

OCT 11 2020 ... START HERE ...



Prepare for our time together from afar

- Find a quiet and comfortable space
- Turn on some soothing instrumental music, maybe with headphones
- Consider the stillness of a lit candle
- Take 3 deep breaths and calm your mind



Pray as you are comfortable – read silently, say out loud, whisper

God, guide me through the day
God remind me of Christ's presence
Under me, over me
On my right and on my left
God, breathe in and through me

May it be so.

TIME FOR THE ANCIENT STORY

Read silently or aloud – let these ancient words tap into your imagination.

Here's the backstory for today's story :

So, we left off last week the story of Passover and the Israelite slaves leaving Egypt. After this scene, the king takes off after the slaves (a whole bunch of them, by the way) and chases them to the Red Sea – where Moses splits the waters and they walk through the sea to get away.

Now – Moses and God are having a staff meeting up on the top of a mountain and they've been at it for a loooooong time. The people are scared and restless – imagine having been a slave all your life, escaping just barely, and now you're in a desert by a mountain and your leader has disappeared.

Now for the ancient story ...

The people saw that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, "Come on! Make us gods who can lead us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don't have a clue what has happened to him."

Aaron said to them, "All right, take out the gold rings from the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took out the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. He collected them and tied them up in a cloth. Then he made a metal image of a bull calf, and the people declared, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf. Then Aaron announced, "Tomorrow will be a festival to the LORD!" They got up early the next day and offered up entirely burned offerings and brought well-being sacrifices. The people sat down to eat and drink and then got up to celebrate.

The LORD spoke to Moses: "Hurry up and go down! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, are ruining everything! They've already abandoned the path that I commanded. They have made a metal bull calf for themselves. They've bowed down to it and offered sacrifices to it and declared, 'These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" The LORD said to Moses, "I've been watching these people, and I've seen how stubborn they are. Now leave me alone! Let my fury burn and devour them. Then I'll make a great nation out of you."

But Moses pleaded with the LORD his God, "LORD, why does your fury burn against your own people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and amazing force? Why should the Egyptians say, 'He had an evil plan to take the people out and kill them in the mountains and so wipe them off the earth'? Calm down your fierce anger. Change your mind about doing terrible things to your own people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, whom you yourself promised, 'I'll make your descendants as many as the stars in the sky. And I've promised to give your descendants this whole land to possess for all time.'" Then the LORD changed his mind about the terrible things he said he would do to his people.

You might want to read the chapters in between last week and this week to grasp the challenges Moses and the people faced ...

- Exodus 32:1-14 CEB

SO WHAT NOW?

Read silently or aloud – some thoughts on this story

COVID. Ugh.

COVID has caused more fear in my lifetime than any other thing – I have lived through the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Challenger and the Columbia disasters, 9/11, two major economic fiascos (2000's dot-com-bubble burst and the housing financial crisis of 2008), and my own ups and downs of life.

I have never seen so many people world-wide afraid. I have never seen so many people soooo afraid.

Add all the other stuff – political and civil liberties and climate emergencies and natural disasters – and I think I'll stop right there. It's too much.

I've noticed something though as I've observed and lived and feared – when people are afraid, they turn to something solid. Something that eases their minds. Something they can control, maybe. Something that acts the way they expect it to act. Something familiar.

I will be my last dollar that the Israelites in the desert, waiting almost 2 months for Moses to come down from the mountain, were in the same difficult space – of fear.

Think about it for a second – these people have just been through some serious trauma. Sure they've been praying to God for deliverance but I wonder if they really **knew** God as Moses had come to know God. And in extreme fear, you turn to what you **know**.

The traumas of the ten plagues, the escape from their homes – perhaps the only safe and familiar place they held dear – and the Egyptians chasing them afterward, the walk through the sea, and now they land at a mountain and their leader disappears in a thunder cloud up top.

I would be terrified. I would probably want to go back. At least I had a bed and a roof and I knew what to expect.

I think that's the root of fear many times – we don't know what to expect.

One detail of the Israelites' escape from Egypt that plays into today's story is important. As they were loading up and leaving, they asked for and received flocks and herds of animals, jewelry, and clothing from the Egyptians. So – the Israelites went from super poor to pretty rich as they escaped. I wonder if they even knew what to do with all their stuff. Well, except for the animals, they knew how to care for them – but silver and gold?

That all happened in chapter 12 verses 33 through 36.

So imagine – here you are, over half a million people camped out at the base of a mountain, with your leader MIA (missing in action) and you can't take it anymore. You HAVE to have something to comfort you, give you peace, help you keep going – something familiar.

God was not familiar yet.

So they fell back on what many peoples of that place and time (we call it the ancient Near East) did. They and Aaron took all the metal they had and crafted a statue of an animal as their “god”.

And God gets angry, and Moses reminds God of the ancient promises God made to Abraham, and God forgives.

But did the Israelites ever get to a point where they completely broke free from all the “gods” of that time and place? Not for a loooooong time.

I get it. I am not bashing the Israelites. And thank God Moses intervened. But I get it.

It is incredibly hard to choose God as first – no matter what. I mean, it is so much easier to choose my job, my family, the activities I enjoy, or something else first – because they are right there in front of me.

I used to dance in middle and high school and then later on in my early 30s – both with a studio and in musical theater productions. I loved and still love dance – and it would be easy to make dance my “god,” spending all my time at a studio, training, practicing, stretching, auditioning, competing and buying all the gear and taking all the classes – to where nothing else in my life mattered.

The fine line between obsession and idolatry (worshipping a false god) and chasing your passion is quite fine. It doesn't take much to push God out of the way and run after what makes us come alive.

Can we do both?

Can I continue to hike in the mountains of New Mexico and keep God first? Absolutely. Especially when I stop on the trail to stare at an amazing waterfall or bird or rock formation and remember that God created it. And that I can share that with others. And that my ability to experience God's creation is part of my relationship with God.

The trick though comes when I get scared. I had to have ankle surgery almost seven years ago and I was terrified I would never hike again, or dance again, or do martial arts again – and I struggled to trust God. I had a hard time believing that no matter what happened, God was there and I would be ok – EVEN IF my activities had to change for good.

That's why I have sympathy and compassion for the Israelites. Choosing to trust God in the middle of fear – intense fear – can be hard.

And now, with COVID and everything else around us – sheesh.

But ... will we trust God? Will we try to trust God? Will we stop turning to our “gods” of Netflix and food and surfing the internet and our “god” of complaining and lashing out at people instead of the virus?

May we simply pray “Hey God, I know you are here with me. Walk with me in my fear.”

God will always say – “You bet. Let’s go.”

CHAT WITH GOD TIME

Pray as you are comfortable – read silently, say out loud, whisper.

Hey God, that must have been hard to watch
The Israelites you just freed, worshipping a statue

But God, when I get scared I can't always think straight
Will you help me?

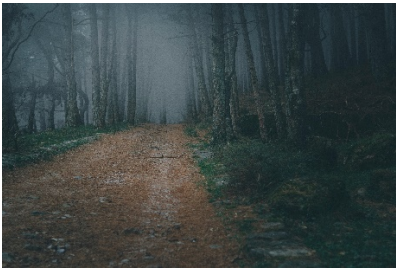
I don't want anything to come between you and I
And there's a lot in my life to choose from

Help me know you are here with me no matter what
Help me trust you even when I'm scared

May it be so.

LET YOUR SOUL RESPOND

As you wish, choose a theme, and participate in a response to the story and the message.



FEAR

Practice awareness

- Have you experienced a deep fear?
- Have you acted out on your fear?

What other ways could you respond to your fears?



IDOLS

Practice reflection

- What is most important to you?
- How do important things get between you and God?

What important things do you see others worship other than God?



PRESENCE

Practice wisdom

- Who do you trust even when they are not there?
- Who do you **not** trust when they are not there?

What helps you trust God when you aren't sure if God is there?

Options to share your responses:
(see end of packet for online options)

- create a piece of art representing your thoughts
- choose a song or playlist that shares your thoughts
- write something that reflects your thoughts
- what else can you imagine?

LET YOUR MIND RESPOND

Choose a “thought & question” pair to think about. You can do one or as many as you’d like.

1. The people, in their trauma and fear, reacted rather than respond thoughtfully and carefully. *How do you react to fear? How might you respond with thought and care?*
2. Statues of animals as “gods” were common during Moses’ time. *What “gods” do you see around you? Why do you think people choose “gods” instead of God?*

3. God was angry and ready to walk away until Moses reminded God of the promises made earlier.

What do you think about God getting angry? Changing God's mind? How do you feel about that?

Options to share your responses:
(see end of packet for online options)

- create a piece of art representing your thoughts
- choose a song or playlist that shares your thoughts
- write something that reflects your thoughts
- what else can you imagine?

LET YOUR BODY RESPOND

What will you do with this experience?

Choose an action (or more) to act on what you've learned ...

- Do some research on Google about ancient Near East idols.
- Write a song about waiting for someone.

- Draw a picture of God and Moses at the top of the mountain.
- Ask someone you trust how they manage their fears
- Go for a walk and think about the things in your life that are “gods”

Options to share your responses:
(see end of packet for online options)

- create a piece of art representing your thoughts
- choose a song or playlist that shares your thoughts
- write something that reflects your thoughts
- what else can you imagine?

END HERE ...



Prepare for our return to our daily lives

- Take 3 deep breaths and calm your mind
- Consider the stillness of a lit candle



Pray as you are comfortable – read silently, say out loud, whisper

God, guide me through the day
God remind me of Christ's presence
Under me, over me
On my right and on my left
God, breathe in and through me

May it be so.

SEE YOU NEXT WEEK! PASTOR CRISTINE

ONLINE RESPONSE OPTIONS

How will you share this experience with our youth group?

If you would like to share your responses online with our youth and leaders, make sure you are part of our MVCC Youth Google Group.

Email Pastor Cristine at youth@montevista.org
for more information.