

Title: Anxiety & Idolatry

Text: Exodus 32:1-5

Date: October 15, 2017

If we had stayed with the Philippians reading again this week, we would have come upon a verse there that I had memorized as a young person: **“Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”** (Phil. 4:6) As tempting as it would be to simply say *“Have no anxiety!”* I thought we might be better served by exploring one of the innumerable ways in which anxiety can manifest itself.

In our Exodus reading, it has now been three months since the Exodus, when they walked through the Red Sea and headed south into the vast Sinai Desert. Along the way, the Hebrews had learned to have faith when there was no safety, water, or food. Now at the base of Mt. Sinai, they, *and we*, are called to have faith when there is no appearance of God.

After the people arrived at Mt. Sinai, Moses climbed the mountain alone for what everyone thought would merely be a two week Presbytery mandated study leave. But now he had been gone 40 days. That made the people more anxious than anything else they had encountered on the journey because it was Moses who had always been the mediator who stood between the people and God. Craig Barnes highlights that when the people left Egypt, they followed the dream God had given *to Moses*. When they reached the Red Sea, *Moses* held out his staff, and God parted the waters. When they ran out of resources, they brought their complaint *to Moses*, and he brought it to God. When they were attacked by the Amalekites in the desert, it was only because *Moses* held up his hands to God that the Hebrews prevailed. I am not sure if you can relate to being dependent on a strong leader like that.

Their security, sustainability, and even direction on their desert sojourn were all tied to God *through Moses*. When Moses was absent, it seemed as if God was absent as well. To be out in the hot, barren desert so long without any word from God or any assurance that he even remembers you are out there, well... *that is enough to make you search for a new god.*

Maybe, like the Hebrews, you in your personal life, too, have been chasing a dream for a long time – longer than a few months. Maybe the dream has to do with a relationship, a child, or your work. Maybe you have had aspirations of “making a difference.” It is such a good dream, and you’re sure it came from God, but the journey to the Promised Land is harder than you thought it would be. The obstacles along the way have been great, and when you overcame them, you knew it was only by the grace of God. But now there are more obstacles, *and you haven’t heard from God for awhile.*

When you start to wonder if God has forgotten you, it will be tempting to look for a more tangible deity. Our text tells us: **“When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron**

[the Interim Pastor] **and said to him, 'Come make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses... we do not know what has become of him.'**" What the people were saying was: "*Aaron, do something to take away the fear. Make another god for us – a god that is more manageable, more accessible, one we can get our hands on when we need it.*"

Notice that when the people become anxious and give up on Yahweh, the one who has carried them this far, they do not give up on worship. No one stands up to say, "Okay, clearly we are on our own out here. Who has a plan?" No, they just search for a new god. G. K. Chesterton has claimed that when people stop worshipping the God of heaven and earth, it's not that they worship nothing. Rather, *they worship everything*. So we think, "Maybe I need a new job, a new iPhone, a new doctor, or a new pastor," and the list goes on and on. None of these things are wrong unless you are counting on one of them to get you out of the desert, in which case it becomes an idol.

The Hebrews' choice of a golden calf seems strange to us, but that is only because we are not ancient Semitic people. In their day, many worshiped the young bull. It was familiar and predictable. It made promises of strength, fertility, and endurance. It was a god they could fashion with their own hands... just like our idols of success, power, and materialism. Best of all, a gold calf does not make any demands!

It doesn't have Ten Commandments. It doesn't call you to do justice or even to have compassion. It doesn't expect you to have faith in it when it fails to do what you want. Nor does it expect exclusive loyalty. You can worship before as many idols as you want. So an idol is a god that *makes only promises and no demands*. When we are anxious, such an idol seems rather appealing.

By contrast, the living God is completely unmanageable, and very demanding. You cannot fashion the living God with your own hands. You certainly cannot get a leash around the living God to make him come just because you call. But that is only because this wild and living God is making room for you to have faith. And faith is the great invitation.

That is why God brought you out into the desert in the first place. The point of the journey isn't *to arrive*; the point is to *learn faith*, especially when God is slow. I started my first Session meeting here with a poem admonishing them to *trust the slow work of God*. This is the kind of faith that frees you from being a slave to fear.

When God *seems* absent, it creates a choice between *faith* or *idolatry*. So you want to be very mindful of what is going on with you at such a time.

So as your Interim Pastor, it might be tempting to say, like Aaron, "**Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.**" (Exodus 32:2) At this point, I can imagine the Finance Committee shouting out, "Preach it! Preach it!" Certainly we could pool our resources and create a golden calf, but I have a different image I would like to play with.

For those of you who like visual images, artists and sculptors will sometimes speak about “negative space.” It is the empty space created by all of the positive forms of the sculpture. For example, a chalice has a base, a stem, and a bowl – all positive, tangible forms. But they create a negative space, which is the area inside the bowl. We tend to think of “negative” as a bad thing, but in the case of the chalice, the purpose of the positive form is to create the negative space. Think of the chalice we use when we celebrate the Eucharist. The negative space has a holy purpose.

In every life there is a negative space. It has a holy purpose. It is the place where you wait upon God in faith. To fill it with anything else is just idolatry.

This past Friday we had a wonderful retreat here led by Nina Frost and Rev. Dr. Robert Close on “Seasons of Change – Living with Transition.” This was a rich and provocative time of exploring the profound invitation that lies in what others might consider fallow times. I am so impressed with the maturity of this church that offers a whole range of times of reflection like this where together we can create a sacred negative space to counter the seductive call to idolatry.

You see Aaron had as much trouble with anxiety as the people around him had over the absence of God. With Moses gone, he knew it was his job to serve as an interim leader. But Aaron was the kind of leader who thought his job was just to *service complaints*. So that is why he told the people to melt down their gold and create a golden calf.

Meanwhile, up on Mt. Sinai, God brings Moses’ study leave to a sudden end. The Lord said to Moses, **“Go down at once. Your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have acted perversely... They have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it... Now leave me alone so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them.”** Did you notice the Lord’s emphasis that these were Moses’ people?

Moses responds to God in what may be his finest hour. **“O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?”** Isn’t this a pretty picture? At the bottom of the mountain, the people are dancing in front of a golden calf. Up on the top of the mountain, Moses and God are arguing over who has responsibility for them.

Notice that as Moses pleads the people’s case in prayer, he doesn’t say, “Sure they’re idolaters, but they have some good traits.” No, he reminds God of his own nature to be faithful. He says, in essence, *“You are the one who started this dream with the Exodus. You said you would lead them to a land called Promised. You are the one who vowed to care for them through the desert. You are the one who is merciful and forgiving and faithful, even when we are not.”*

This passage of Scripture closes by telling us that Moses changed God’s mind, and he did not destroy the people. Can God change his mind? That has frightening implications if we take it out of context. So my suggestion is that you

do not take it out of context. Here it simply means that God is moved by Moses' prayer.

That is the only hope we anxious idolaters have for making it through the desert. God sees, God knows, and God is near even when his presence is unapparent. And God is merciful. That is all we need to know to live with hope through times of transition, both individually and corporately.

Amen

Exodus 32:1-5 (NRSV)

¹When the people saw that Moses 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 up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." ²Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." ³So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" ⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord."