

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**“Idols on the Way”<sup>1</sup>**  
**Exodus 32**  
**October 9, 2016**

You know how every now and then you hear a sermon that just sticks with you? Of course, I know, that probably happens to you every week. But the thing is, I’m not as good at remembering as the rest of you.

Most sermons work on us for a day or two, maybe a week if it was exceptional. But every now and then there is one that sticks in your heart and mind. Every now and then, there’s a sermon that keeps working on your sacred imagination.

That’s how my mentor, Burt Burleson’s sermon on the golden calf has been for me. And so, I need to come clean with you and just tell you that this is one of those sermons where I’m channeling someone else’s words. Because more than a decade later, his words are still echoing around in my mind when I read this story.

And in part because he pointed out what a strange story this is. This whole journey out to Mt. Sinai is pretty odd. God sure makes a lot of strange moves out there in the wilderness.

Here Moses is pulling out of Egypt with a new nation in tow, and they’re just beside themselves with joy. And they head out across the desert with visions of milk and honey dancing in their heads. And they’re ready to go make a bee-line for the Promised Land.

But God does something really strange here. Or at least I think it’s strange. Rather than going straight to the Promised Land, God has them take this little detour to this mountain out in the middle of nowhere.

And it seems like a bad strategy to me. Here you have this vulnerable people, who have no idea how to govern themselves or how to hold together law and order. They’re a rag-tag bunch of slaves... who could easily slip into chaos.

So, it seems like the best strategy would be to get them safe... as quickly as possible.

You’d want to get them settled.

Get the economy started up.

Draft a constitution.

And above all, keep the morale high.

But instead, God takes them out to this desolate place, where there’s no running water, nothing to eat, and they’re vulnerable to all kinds of things. I mean, the desert is a dangerous place. It’s dangerous physically and spiritually.

---

<sup>1</sup> Inspired by Burt Burleson’s sermons “The Way Home,” 2004, and “The Gift of Absence,” 2007.

In fact, the desert fathers and mothers tell us that it's the place where all your demons start to show themselves and start to attack you. So, I wouldn't have made this move.

But assuming God knows best, there must be a good reason for going to the mountain. Maybe it's to remind us that the journey is just as important as the destination. And in order to enter the Promised Land... there's going to need to be some maturing on our part. ***Apparently, we must need some time in the desert to be made ready to enter the Promised Land.***

You see, the wonderful... beautiful... eternal... takes some getting ready for. You don't show up to the symphony and really get it having only listened to Justin Bieber along the way.

You don't get the richness of Hopkins poetry if you've only been fed a diet of "South Park" and "The Family Guy".

And you can't waltz your way into the Promised Land and fully enjoy its deep riches, the sweetness of the milk and honey, if you haven't made a good journey to get there.

\*\*\*\*\*

So, Yahweh calls them deeper into the wilderness to this desolate mountain. And it's not a very welcoming place.

Again, if I was Yahweh and they showed up at my mountain, I would have done things a little differently. I would have thrown them a big **"Welcome Back to Me"** party. After just living through all those years of slavery and the trauma of the plagues, I'd want to get them all comfortable.

**"Great to see all of you. Make yourself at home. My mountain is your mountain. Is there anything I can get you?**

**Some milk and cookies, or a plate full of power?**

**How about a warm cup of self-esteem?**

**Or maybe just a big old divine hug?**

**"I sure hate the way Pharaoh treated you. So, if you need anything... anything at all, just let me know. I'm your man... uh... I mean 'God'"**

But that's not what God does. Not even close. They get there and the mountain's all dark and foreboding. There's fire and smoke and it's shaking and rumbling... God's presence scares the bejeebers out of them.

And when they get there, God says to Moses, **"Tell them not to touch this mountain. And if they do... if they lay a finger on it... they're dead meat."** So Moses goes around putting up orange fencing and warning signs **"Sacred Personnel Only. Beware of Yahweh."**

It's not what I would have done, but it's what God does. Right here at the very beginning God keeps a mysterious distance and is quite clear with them. **"I am not easily handled. Don't think you can simply grab hold of me. I Am great mystery."**

Before they get faith *literally carved in stone*, they get a great big dose of mystery.

Which might just be telling us that to make a healthy journey, we need a big dose of mystery. We need to see that there is something beyond us... and any “gods” that are *easily* handled or used for our agendas just aren’t going to get us there.

Which means, that sooner or later, we’re going to have to learn to bow in reverence before the One that is beyond us.

\*\*\*\*\*

The people get to this holy mountain, and they are terrified of the whole thing. But at least they have Moses to intervene on their behalf, right? He’s a nice little buffer so they don’t have to deal directly with God.

They might not be able to see Yahweh, or handle him. But they had Moses. And Moses was God’s “go-to” guy. At least they have Moses to set them at ease, and to tell them what to do.

Or they did, anyway, until this story that we heard earlier. Again, a really bad strategy here, but basically, God hides the pacifier. You know, just like we parents are known to do from time to time.

Eventually the time comes for your kids to give up that object of security, and so you hide it... or at least you try to. You’re hoping your little one will learn to soothe themselves and not rely on the object anymore.

Moses had been the pacifier...

the intermediary... their security blanket.

the conduit of God’s guidance and power and presence.

And God just takes him away... *up on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights!*

Doesn’t seem like a very good strategy here, if you ask me. I mean if I were Yahweh, I would have given Moses those 10 commandments and sent him back down lickity-split before the crowds got restless.

But not God. God keeps him up there 40 days and 40 nights... and here’s the interesting thing: if you read though that portion of scriptures where Moses is up there on the mountain, God is dictating some pretty mundane things.

For 7 chapters God goes on and on with details about this and that...

how big to make the tabernacle,

where to put the lamp stand

even what the priest should wear right down to their ephod undies.

And I just imagine Moses up there getting antsy with the whole thing. He starts jiggling the keys in his pockets like some of you do out here in the Narthex when you’re ready to leave, but your family’s still talking away.

Moses keeps looking back over his shoulder. **“Lamp stand. Got it. Ephod. Check. Anything else before I get back?”**

He’s getting nervous because he knows leaving them down there is like leaving a bunch of 7<sup>th</sup> grade boys alone in their dorm room at camp. Nothing good is going to come of that. Trust me!

Now like I said, if I were Yahweh, I would have made sure Moses got back down the mountain right away. But not God. Nope... on and on God goes... ***almost as if God is intentionally keeping Moses from them...*** 40 days and 40 nights.

So, here’s the basic outline of the story so far:

God brings them out there to the wilderness, to the desert,  
Scares the living daylights out of them.  
And then God withdraws their connection.

And this story is the paradigm for our relationship with God. This is the way God works in our lives. And the saints have said it’s because this is how real faith is grown.

God’s presence is always going to be a back and forth kind of thing.

There’s dramatic presence... absence.

Great power... now vulnerability.

Consolation... and withdrawal of consolations.

Have you noticed that in your journey with God yet? How quickly the feelings can fade? How something once so meaningful... can later appear mundane?

The spiritual fathers and mothers all tell us that this is the way to deeper faith... this is how we get to the Promised Land.

God gives us gifts:

Feelings... security... meaning... things we need.

Relationships... community... callings... gifts of goodness.

People in our life... leaders like Moses.

And in time, like a parent pulling the pacifier, it’s taken away. Ignatius calls it the “desolations” the “withdrawing of the consolations.” And it’s an important part of the spiritual journey, because here’s the thing-- God needs our hunger and our longing in order to lead us deeper.

**“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...”** remember? Our hunger, our longing, is a great gift. ***We need the finite, concrete, definable things in our lives to fail us along the way.***

I know that sounds counter intuitive, but just think about it:

If your marriage was always deeply fulfilling, would you ever learn to pray?

If your career gave you all that you needed in life to be satisfied, would you ever really explore the spiritual path?

Would you every really seek after the Divine Presence if mystery itself could be printed on a bookmark and sold on Amazon? You need more. Pop faith needs to fail you, because it won't be enough to prepare you for the feast of milk and honey that is waiting.

But we don't want to believe that. So we cling to our pacifiers. God knows this... And so, God withdraws from us those things that have been our channel to God.

Moses stays gone... and it's time for them to go deeper... to wait and learn faith... and trust

But they don't. They get anxious. And they can't stand the anxiety and the not knowing. They think something has gone terribly wrong.

Moses has been missing for weeks now

And the anxiety gets higher, and they've got to have something to deal with all their sacred anxiety. They need a divine "fix." And so they fashion a god with their own hands.

They need something to remove their anxiety.

Got to get things formed up again.

Got to get the feelings back.

Got to get our sacred ducks in a row.

You see, when God seems absent, we are at the threshold of something good or bad... and the only difference is what you do with that absence. Can you wait in it? Can you bear it?

They couldn't. They didn't. They are still slaves ... slaves to their own anxiety and dependence.

\*\*\*\*\*

And so they make this idol... and notice that it's made from the very gold that God told them to take from Egypt. That's interesting. The idol, again, is constructed out of something God had given them... something God had blessed.

That's almost always how idols are formed. Good stuff... elevated to the best stuff. Some gift, glorified.

They take the gold that was entrusted to them, and fashion it into a god of their own making.

And the image of the calf? That was right out of their spiritual past. This is "ole time religion." from their days in Egypt. Because... well, they're comfortable with this god. They like this god. Everyone does. The golden calf, it's popular as gods go.

It's a god they can see...

and define.

A god they can manipulate.

\*\*\*\*\*

Of course our idol making... tends to be a lot more sophisticated and our idols harder to spot. But like these lovers-of-the-golden-calf, it's usually made from the gifts God has given us:

It's so very subtle... all sorts of gifts end up mistaken for the Giver.  
Anything, you know, can be idolized  
    An experience... a type of worship...  
    The Bible,  
    The Doctrines we believe

Yes, even our ideas can be idols...  
    our conceptions... our convictions... our righteous causes.

***Anything can be idolized and I'll guarantee... you have some golden calves in your life.*** There's a chance some idol has been shaped up from some gift God gave you. And maybe you're still enamored with it...  
    or maybe it's starting to disappoint you.  
Eventually they all will, you know.

And you'll start feeling anxious, or jealous, or frustrated because it's not saving you anymore like you want it to...  
    Because of course, it can't. It was never meant to.  
And your life, and the Holy God on the mountain... is trying to make that clear to you.

I know it can be painful... to have those idols exposed,  
    to get the pacifiers hidden away.  
But God does this in love... because it's what must happen for you to make this journey to the Promised Land.

You and I are being called out of slavery, and we're invited to this place of milk and honey... to a deeper richer life... But we're not there yet. We're called to be free, and out of bondage, but there's a journey to get there.

And that journey involves some detours into hard, dry, and scary places. It's going to involve dealing with a Divine Presence that can't be controlled or handled, and a God that makes no bones about what's best for us.

It's going to involve waiting... and trusting ever deeper in the mystery who is revealed on its own terms.

We don't want it this way, I know.  
It's certainly not the way I would plan it.  
But that's the way it is. And it's the only way home.

Amen.

Reflection:

*“The genius of the biblical revelation is that it doesn’t just give us the conclusions; it gives us the process of getting there.”*

~R. Rohr