

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 15, 2017

Following the Unseen God

Exodus 32:1-14; Hebrews 11:1-3, 24-27

We return today to the story of the Exodus,
as the people of Israel continue their journey of deliverance
out of Egypt, through the wilderness,
in hope of reaching the promised land.

And our story today begins with a *delay*.

Apparently God's Word to the people of Israel,
which Moses had gone up the mountain to receive
was taking a really long time to download
because the wifi was really slow back then,
especially up on Mt. Sinai!¹

*When the people realized that Moses was taking forever in coming down off the mountain,
they rallied around Aaron and said,*

"Do something.

Make gods for us who will lead us.

*That Moses, the man who got us out of Egypt —
who knows what's happened to him?"²*

So Aaron takes their gold —

the gold the people had looted from the Egyptians on their way out of town —
and he melted it down and fashioned from it
the now-famous golden calf.

When the people saw the calf Aaron had made, they declared to each other,

These are your gods, O Israel,

who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!

Now, before we are too quick to shake our heads at the Israelites,
judging them to be impatient and ungrateful,
consider their situation:

"Before this moment,

the people have struggled to know that God is in their midst.

By day they see a cloud, by night a column of fire.

Cloud obscures vision,

hiding its secrets within.

Fire defies touch,

creating distance between the God within and the people without.

They have seen and eaten strange bread

and birds that appeared upon the ground.

They were told that this food is how they would know
that God is the one who led them to freedom.

But they did not see God's face
and they did not hear God's own voice.

They asked questions of God
by speaking to God's servant Moses.

**Moses became their living link to the hidden presence [of God]
that eluded their senses.**"³

But now Moses seems to have disappeared.

Remember, he's been on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights.

Consider, that's a month and 10 days with no sign or word to the people below.

What would we think?

What if the Pastor of the church,
or the Mayor of the city,
or the President of the United States
disappeared on a mountain for a month and 10 days,
with not so much as a text or a tweet?

It might make you wonder.

After all, Moses didn't grow up among the Hebrews,
but in the house of Pharaoh.

Perhaps he had given up on them,
snuck down the other side of the mountain and fled
like he fled Egypt?

He claimed to speak for God,
but how could they really know?

This Moses has been their link to God,
but now they need something more.

So they turn to Aaron,
and demand a visible...something...a visible anything...
something they can **see** and **touch** and **grasp**.

They want something **real** to be the object of their worship.

Remember,

at this point the people have already received the Ten Commandments.

They've already heard the Second Commandment:

*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt,
out of the house of slavery;
you shall have no other gods before me.*

*You shall not make for yourself an idol...
You shall not bow down to them or worship them...*

But those words came through this unreliable slow-poke, Moses,
so perhaps they'd be better off making something up for themselves.

Surprisingly, Aaron, the brother of Moses,
the man who would later be consecrated High Priest of Israel,
does not balk at their request.⁴
And the people are delighted with their new idol.
They see the golden calf, they offer sacrifices to it,
and throw a party — a really wild party — to celebrate their new god.

Now to Aaron's credit, the party was still called *a festival to the Lord*.
This graven image was not Baal, or Ashera, or Marduk.
It was intended to represent Yahweh, the Lord God of Israel.
But nonetheless,
it was a blatant violation of the second commandment.

It is probably worth saying, in this month of October 2017,
as we approach the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation,
that the primary way we in the Reformed Tradition have spoken of sin,
has been to speak of idolatry.

**All sin, at its root, is idolatry:
Putting anything other than God in the place of God.**

John Calvin, in his reaction against Roman Catholicism,
rejected anything that remotely resembled a physical idol.
Even our beautiful stained glass windows
would have been anathema to Calvin.
Had the Father of the Reformed Tradition been transported through time
to 1912, when this sanctuary was constructed
with these two resurrection windows,
or to the 1970's when the clear windows were replaced
with these beautiful portrayals of the gospel story,
he would have railed against them
as a temptation to worship something visible
rather than the invisible God.

Calvin's definition of idolatry might have been unnecessarily strict,
but then again,
**it may have grown from an accurate reading of our human tendency
to rely on the work of our own hands,
and to trust in our material blessings,
rather than to trust God.**

In the Old Testament,
the Ark of the Covenant, housed in the holy of holies chamber of the Temple,
was the closest Israel ever came
to having a physical location for God .

The top of the Ark was called the Mercy Seat,
and there on the Mercy Seat, between the wings of the Cherubim,
was an empty space
where the Lord God of Israel was enthroned—
invisibly enthroned.

The commandment against a visible image
was given because God intends for the image of God
to be represented on earth in one way only:
The Lord created his own earthly image on the sixth day of creation,
when he created the man and the woman
in the image of God.
Israel was to worship the invisible God,
and to honor God's image in one another
by not sinning against each other.
Thus the first and second tables of the law,
which are summed up by Jesus teaching,
to love God and to love the neighbor.

When we begin to lose our focus on loving God and our neighbor,
and begin to love material things more than God and our neighbor,
we fall into idolatry.

Now I expect I'm safe in assuming we have no golden calves exalted in our homes.
So what might our idols be?
Perhaps the bricks and mortar of the home itself?
Or the steel and leather of the cars we drive?
Or the beauty or value of our art?
Or the entertainment provided by our many gadgets?
Or the quick access to information?
Or the power of the economy,
represented on our bulletin today by the Bull of Wall Street?
Is that Bull not the graven image of the human power in the world?
Is it not one of the greatest ironies of all time that we print the words
"In God We Trust"
on the American currency?

In whom do we trust? Really?

The Book of Hebrews in the New Testament
names the challenge as one of trust — which Hebrews calls faith.

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen.*

*...By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared
by the word of God,
so that what is seen was made from things that are
not visible.*

Such faith calls upon us to trust,
and to learn patience,
when we cannot see God,
or see the works of God,
or see God's provision for us.

Such faith calls upon us to say with the Psalmist,
*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
The Lord is my shepherd, I shall lack nothing.*

Even when all the evidence screams out against it:
The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Even when our leaders seem to fail us.
The Lord is my shepherd, I shall lack nothing.

Even when our family members let us down.
The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Even when our financial resources dry up.
The Lord is my shepherd. The Lord will provide.

When we are afraid that our needs will not be met,
then we long for a God we can see, and touch, and grasp.

**Idolatry is not about the lovely object itself,
but about our need to see and experience God directly.**

A positive yearning
that is easily distorted
and subjects us to being manipulated and to manipulating others.

We want a god we can control for our own ends.
But a god we can control is no god at all.
We want to be more than God's representatives on earth,
we want to be God —
but we would make sorry gods,
and we do make sorry gods when we try.

This is the lesson the people of God have to learn over and over and over again.

Waiting for God to provide may be painful,
but waiting for God is the only way
not to make a mess of things.

Waiting for God means delayed gratification
but this is not our forte, apparently,
especially in America, judging by the levels of debt we sustain.

We would rather have the assurance of things seen,
and the immediate possession of things hoped for.

**But the hard way forward into the promised land
is to trust the God we cannot see.**

Even when the wilderness around us obscures God's presence.

When violent men lash out against their fellow men.

When natural disasters wreak havoc on peoples already deeply impoverished.

When long illness or sudden death robs us of our loved ones.

When the dysfunction of our families keep us stuck in patterns of pain.

The hard way forward into the promised land of our deliverance

is to **trust this God we cannot see,**

to trust the God who sent Moses to lead the people through the desert,

...and who finally sent his own Son

and to provide for us what we cannot provide for ourselves,

try as we might.

Jesus Christ is our Moses

and the hard way forward is to trust him

as the One God has provided for us to see,

the human being in whose life the image of God was most perfectly represented,

the One who even now intercedes for us,

the One who is God's enduring presence among us,

and who is the fulfillment

of every promise God has made to God's people.⁵

He is the image of the invisible God.

He is our Good Shepherd.

He will lead us to green pastures.

He will restore our soul.

In him, we will lack nothing.

Trust in him. Stay the course.

The hard way forward...is the way of eternal life.

¹ Thanks to Rolf Jacobsen of *Sermon Brainwave Podcast* for this bit of corny humor.

² Exodus 32:1 from *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson.

³ Anthea Portier-Young, *Commentary on Exodus 32:1-14* at WorkingPreacher.org, with adaptation. Accessed Oct 13, 2017.

⁴ Portier-Young

⁵ Portier-Young, quote with adaptation