

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.¹

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,

¹ Rolf Jacobson, Commentary on Exodus 32:1-14, Commentary on Human Nature,
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."²

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.

² Callie Plunket-Brewton, Commentary on Exodus 32:1-14,
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.³

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.

³ Rolf Jacobson, Commentary on Exodus 32:1-14, Commentary on Human Nature,
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.⁴

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.”⁵

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

⁴ 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>

⁵ *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.”⁶

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