

You see, Moses was their link.

Moses was the go-between.

Like Whit mentioned last week,

the Israelites thought

they wanted God to speak to them

—to give them a sense of assurance

that God was there—

they thought they wanted

to hear from God

until they heard from God

and then they wanted Moses

to be the mediator.

“You speak to us, Moses,

and we will obey;

but do not let God speak to us

or we will die.” (Ex. 20:16)

This is a pretty good arrangement

when you think about it.

To have someone be

the go-between,

an intermediary

who can approach God’s glory

and tell us what God says and wills,

someone to bring us

the divine proclamation.

So, this seems like a good arrangement for Israel.

After all Moses had been the one

who confronted Pharaoh.

Moses held out his staff

over the parted Red Sea;

Moses asked for the quail,

the manna,

the water.

It was natural then for Moses

to be the leader—

Moses was the sure sign  
that God was *with* and *for* these people.

But Moses isn't there.

The sign hanging on his pastor's study says,  
'out of the office.'

And the sign has been up for weeks.

He isn't answering his email;  
he isn't returning voicemails  
or text messages.

He wasn't at the zoom worship committee mtg  
and hasn't updated  
his Instagram in a month.

The logical assumption is  
that he's a goner.

After all we saw the thunder and lighting,  
we heard the blare of the horn  
and saw the mountain smoking.

Did God...

did Yahweh,  
the God of that mighty fire and storm,  
wind and thunder  
...did God consume Moses?

Several chapters ago,

at the end of chapter 24,

before going back up the mountain,  
Moses tells the elders of Israel,

"Wait here for us to return to you.

You have Aaron and Hur with you;  
let anyone who has a dispute  
or legal matter  
approach them."

So, Moses appoints Aaron and Hur  
as the mediators, the judges, the leaders

in his absence;

which for forty days and forty nights  
—ended up being a long time.

The story doesn't tell us  
how many days have passed.  
All we know is that it was long enough  
for fear and restlessness to set in.  
Unease must have taken over  
**and** as the hours passed  
and the days ticked by,  
there developed a dispute,  
an issue,  
a situation  
that needed to be handled.

Moses has been gone too long;  
he has delayed coming down  
and these fear-filled people  
decide it is time  
to take matters into their own hands.

They do as they were told,  
they bring their dispute to Aaron  
*—make us a god who shall go before us,  
for that man Moses, who brought us out of Egypt—  
we do not know what has happened to him.*

In confusing Moses' leadership  
with God's work of liberation,  
the people see Moses' absence  
as the absence of God.

Moses was their link.  
He was their go-between.  
And maybe even before  
the people ask Aaron to make them a god,  
even before they ask him  
to make them an idol to worship,  
perhaps the people's first sin  
is their assigning their liberation  
to Moses instead of Yahweh.

This kind of confusion happens all the time.

We often fall prey to the temptation  
of confusing the human "image of God"  
that is a spiritual leader  
(a pastor, parent, teacher, mentor) with God.

I know you are like me  
and make that mistake with God and Whith all the time.

*(You can't see him  
but he's shaking his head at me.)*

When a spiritual leader disappears,  
we can lose sight of God  
and lose faith in their direction.<sup>1</sup>

We often deify our leaders.

Think about times of transition of leadership,  
how hard is it for God's people  
to adjust?  
We as a church  
know how hard waiting  
for spiritual leadership and direction can be.

It is human nature  
to compare and contrast,  
to think back, pinning for what was.

We know what's best, don't we?

If only that television preacher hadn't  
asked for donations on air  
...if only Rev. so and so hadn't retired  
...you know that story, don't you?  
The people have lost sight of God;  
they can't tell what is going on,  
on top of that mountain.

They again, want and long  
for a tangible sign.

At this point, I want to ask,

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<sup>1</sup> Rolf Jacobson, Commentary on Exodus 32:1-14, Commentary on Human Nature,  
[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=751](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=751)

where is the people's collective memory?  
Why is human nature so fickle?

In asking Aaron to make them a god,  
have God's people already  
so quickly forgotten  
the first two commandments?

Sure, they aren't just like us—  
as soon as we are told not to do something  
the temptation to do it  
grows all the stronger.

They heard God speak from the mountain,  
'I am Yahweh, who brought you out of the land of Egypt'  
...but they declare  
'that man Moses, who brought us out of Egypt'

...they hear, 'I am Yahweh,  
you shall have no other gods before me'  
...but they then request,  
'Aaron make us a god who will go before us...'

Their demand is heartbreaking,  
it is their dismissal of who God claims to be.  
The people's idolatry...is difficult to read  
when just a week ago we heard how God  
makes a covenant with the people of Israel  
in giving them the 10 Commandments  
which serve as the heart of that covenant."<sup>2</sup>

Their disbelief is hard to believe  
after all the signs God has given them.  
As the appointed leader,  
the interim in charge,  
you would think  
Aaron might scoff at their request  
or at the very least  
shush them.

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<sup>2</sup> Callie Plunket-Brewton, Commentary on Exodus 32:1-14,  
[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2248](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2248)

Keep your voices down!  
Do you want Moses and Yahweh  
to hear what you have asked?

We have only a few clues  
and really it is just a guess,  
as to what Aaron felt  
when the people made their request.  
The text does not mention  
whether Aaron thought twice  
about giving into the people's demand,  
but it does give us some clues  
on that he might have tried  
to steer the people in the right direction.

The gut punch  
is that he gets it a little right  
and a lot wrong.

To explain this,  
we need to nerd out for a moment  
and look at the language translations.

Traditionally the NRSV translates v.4,  
"He [Aaron] took the gold from them,  
formed it in a mold,  
and cast an image of a calf;  
and **they said**, This if your god,  
O Israel who brought you out of Egypt."

The older Greek version of this text  
translates that verse as,

**he said.**

Meaning, "He [Aaron] took the gold from them,  
formed it in a mold,  
and cast an image of a calf;  
and **Aaron said**,  
here is your God O Israel,  
who brought you out of Egypt."

And in the next verse it is Aaron  
who builds an altar  
in front of the golden calf  
and declares a festival for the Lord.

It's almost as if he tries  
to subtly correct the people,  
no, it isn't Moses who brought you out of Egypt,  
it was Yahweh;  
and here Yahweh is.

It is almost as if he tries  
to turn their attention back to God:  
*tomorrow we'll have a festival for the Lord!*

But he fails.  
He fails because he tried  
to make an image of the true God.<sup>3</sup>

History has a way of repeating itself.  
Generations later, King Jeroboam  
of the northern kingdom of Israel,  
fashions two golden calves at Dan and Bethel  
and proclaims to the people,  
"This is your god, O Israel,  
who brought you up from the land of Egypt!"

But whether it is the story of Exodus or 1 Kings,  
these golden images  
are handmade idols,  
no matter how ornate;  
they are an attempt to domesticate  
that which cannot be tamed;  
attempts of unmasking  
the ultimate mystery;  
the golden calf is an attempt  
to control the true God who creates,  
who covenants,  
who liberates and saves.

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<sup>3</sup> Rolf Jacobson, Commentary on Exodus 32:1-14, Commentary on Human Nature,  
[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=751](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=751)

Aaron tried, but he failed.  
He wanted please the people  
and please God,  
but that can never be done.

So, when Aaron and the people  
make an idol,  
when they worship and sacrifice to it,  
God has every right to be angry.  
God has laid out the rules  
and explained the covenant.  
God has kept his promise  
to be with the people;  
freeing them,  
protecting them,  
providing for them.

God hears the people dancing and singing;  
he gets a whiff of their sacrifice  
and is swift to impart justice.  
We are not surprised  
at what should happen next.

But the grace and intimacy  
of what does happen next  
—is nothing short of biblical testimony.

Moses was the link, remember.  
Moses was the mediator,  
the go-between for the people and God.  
When God calls for their punishment,  
it is harsh.  
When God calls for their destruction,  
we can understand that reaction.

But Moses steps in.



Even in a situation of righteous anger,  
grace is allowed a voice  
in the conversation.

Moses, the leader;  
the mediator, the one who goes to God  
on the people's behalf  
—Moses boldly persuades God,  
Moses boldly appeals  
to God's covenant and promise.  
In short Moses boldly petitions  
to God's inherent grace.

Moses shamelessly asks God  
to remember that these are his people;  
remember the time and energy and love  
that goes into a relationship with them;  
remember the promises  
that were made to the patriarchs long ago.

We hear Moses ask  
bold and pointed questions of God  
and maybe we hear them for our benefit  
—so that we might be reminded  
of God's enduring character.

What does this do  
to God's reputation Moses asks  
—you are right to be angry  
and justified in punishment,  
but aren't you a God of scandalous grace?

“And the LORD changed his mind  
about the disaster  
that he planned  
to bring on his people.”  
What the people deserve  
and what the people get  
—this is the definition of grace.

Wrapped up in this grace  
is an intimacy that allows Moses  
to approach God on behalf of the people.  
Moses shares a closeness with God  
that reveals, “a mysterious friend  
who both comes close  
and stays far away,  
who shares our human nature  
and transcends our human understanding.”  
This is a kind of nearness in friendship  
that allows for bold questions;  
and not just questions every once in a while,  
but questions again and again and again.<sup>4</sup>

This intimacy isn't only afforded to Moses—  
think of Job and his questions.

Think of Jeremiah  
and how he vows to not speak of God  
and then cannot hold it in.  
Think of the psalmist  
who over and over  
demands answers  
and appeals to God's goodness and grace.

This is also biblical testimony that assures us,  
the God who brought his people out of Egypt  
is present and listening.

“To talk back means to keep talking.  
It's what the friends of God do.”<sup>5</sup>

The scandalous grace  
that God shows this stiff-necked people,  
the shared intimacy  
between Moses and the Almighty  
that enables him to appeal  
on the people's behalf—all of this,  
provides us with a sign

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Hawkins, September 11, 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Exodus 32:7-14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10, Aug. 23, 2016

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2016-08/september-11-24th-sunday-ordinary-time>

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

of who this God really is,  
better than any golden idol  
ever could.

And if we, who also beg for a sign,  
if we today should forget  
what God has done in the past,  
we need look no further than the link,  
the mediator,  
the go-between,  
the intermediary,  
the one who boldly approaches God  
and can tell us what God says and wills,  
the one who bring us  
the divine proclamation...  
Amen.

#### Benediction

Hear these words from the Westminster Confession of Faith, “Each period of redemptive history had mediators of the covenant to represent the one True Mediator. The human mediators were administrators of God’s covenant. The Divine Mediator is always Jesus Christ, the author of and a party of the Covenant of Grace.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <http://genevaninstitute.org/syllabus/unit-three-objective-soteriology/lesson-3-jesus-christ-the-mediator/>