

Exodus 32:1-14
October 9, 2011

I

Plymouth is a beautiful place for a wedding. This long center aisle, the beautiful windows and burnished wood of these old pews, they all photograph beautifully. I can picture a wedding here really vividly because about four and half years ago Ben and I got married right here in this sanctuary. Matt officiated along with one of our favorite professors. We had fantastic flowers – red gladioli and burgundy snap dragons in a huge display on the altar. The bridesmaids carried giant bundles of baby’s breath – which has the advantage of looking really dramatic while costing practically nothing. They wore long black dresses and the groomsmen wore black tuxedos with white boutonnieres and we all looked great. Our friends and family drove in from all over the country and gathered in right here where you’re sitting this morning. It was an evening for celebration and for sharing sacred promises about the new life Ben and I were about to begin.

We’d been engaged for a long time and had made a lot of plans for how our life would be. I remember the excitement and anticipation I felt that summer as the wedding date approached and the wedding gifts started arriving and the final details were set into place.

In the chapters before the reading we heard this morning, God has been hard at work making similar plans with Moses for the Hebrews’ new life in the Promised Land. In a private conference up on Mt. Sinai, they’ve literally measured the curtains for a new temple and ordered the lamps. They’ve discussed the household staff of priests and agreed on appropriate uniforms for them to wear. They’ve laid out blueprints for the tabernacle and arranged for offerings of gold and onyx at certain times and places. God and Moses are full of anticipation for this new home and this new life they’re going to start with the Hebrews.

Meanwhile, back at the camp, the Hebrews are getting antsy. They’ve been waiting and waiting for Moses to come back down the mountain. It’s been days. They’ve waited so long they’re starting to wonder if something happened to Moses. If you were here last week, or if you’ve read this book before, you might remember that Mt. Sinai is covered in clouds of smoke and fire and lightning and trumpet blasts. It’s also common knowledge among the Hebrews that anyone

who comes directly into the presence of God will fall down dead. So they're right to be worried. Also, they have no food stored up, no maps and no idea where they're going and now their leader has disappeared up this mountain.

The Hebrews are scared. And like a lot of scared people, they're ready to follow whoever is willing to lead. Moses' number two guy, Aaron, is willing. So here's what he does: he collects everyone's gold jewelry melts it down and forms a golden calf. The Hebrews are so relieved to have a normal, reliable god like everyone else's they offer it lots of sacrifices and throw a party to celebrate. That might seem strange now, but back then everyone had statues like the golden calf to worship. The statues represented fairly well-understood gods of fertility, weather, family tradition, healing and all kinds of other things. The Hebrews had been the odd balls for worshipping a mysterious God no one could see and for following this weird Moses character out into the wilderness. They probably felt normal for once when that calf came out of the fire.

God, however, was less than pleased.

My cousin Craig had to tell his friend's bride that the groom would not be showing up for the wedding – on the day of the ceremony. She felt about like I imagine God felt that day. They'd made all these plans for a life together. Pledged loyalty to one another. And now, right on the cusp of their new life, just as God is about to lead the Hebrews into the Promised Land, they're making offerings to *a golden calf*. God was righteously peeved. Furious. Ready to burn hot wrath.

I get that. Don't you? Maybe it's not the side of God you like best but in this context, in this story, I think God's got the right to be divinely ticked off.

And yet, I also get why the Hebrews made that calf. If you think about it, that calf makes sense.

II

These Hebrews had been out there wandering in the wilderness with extremely limited food and water and only their fairly shaky faith in God to keep them moving. The threat of hyenas was probably also motivating.

But look, when you're wandering in the wilderness, whether it's the wilderness of the desert like the Hebrews or the wilderness of unemployment, or divorce or addiction or depression, the nights are cold and sometimes sleepless. Your body

aches and your feet blister. You lose hope. You get irritable. You fight with your friends. God can seem very, very far away. It's the wilderness. Everything seems out of control. And for us human beings, control and even the illusion of control is something we hate to lose.

And you know, not a lot has changed since the Hebrews made that golden calf. They wanted to believe in something they could see. The calf made them feel safer and more in control. And so does a country club membership. So does a job that pays the bills but makes you miserable. So does the right purse, the right grades, the right diet. Sometimes cynicism makes us feel more safe. Sometimes alcohol does it. But all of these have two things in common with the golden calf: they don't deliver what they promise and they can get between you and God.

Every T.V. commercial, magazine ad and political campaign we encounter offers us a chance to take control of our lives, to define ourselves as lovable winners. But let me ask you this: does it work? Did buying the Bow Flex really turn you into that muscle strapped hunk? Did losing 20 pounds make you more lovable? Did your candidate usher in the reign of God?

My guess is no. None of it ever worked for me anyway. What I have experienced is the slow exhaustion of returning to an empty well over and over again because I'm just so darned desperate for one of those promises to be true.

And here's the kicker: I've gotten so used to the failed promises of diets and bad relationships and brand new furniture that I don't even care if they deliver anymore. I've learned to settle. And I don't think I'm alone.

But, friends, I believe this whole heartedly so please hear me: settling for less than the fullness of life and love that God has promised pulls us away from God. When we buy the hype that smart people purchase their security or earn it by hard work or by being pretty enough or smart enough, when we buy that hype we slam the door shut on God. Because every one of these lies is designed to lead you away from the deepest truth there is: that everything we are and everything we have already belongs completely to God and that God loves us with a passion that's unimaginable.

III

Even in the wilderness, God loves us and wants to share a life with us. Even when God seems absent or irrelevant, it's still true: all that we are and all that we have

already belongs to God. Like the Hebrews we tend to hedge our bets when we feel afraid or abandoned. But the wilderness is where we come to meet God and to be shaped as God's people. The anxiety and the uncertainty are part of the shaping. They teach us to let go of control and to learn faith in the promises that do not fail: God will be with us. God desires to share our lives. God loves us passionately. Even when it seems like that's not true, it is.

So this is my challenge to you for this week: let the wilderness do its work. Lean into the discomfort of uncertainty. Resist catharsis. Wait for God. And then wait a little longer.

If that kind of challenge makes you squirm in your seat, if you're more comfortable doing than waiting you could try talking to other people about where you're looking for God. Pray in whatever words you have to pray with. Worship God with offerings. Go to the class Matt and David are doing on 'Giving to God' because it will teach you how to start worshiping God with offerings and how to start leaving some of those golden calves alone. Matt said this week that our offerings to God are sort of like acts of direct resistance to consumerism. That's a pretty amazing idea. So try out the class. It'll be great.

IV

One final word,

Please don't believe that everyone else has this God stuff figured out. They don't. Sharing life with God means just this, right here, what we're doing right now. This life is our life with God. It may not look like a Hallmark movie or an episode of Touched by an Angel, but I don't think it's supposed to. God meets us where we live and shapes us slowly, often through pilgrimages in the wilderness. Even long periods where God seems irrelevant can come to a scraping halt when we find ourselves suddenly alone out there in wild wondering where God went.

All along, God is there. Right up the mountain and right here this morning, looking forward to the richness of sharing life with us. Thanks be to God!

Amen.