

14th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 9.11.22

Exodus 32:1-4, 7-14

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.' ²Aaron 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.' ³So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He took the gold from them, formed it in a mould, 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!'

The Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸ 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!" ⁹ The Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ 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? ¹² 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. ¹³ 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." ¹⁴ And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. ⁸ "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (506)

Yesterday was a good day in Ukraine, surprisingly good.

Prior to it, one of the scarier things I'd heard regarding the Russian war there—or maybe creepier is more like—involved the schools. Russia sent teachers into Ukrainian schools to teach a

“corrected” curriculum and even established Russian-sponsored schools. They then pressured Ukrainian teachers to join as faculty members there and threatened parents with losing custody of their children if they didn’t enroll them there.

This was news in July, but it resounded to me this week. Then, the Russian education minister was quoted as saying, “Integration will take place. We are already taking some steps in this direction: teacher training and the supply of textbooks,” while one teacher living in a village in the (perhaps no longer) occupied area of Kharkiv said that teachers of “history, geography, language and primary schoolteachers were asked to sign the document” agreeing to Russian standards of education. He added, “Math, physics, biology and chemistry curriculum in Russia don’t carry propaganda, so they are left alone, at least for now.”

Scary to me, *creepy* to me: the idea of a captured mind has always been creepy to me.

But it seems common knowledge: capture the minds of children and you’ve got a whole country for decades to come. True in Eastern Europe, true closer to home. Lately, it seems the hottest battles are the ones fought over what’s to be taught in our public schools. Every podcast I’ve listened lately—and I listen to a lot—seems to have this as its focus. It’s as if everyone knows, control the children and you control the country. Meanwhile, we all suspect it’s the folks on the other side of the debate who are trying to capture and not simply to educate.

But better still than capturing young minds is that, if you get them young enough, they don’t know they’re captured. Which is the best way. Make it so they never know they’re not free. Make it so they even come to love their cage.

This is at the heart of the conflict we just heard, the conflict between Moses, God, and the people.

We’re in the wilderness now.

The people have been brought up out of Egypt. Moses led them through the sea at the command of the Lord. Now they’re in the wilderness, and now without Moses as he’d gone up the mountain and has been gone for forty days, which is to say a really long time.

For all the people knew, he would never return.

For all the people knew, he’d been consumed on that fiery mountain top.

And for all they believed, it was Moses who’d brought them out of the land of Egypt—Moses and not the Lord, which makes his absence all the scarier. Where *was* he?

This is the point Rachel Wrenn makes. A biblical scholar, she notes that “the people have anchored their faith to Moses, and not to God.” Earlier in Exodus, “God specifically claims that it

will be by divine action that the people will be brought out of Egypt” and a little later “Moses specifically tells the people that they were brought out of Egypt by divine action.” And yet, by just prior to Moses’ ascent up the mountain, the people, now dying of thirst in the wilderness, succumb to their entirely understandable terror, turning to Moses to demand of him, “Why did *you* bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?”

See, they thought this whole thing had been Moses’ idea. They attributed this whole wondrous, and now terrifying and devastating, situation to Moses.

They’d reiterate this belief now that Moses was gone, demanding of Aaron, this who was essentially second in command, “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 don’t know what’s become of him.”

See, they thought Moses had been the one to lead them, and now to abandon them. But that it was God: that’s just too much to take in. Like when each of my sons saw the ocean for the first time. Toddling up to its edge, they couldn’t see it until it growled and rolled toward them. Getting their toes wet, it terrified them. Tobias even screamed.

God as guide was like that to the people. Inconceivable, imperceptible, God would not be all that Moses was, present, obvious. He would be their god.

No surprise, this, perhaps.

What *might* be a surprise is how this question became live between Moses and God. As to who’s responsible for this people and the terrifying situation they now find themselves in, this plays out, according to the story, between the Lord and Moses, too. On the mountaintop, their conversation is one we’re privy to. The Lord says to Moses, “*Your* people, whom *you* brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely,” which has Moses push back, though subtly, semantically: “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?”

Even God forgets Godself.

And it's perhaps surprising, too, to see Moses push back against the Lord, and to see the Lord as suggestible to Moses, persuadable. You might not have known this tradition exists as regards the Lord of heaven and earth, that sometimes some people have the capacity to push back, correct. More pressingly, you might not have experience yourself as being the conscience of God. Quite the opposite, if we have personal experience of the God of the Bible, the God of Moses, the God of Jesus, it’s more likely that he is our conscience, not the other way around.

Here, though, Moses is the voice of moral reasoning, while God seems to shirk and rage. Which, related, calls forth the quite long tradition of the elect of God appealing to the better angels of God's nature. It's often the case that prophets and others-like step into the breach between God and the people. Abraham begged of God greater grace than wrath, and succeeded in persuading him when it came to the fate of the city Sodom. Stephen prayed for those who stoned him eventually to death. Of course, Jesus prayed from the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know what they do." Most strikingly, God is remembered in the book of Ezekiel to have known this about himself, saying according to the prophet Ezekiel, "I looked for someone [to]... stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it." For this, the tradition is called "standing in the gap" or "standing in breach," the notion that someone so chosen—a prophet, a martyr—had the capacity to stand in the breach that had come between God and the people so to moderate the extremes of action and reaction.

But it's perhaps surprising because it asks us to imagine God as a force for whom grace and graciousness might not be forthcoming, might not be primary, might indeed need to be begged forth. We're likely used to thinking of God as being all about grace, or at least more about grace than any person by compare. Moses, here, though outdoes God in that regard.

Then there's the likely fact that for us God feels more remote than all that, more silently present than conversational and interactive. That's true for me, anyway. I've never had an experience of God so immediate as this, so interactive and interventionist as this. God to me is transcendent presence, imminent opportunity, but never a partner in debate or a presence open to persuasion.

The way I understand this, then—this encounter between God and Moses, this ping-pong of responsibility between God and Moses—is as a story told long after whatever of history might have happened to give foundation to this telling. We're early in the Bible here. We're in mythic time, only slowly emerging into historic time. We're in what philosopher Charles Taylor calls time-out-of-mind, which is often in religion the time of origin, of genesis. We're though pivoting into events that can be found in the historical record—if not Moses, if not enslavement in Egypt in particular, then at least a frightening landscape, enslavement in general, exploitation amidst empire, and the reliance on some bold, fierce freedom-fighter. These are (sad to say) very much things of the "real world."

For all this, this foundational story has at play many otherwise "real" things, and has implication of "real" concern, among them the question of human authority, divine authority, and

worldly power and politics. The Lord God has claimed these people as his chosen. He has done so because, as people who were once enslaved and exploited by worldly power, they have unique capacity to see good possibility in having but one king, this a transcendent king whose generating power isn't blood and soil, but is love and grace.

But God as king is an imaginative leap, to say nothing of a functional challenge greater than most political challenges. With God as king, who's actually in charge? With God as king, how are decisions to be made and executed? By what standard shall work be assigned and resources be distributed, and how shall transgression be addressed, how shall transgressors be brought back into justice? The questions that enliven any political formation and debate we should assume were very much at play here among the Israelites newly formed of these previously enslaved and newly freed from imperial domination.

What's more, God as king and love as rule were (I imagine) thin gruel for a world where brutality had long been proven to work, where might made right for its bringing clarity and common understanding if also terror, pain, and suffering.

A once-enslaved people might be uniquely open to this—though this ephemeral God might not be enough to go on, at least not for the long run.

This would be difficult. It always is.

This story seems to suggest even God had begun to forget amidst all the terrible freedom, referring to this people in his exchange with Moses as “*your* people,” as if they belonged to Moses and not to the Lord, as if Moses had brought them out of Egypt and not the Lord.

This point, Rachel Wrenn writes “is visible in Hebrew, but less obvious in English translations. It involves two Hebrew verbs: *alah*, “to go up,” and *yatza*, “to go out.” Both verbs are used by God to describe the exodus event. [But] *Alah* suggests a movement from one place to another, namely, a place where the people can freely serve and worship God...[while] *yatza* is explicitly linked not only to the movement from one place to another, but to the movement out of a position of bondage to one of freedom. *Yatza* describes liberation from slavery.”

To wit, “God uses *yatza* several times in just this way, describing the liberative aspect of the exodus act... [The people, though,] when describing the exodus act, ... never refer to their liberation. In their descriptions of the exodus, the only fact that takes precedence is how they were brought out of Egypt to another place. Never do they mention slavery. Never do they mention their freedom. The people fixate on the fact that they seem to have been brought from one frightening place to one that is even worse.”

Which presents a good time for this aside, also from Rachel Wrenn: “Wise preachers will avoid the easy pitfall of making light of the people’s predicament. The Sinai wilderness is no joke. Dying of thirst in the desert is a constant possibility. Dying of hunger might take longer, but it would be just as deadly. Either possibility is very real, especially if the only one who seems to know how to lead them through the wilderness has disappeared into an inferno. Death in the desert would not be a pretty process. The healthy adults would have to sit and watch as the children, the elderly, and the sick died first. Fear may be confusing their senses, but the fear is not itself unwarranted.”

Additionally, she notes this: “Wise preachers will also avoid emphasizing a metaphorical understanding of slavery in this text and ignoring its real, lived reality. Modern descendants of the enslaved continue to pay the price of an institution that baked its evils into the groundwork of many societies. An emphasis on metaphorical slavery that ignores the real history of slavery in your respective country does a disservice both to preacher and congregation.”

So, this fear for what’s now possible, and the enduring trauma at what had been, combine, it seems, to have the people “completely lose sight of the fact that God brought them out of the bondage of slavery” in Egypt, have them credit it as their simply being moved out of the proverbial frying pan into a fire, with Moses as their guide and God as not even meriting mention.

I’m reminded of a time when Tobias was really struggling. After weeks, a few months, of his coming undone, I devised a plan to get him back out of the hole. And it worked. And years later, when he was describing the process to someone else, he told the story in such a way as I wasn’t a part of it at all, like he’d gone through it on his own, like he recovered from it on his own. I wasn’t offended in listening to him, but I was struck. How had he so forgotten my ever-presence, as his mother to him as the young person he was? I guess it’s easy to forget the presence that pervades even if it also provides.

The debate as to what happened in the exodus continues today. My Judaism professor at divinity school, whom I refer to a lot because he was very influential to me as a student, made clear in the Hebrew Bible class he taught as a large lecture course to graduate students that the Israelites weren’t slaves who were then made free in the event of the exodus, they were people who’d once been enslaved to serve the Pharaoh but were then made free to serve the Lord.

Made free to serve: now that was a new one to us, mostly liberal Protestants. You could practically hear the surprise as it took hold. Made free to serve. Huh. Freedom not as the ultimate untethering, loosing of bonds, but as being in service to the good, to love and grace, which laid but

new demands and new responsibilities, which tethered though with loose bonds and light burdens of relationship and consideration of the other. This wasn't getting to do whatever they wanted whenever they wanted; this was about doing what's good as measured by the standard of self-giving love.

That's what freedom is: the freedom to choose and serve the good, however such service might come to you to do. There are lots of ways.

But this king-God, a far more mystical source of authority; this far less obvious imposing of rule: these were more than the people could conceive of. They assumed Moses was their god; and absent him, they'd like something even more durable than a person, even more inarguably valuable than a regular old guy, even if an astonishingly powerful one from time to time. (Sure, he had found a way through the sea. But what had he done for them lately?) How about something of gold, never to tarnish, universally valued. How about something emblematic of fertility and functionality, food even? A calf. A golden calf.

And now they'd be captive again. To myth and mystique, to enchantment and charm, instead of relationship and responsibility and real, manifest blessing: there's something insistently real about our religion, this so-called Judeo-Christian heritage. It insists upon something other than mystification and magic, something other spiritualism and pious proclamation. It insists upon real, relational, kindness and justice, provision in practice, which might cost us, though will also clearly benefit us. We will sometimes be in the position to give of our abundance. We will inevitably find ourselves in need to receive of some other's abundance.

Which is why authoritarianism has such appeal. To avoid our own vulnerability, to free ourselves from our own terrible freedom, to safeguard against the scarcity that freedom can feel like: no wonder its widely thought the best we can hope for is a jerk in charge who at least is our jerk and therefore will see to our dominance. No wonder indeed the people wailed in their freedom amidst the reign of God in the wilderness, "Would that we were back in Egypt where at least we had meat to eat!" No wonder the people will even long for their own captivity, which those who aim to capture well know. People can come to love their own cages, especially if you get them into it at a young enough age.

When it comes to the battle over young minds that seems everywhere these days, I think of how such captivity was understood when first examined in a critical way. Syed Hussein Alatas was a professor at the University of Malaya in the 70s when he wrote in defining the so-called "captive

mind.” This is an “uncritical and imitative mind dominated by an external source, whose thinking is deflected from an independent perspective.”

Hussein’s specialty was in decolonizing the world as the colonizing powers finally retreated. His aim was to decolonize universities and schools.

He had his work cut out for him.

We have our work cut out for us.

This has never been an easy project—freedom. It’s as old as time and has never been easy. But on we go, with the Lord being as ever our guide.

On we go.

Thanks be to God.