

Easily Distracted

Scripture: Exodus 32:1-14

Have you ever left someone alone for too long? Have you ever had to run an errand and asked a child to wait while you ran upstairs only to come back and find them into mischief? Or you came back, and they disappeared, and you had to look for them? They'd wandered off and now you have bigger problems.

Then you know how Moses felt. In charge of a major expedition Moses was leading the people when he was summoned away. He did not leave his people very often because they needed him, but when God invited Moses to a meeting at the top of Mt. Sinai, he knew he had to go. It's a famous moment in history when they craft the Ten Commandments and put boundaries on behavior. But as they were up there talking and writing these brilliant sparse boundaries for life the session got longer and longer. It took much longer than Moses expected, and the Hebrews were left waiting and wondering. Like children who need their parents these people couldn't be left alone for long. They got nervous and impatient and started to melt their jewelry and make a calf so they could worship something they could see.

It's easy to blame these folks for their lack of faith, for the way they so quickly reverted to worshipping idols, especially after all God has done for them, but idols were much more common in those days. There's a lot going on here. Let's take a closer look.

In the first place, the Bible says it's hard to be patient. Moses has been leading them for months when they arrive at Mt. Sinai, a holy mountain made famous by this story. God calls Moses to ascend. It's such an auspicious occasion that the people must bathe, put on clean clothes. They all come out for the send-off like it's a rocket launch. They stand in assembly at the foot of the mountain and Moses makes a speech about the honor of meeting God face to face. His words are punctuated by lightening, and claps of thunder. The prophet ascends as clouds wrap the summit in smoke, a signal that God is coming. Before he goes, Moses tells the Hebrews to at a respectful distance but to stand vigil at the base of the mountain. Then the story in the Bible breaks as we see ten chapters of laws outlined in the narrative – laws about slaves, property rights and worship and restitution all in great detail, like a law school curriculum. It's the Bible's way of saying that God and Moses had a wide-ranging conversation about how to order life and make things fair and just.

Like those disciples when Jesus went to pray in Gethsemane, the people were left to wait. It was too much. They grew impatient.

From the time of the Trojan War history tells us people have had trouble waiting. When things take longer than expected, waiting takes its toll. Folks murmur. Discontentment bubbles up; mischief unfolds. It's hard to wait. Whether we are waiting for someone to grow up or see reason, or waiting with your unanswered prayers, it's hard to be patient. But sometimes big change takes time. Hebrews had to learn to be patient because the work was worth it.

Mahatma Ghandi was an inspired leader of the independence movement in India. He was a genius and his use of non-violence as he called for self-rule was brilliant. But Ghandi started to organize farmers peasants and laborers in 1915. He was a brilliant strategist who led massive protests against British taxes, all the while living among some of the poorest people on earth and eating a

subsistence diet. It was 32 years before the British relented. Through it all this diminutive man remained steady, purposeful, and patient. Later, he said being patient was the key to their success, famously saying, “Lose patience and you lose the battle.” In the second place, the Bible says mistakes happen. Everybody in this story is guilty of mistakes.

Moses wasn't much of a leader. He led with his emotions when he found the people dancing. He smashed the Ten Commandments in one of the most famous temper tantrums in all of history. Whether his rage was justified or not, Moses is no Ghandi here. Parents that give in to such outbursts are usually referred to a class in anger management.

God is not bringing the best game to this moment either. Why leave the Hebrews for so long? Shouldn't God have anticipated this would happen? Most elementary school teachers could have predicted this; you cannot leave a group for that long unattended. Why not plan for success, put in a substitute prophet, give them something to do. What's God thinking? Plenty of blame to go around.

But we all make mistakes, the Bible says. The Hebrews felt lost in this wilderness. Then they were profoundly dis-oriented when Moses left for so long, and they lapsed into old habits. They forgot how far they'd come. They lost sight of what they needed to do, and where they were headed. They were not bad people no more than any of us are when we do things, we later regret. They couldn't understand the God was ahead of them doing work for them which is often the case when we feel abandoned. We don't understand. We can only see in a mirror dimly. Mistakes happen

Finally, the story says we all need commitment. Moses got angry because after all they had been through the people needed to have more faith in God. After all the miracles and all the rescues, they should have not reached for their old gods. After they had come this far, Moses wanted to see more commitment. The Bible says that like the Hebrews we all get distracted, so easily. But faith is not a smorgasbord where we take a little of this - yoga for the stretch and meditating to stay calm and church when we have nothing else planned on the weekend. There is nothing wrong with a full life as long as we understand that God is the North Star, the one around whom everything else orbits. Church was never meant to be part of a long list of things that help you feel good.

The Bible says God is jealous. What that means is you need to decide what your priorities are. People have trouble committing today. It's a societal issue. In our culture folks want to keep their options open. We want all the choices when we shop. We want all the facts when we choose. We want time to decide when we marry. These days lots of people are commitment averse. The U.S. Army has failed to meet its recruitment quotas again this year because young people refuse to make those kinds of promises. Marriages are fewer because people don't want to make those promises, even though statistics show living together doesn't lead to greater commitment either. Monasteries are empty because even novitiates don't want to make those promises. Churches struggle to persuade people to join; many don't feel the need and we allow that now.

The Hebrews wanted to have it all – the miracles God could bestow and the familiarity of worshiping a calf when that would scratch the faith itch. But the problem is you cannot journey very far with God if you are hedging your bets. It is the faith we commit to that will prove to be the making of us.

I spoke to a man yesterday about his life as a Lutheran and talked about what it meant to him to save so he could send his children to Lutheran schools, and how proud he was when they

graduated. I may not agree with all his beliefs but I was impressed by all his commitment. Faith is a muscle and the more you exercise it the stronger it gets and the stronger you become. I believe faith is a journey with many forms of deepening commitment, many corners to turn on the spiritual trail. In my own experience, nothing is gained by sitting this process out. You cannot really grow until you make a commitment to God, a commitment that means something in terms of focus and sacrifice.

Let us pray: Help us to hear your call in our lives, to reflect on your goodness and your many gifts, and then to respond with our lives.

Amen.

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Susan Cartmell at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin
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