

"God's Decision"

October 11, 2020 - Exodus 32:1-14

First Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Andrew Kort

We are an impatient people. We are impatient in big things—like “when will this pandemic ever end?” And we are impatient in little things; like waiting for coffee. Or at least I am an impatient person. I remember one Fall morning a few years ago, when we were living in Bloomington. I was in a real hurry to get to work, but I had to drop off the kids at their day care, which meant I was running a little late. I also knew I had to go pick them up mid-afternoon, which meant I was going to have to leave the office a little early—and there was a lot to get to on my to-do list. I was rushing around and going as fast as I could and realized that I needed some coffee.

As I was on my way into the office I stopped at Starbucks, the one downtown. I easily found an open space, pulled my car in and parked. I tried to scrounge for quarters but I was all out of change. I considered just running inside thinking it would only take a minute to get my coffee so I could risk not putting change in the meter—yes, I know it would be wrong to do that—and yes, even ministers struggle with ethical decisions. We are only human.

But I saw the meter-maid walking down the street headed my way, so I pulled out my credit card to pay for my parking spot. It literally only took about 7 seconds for my card to get approved. But as I watched that blinking red light and the words “approving card” flash on the little screen I grew more and more impatient. It seemed like it took 20 minutes. Then I go inside Starbucks and there is a line almost out the door. Good thing I didn’t just run in without feeding the meter because it was more than just a quick in and out. The longer I stood in line the more impatient I became. The more impatient I became, the more agitated I got at everyone who ordered a drink with 55 different ingredients and specifications because those drinks take forever to make and all I wanted was a small cup of drip coffee. I am often an impatient person and I know that when I get impatient I either do or consider doing things I normally wouldn’t do—like skip on paying a parking meter or get upset because someone orders an extra hot pumpkin spice latte with almond milk, a shot of espresso, and extra cinnamon on top of the low fat whipped cream. By the way, I am convinced coffee shops should have a separate line just for people who want drip coffee. But again, I am often an impatient person.

Our passage this morning begins with the people growing more and more impatient. It begins with this sentence, *“When the people saw that Moses was 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 out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’”* Can you believe that?! Moses is delayed a little bit up on the mountain and the people become so impatient that they quickly sell him out and get ready to move on without him—as for this Moses, the guy who brought us out of Egypt, whatever happened to him? We don’t know, Sure he brought us out of Egypt, and we appreciate that, but he’s taking too long wherever he is, so let’s just move on.

So they do something they maybe would not normally do had Moses been down there with them—they turn to someone else and something else. So they take off all of their earrings and have Aaron make them a golden calf.

It is one thing to give up on Moses. We can understand that. He's been up on the mountain for a long time. Who knows what happened. At some point maybe you do have to move on and Aaron, he's a good choice to be the next leader. He was called and appointed by God to go on this mission and he's Moses' brother. He's the logical choice if they think that something has happened to Moses or more likely, now that they had grown tired of waiting on Moses. But it is one thing to give up on Moses, it is another thing altogether to give up on God. And in their impatience, that's what they did. "Come, Aaron, make some other gods for us."

It is easy to villainize and criticize the people for becoming impatient with God, but don't we do that too. How many of us when faced with a difficult or stressful situation, when we really want an answer or a sign from God, and we want it now, or we want some kind of assurance that God is still Emmanuel—God with us—will ask, "Where is God? Why hasn't God done anything about this? Has God abandoned us? Why is God taking so long? Doesn't God care?" or worst of all—"Has God given up on us?" Remember just a few weeks ago, as the people were thirsty, they wondered, "Is God among us, or not?"

And as we wait, at what point do we say, "God is taking too long. Yeah, we remember that he brought us out of Egypt and has done some things for us in the past, but where is God now and what has God done for me lately?" Ultimately it boils down to a matter of faith. When the pain and the grief and the hurt linger for what feels like far too long, how much are we willing to trust God to lead us and to guide us and to care for us in life,—and do we give up on God? Maybe we say, "Yeah, we remember God has brought forth from Egypt, but now that we really need him—because someone we love has cancer or dementia, or because the checkbook never seems to balance, or because the pangs of depression are too familiar, or because we haven't smiled in days, or because of what we see and read about world events including our nation's political drama, and of course, we are still in the midst of a pandemic—where is God anyway? What is taking so long?"

Like the Israelites, some will get impatient with God and turn to something else hoping it can help them and lead them forward in life. The list is endless—self-help books, drugs and alcohol, shopping, food, and chasing more money, a bigger yard, a better vacation, or a different job—just to name a few—as we try to see what works and what sticks, as if these things will somehow be able to ultimately give us what we need. When we become impatient with God and with God's timing for us and with what God is trying to do with us, often we will return to old habits and dysfunctional patterns rather than trust the new way forward God calls us into.

And that is what the people that day were doing as they got tired of waiting for Moses and made a calf. Bull worship was common in Egypt and the Ancient Near East. So it is very likely they had seen or heard this done before. Remember, these are the same people who say during the wilderness that they wish they were back in Egypt. So, hey, if worshipping a calf had worked before...They were looking for something—anything—that could lead them forward in life. That is what they said to Aaron. "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us."

Aaron will often catch some heat for suggesting they take off all their precious jewelry so he can melt it down to make a golden calf. And maybe he should. But what if Aaron was actually calling their bluff or testing them? Maybe he was thinking, “These are good people. They remember how they were led out of Egypt, there is no way they’d give up their golden valuables—and therefore will continue to be patient and wait on Moses and wait on God.” But oh, we are an impatient people and as someone once said, “such is the rage of the idolaters, that they will spare no cost to satisfy their desires.”¹ And the people take off their earrings; give them to Aaron, so that he can make them a golden calf.

Of course, God sees all of this. And this little episode is right on the heels of Moses giving these people the 10 Commandments, that just so happen to contain the parts about not making or worshiping any other gods. So God is not happy. And God’s wrath was burning and God told Moses that he was going to wipe out all of these stiff-necked people down there.

Moses, the great intercessor between God and the people, speaks up. He pleads with God and he reminds God about the covenant with Abraham and the numerous descendants. He reminds God that if this mission goes awry and God kills them all, then the Egyptians will just laugh at God and say that the Israelites were taken out of Egypt by God, not to save them, but to take them into the mountains to kill and destroy them.

So God has a decision to make. God can either burn hot with wrath and destroy them or God can continue to be their God, forgiving their stubborn stiff-necked idolatrous ways. Of course, God is God and God is free to do anything God chooses and to do as God pleases. What would you have done if you were in God’s shoes?

Thankfully we are not in God’s shoes. Because we tend to penalize and we tend to destroy and we tend to build more and more prisons for people. But what do we know about God? God is faithful and merciful and God is for life and not death and destruction. So God, who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, makes a decision. God chooses to spare the people, to let them live, and to show them grace and mercy. God chooses to continue to be their God so that they could be God’s people.

The people grew so impatient waiting on Moses and on God. They had no idea where he was or what was taking so long. It has been said that “The root of idolatry is when we think that God is not present, unless we see God physically.”² And they grew so tired of waiting that they turned to a golden calf hoping that it would give them what they thought they were missing. They turned to the golden calf hoping it would provide security. They turned to the golden calf wanting it to lead them and to guide them into the future.

Of course a golden calf just sits there. It doesn’t do anything because it can’t do anything. It is an inanimate man-made item created in despair while the people thought Moses and God had given up on them and had gone somewhere else. In discussing the useless golden calf, John Calvin, says that the calf they set up and worship is stupid, helpless, and ridiculous.³

¹ Found online at <http://www.ccel.org/g/geneva/notes/Exodus/32.html> on October 2, 2020.

² Ibid.

³ Barth’s Dogmatics

The people asked Aaron to make a god or something that could go before them and lead them on their way to the Promised Land because they knew they couldn't get there on their own. And when God seemed far off and when Moses was taking too long, they became impatient and so weary of having to wait any more that they started to look for something—anything—that would help lead and guide them. They created a golden calf, something that they could see and touch, because like doubting Thomas, they wanted some tangible evidence and proof of something divine and holy in their midst.

What they didn't realize was that God was with them the whole time. And God was there—and God is here—even when it may seem otherwise. God is present even when we cannot see and cannot touch. God is present when God seems far off and distant. God is already there and working for you when it seems like God is taking too long. God's decision was that day, and continues to be to this day, to be their God, to be our God, who was not only with them but also with us. And God who will also lead them and lead us into the beautiful future that is in store.

Yes, God had a choice to make. God could punish, destroy, and abandon the stiff-necked idol worshipers and started all over again with Moses. Or God could show mercy and compassion and be present and faithful and to help this struggling band of wilderness wanderers knowing full well that this would not be the last time the children of God grew impatient and tried to make other gods for themselves hoping for some kind of divine presence because we often get so desperate.

Ultimately God decides to go with life, and with love and with mercy. Only something truly alive and full of love can do that. An image of a calf can't, that much is sure.

So good people of God, hear me when I say, God's decision is always to stay true, leading and guiding us in ways that are for good, and for life, so that we may continue on our way as the children of God.

And God is not only with us, but God goes before us, leading and guiding us for God is a living and an active God. These things we make or construct, as beautiful as they often are, they just can't compare to the glory of God and God's majesty and God's love and God's grace for you. That is why we love and worship God, because God has first loved us.

When you make an idol for yourself, you will quickly see that the idol will only try to take God away from the center of your life. Part of our job as a child of God is keeping God at the center of our lives. And we do so knowing that we are at the center of God's.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.