing. He provides everything I need for living: beauty, sustenance, rest.

And to speak *of* someone, even in praise: it's generally done when the person is far off, or at least out of the range of hearing and encountering.

I recently spoke of someone assuming she was out of range, of hearing, of speaking for herself. I didn't say anything bad, just spoke of and on behalf.

When I realized she was right there, in the next room, but close enough to hear and to speak for herself, I was embarrassed. I apologized.

Maybe that wasn't necessary.

"The Lord is my shepherd" says the voice of the psalm to a listening audience, or to the psalmist's own listening heart. "I shall not want. He allows me rest in green pastures. He leads beside still waters. He restores my soul."

I talk to myself.

Do you?

But then there's this turn. The one who was topic for testimony has become one with whom to share an encounter. There is suddenly You. And it happens when the one speaking has found himself in the darkest valley, has found herself in the valley of the shadow of death. Suddenly, there is You. (Thank God. This was going to be very lonely. This was going to be very scary.)

Separateness is what the people in the wilderness feared—being cut off from the one who'd brought them to this place and had now apparently left them here.

Moses had proven powerful to save. He'd brought them out of Egypt. He'd untethered them from the position they'd been in, enslaved. He parted waters for them, found a dry path through it all, or dry enough. They wouldn't get bogged down; light on foot they were. The armies of Pharaoh, though: warhorse, chariot: these *would* get bogged down.

The people would be free.

The people would be in the wilderness.

The only thing worse than living within the enslaving, depleting domain of empire is living beyond this enslaving, depleting domain.

Here is Walter Brueggemann on the people's emerging from empire—Walter Brueggemann, Old Testament scholar, preacher, member of a congregation of the United Church of Christ. “The exodus liberation promised a new existence for Israel, filled with joy, freedom, and well-being. However, the withdrawal from the imperial system of Egypt brought Israel only to the wilderness, which gave no well-being. The wilderness is a place of no water. The wilderness is a place where the guaranteed life-supports of empire are missing. Thus, Israel was plunged into crisis...

“The Egyptian imperial system had given neither dignity nor freedom, but it had offered a steady supply of food and water, if in exchange for servitude...

“Now, out of empire, in the leanness of wilderness faith, Israel's need and thirst and yearning lead to restlessness and an outcry against the leadership of Moses.”

But Moses was now nowhere to be found. (This me speaking now.) He'd gone up the mountain of the Lord and he delayed up there, which, on the one hand was fine because the people had told Moses they didn't want to have an encounter with the Lord themselves, they wanted to leave all that intensity to Moses. On the other hand, the wilderness presented an intensity all its own, the formlessness of it, the shapelessness, the sheer vastness of it that spread and dissipated. Such a void is surprisingly intense—an intensity that comes from utter disregard.

You are subject to no one and nothing, which makes you not a subject at all. Nothing to speak of. Nothing to speak. Forgotten. As if never having been.

Which is worse to you: to come so close to utter being that your own individual being might be consumed or to be cut off from such utter being that it's as if you simply are not and never were.

When Jack was an infant, he would have lively dreams. His body would twitch. His face would cloud over, shine again, lips quivering, eyes behind their lids dashing about. Tobias, two years older, would watch him. Old enough, just barely, to talk, he'd wonder what was going on. I would too. The dream, I imagined, was either about being abandoned or being consumed. I figure our fears come down to that, especially for one still so close to that original experience of being cut off, from your source, that original umbilical connection suddenly severed.

You're on your own now.

Or you'll never be given that chance. Consumed, you will never be free.

Those are the twin fears. That's what I figure. Even from our earliest days. Even from before we have language with which to image our fears.

Moses delayed and the people were despondent. They needed a sign that they weren't so alone.

Aaron had an idea. It wasn't a *good* idea, but it was reasonable. "Give me your gold, everyone. We'll make an enduring shiny symbol. A sign."

Well, already word had come that the people weren't to make any idols or graven images or otherwise signs of the reality of the Lord. Word had come, several chapters earlier in this book of the Bible, a couple weeks ago in the liturgical life of the church. The Ten Commandments, this, the second one, "You shall make no idols, no graven images."

And it's not spelled out as to what is the problem with so called "graven images." But it is much wondered about. That nothing can honestly make present the glory and mystery of the Lord, that anything would only deceptively be such a re-presentation, the prohibition against such idolatry is a safeguard against what deception any claim at making the Lord God present would actually be.

But, the thing is, people need signs. Us people: we need signs of the absolute, ways to relate with what is, in truth, utterly beyond our ability to relate with it. The absolute, creative power of the One who has created all and the One sustains all: this is beyond anything we can relate to because it is itself not relative: it is absolute. And yet we, who are this One's creatures, live amidst the relative. We spend our days in the realm of the relative, only barely touching, from time to time, the absolute, only barely having it broken into our time-to-time, that which is eternal and absolute.

And yet we long not to be cut off from it. Or at least I do, long not to be so terribly separate from the eternal, the absolute.

So, we need signs, which words themselves are, signs, symbols, pointers that point to that to which they point. And honest words point honestly to the thing to which they honestly point. I point to a book and say, "Book," making honest use of the sign. I see justice and say, "Justice," making honest use of the sign.

But words can be used deceptively, to point to things that are not themselves the point, that might even be opposite to that to which they're to point. I point to the blue sky and say, "Red," and I am using a sign deceptively. I point to the green grass and say, "Purple," and I'm asserting power but not truth—and you face a decision whether to submit to my assertion of power

or to resist me and insist upon truth. I see injustice and say, “Justice,” and I am doing something diabolical. Rather than symbolical, the sign I employ is set over and against the enduring thing to which I mean the sign to point.

This is a diabolical move—diabolical as opposed to symbolical, using signs to deceive rather than to indicate truth.

Here’s something worth knowing: to soothe comes from the antiquated word for “truth,” “sooth,” as in a sooth-sayer, which suggests the truth is soothing. Though also challenging, though sometimes unwelcome, the truth is soothing in a way that deception is not.

Which is why the Lord God prohibited signs that are idols—because idols are themselves deceptive, signs that claim divinity but are rather just graven, things of the grave.

A golden calf, so discrete a thing, if ascribed such power it will become cause for fighting, cause even for fighting unto the death. Who gets to hold it? Who gets to wield it? Who gets it to keep it? The absolute and eternal has been imagined as coming to occupy something discrete and bound by limits: if God is here, then God is not there—and then we’ve got grounds for war.

Graven indeed.

The sign Moses was busy up the mountain collecting were the tablets, the stone tablets of the covenant.

You could argue these were themselves graven images. And they would become that. Eventually, the people lost them in war with the Philistines. They watched them carried away by the enemy. And then the people would fight another war to get them back. The question is, did they go to war because they thought the tablets themselves were holy, or did they go to war to retrieve them because, only copy there was, without the tablets the Law by which the people were gathered as a people would be lost, forgotten. This is the question because it was the word that was essential, not to the objects by which the word is transmitted.

In the word, the Lord was near. In the word, the people knew themselves not cut off or abandoned—in a valley of the shadow of death, indeed—but gathered and given a way to live together in peace and justice.

Peace and justice.

The struggle for which continues. I think of Israel. I think of Gaza, which I imagine you do as well. Peace and justice, these phantoms, these distant dreams whose reality we must also insist upon, it seems to me, and the attaining of which seems most possible if we follow Paul’s advice from long ago: “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure,

whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things...and the God of peace will be with you.”

Not now, it seems. Not this morning, not everywhere. This God of peace to be with us: not now, it seems. But forever, I trust. You. I trust You.

Thanks be to God.