

Waiting
Exodus 32:1-14
Matthew 22:1-14

“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.” Exodus 32:1b

“Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.” Matthew 22:4

If the story of the Israelites and the Golden Calf offers any clue concerning our human situation before God, you might say that our situation is a situation that involves waiting—often interminable waiting. To borrow the metaphor from last Sunday, we wait in the face of any given sadness or disappointment or grief for a flash of light: a glimpse of God’s glory that will reveal a way in the darkness; we wait for a word from on high, spoken to assure us that our present troubles will not last, our diseases will be cured, our heartache will come to an end; we wait to know the comfort of a presence accompanying us in the wilderness when other helpers fail and comforts flee.

Of course it is also the case that, while we wait, we necessarily go on with our lives. Back in the modern Aristotelian city of darning and the Eight-Fifteen, to borrow W.H. Auden’s characterization of how we pass the time being, there are machines to keep in repair, bills to be paid, irregular verbs to be learned. Over time, we may even forget that we are waiting and imperceptibly begin to reconcile ourselves to the human condition: “maintain [our]selves by the common routine, learn to avoid excessive expectation, become tolerant of [our]selves and others..., contented with the morning that separates and the evening that brings together for casual talk before the fire...” writes T.S. Eliot in *The Cocktail Party*.

But the story before us this morning tells us something else about our human situation: when the word from God is delayed or rare or maybe is not the word we want to hear, when

God's presence is only known in God's absence, we say we have waited long enough--or at least we say we have waited long enough for *this* God. Yet because it is also part of our human situation to worship *some* god if not *this* God, we begin seeking a new god and, like the Israelites, we usually go for a god we can get our hands on, a god more readily accessible to human reason, say, or a god less demanding of our time and loyalty. Curiously, our religious alternatives or the alternative of religion surrounds our relationship to these gods with similar trappings. Whether in a stadium or a concert hall or a family room or a chat room, we gather in common; we create various rituals; we reorder our precious days in relation to some new and tangible center of meaning and purpose. We even become evangelists for the new god, saying the god we can get our hands on has done a better job of accommodating the life we had in mind at the bottom of the mountain, when we were waiting for the one God, the jealous God, the hidden God to show up or to speak up or, on demand, to ante up as regards our petitions.

Though there is another character in the story who is not waiting, one who is conversing with God while the rest of the whole human running race waits. Not to identify overly with Moses, but as one set apart by this community and sent up the mountain of Scripture every week to listen for a word from God, a word that will lend meaning to the world we must negotiate in the week ahead, I can only imagine the frustration and disappointment you must feel if the word should be delayed or not the word you came to hear or be a word delivered in such a way that your mind wanders and you leave the sanctuary as empty-handed or down-hearted as when you arrived. Though to be perfectly honest, I know first-hand the frustration and disappointment Moses felt when he returned to the people with God's word, only to find them happier--and certainly more entertained--by the worship of gods they had fashioned all by themselves to meet their felt needs in the meantime.

Finally, what are we to make of the hidden character, of the God with whom Moses converses but does not see, the God whose mind changes about the disaster God had planned to bring upon the people, the God who ultimately promises to go with Moses and the Israelites, the God who still waits for a people who will respond in trust to God's summons? What of *this* God?

The story about *this* God was first told in the context of a culture "concerned with the assurance of God's presence and with accessibility guaranteed", writes Walter Brueggemann, noting, as well, the "'hunger for transcendence' and eagerness for 'religious experience'" that reigns in this culture. By contrast, the God of the Exodus was a God whose freedom from Israel meant that life with this God would be precarious. In Exodus, says Brueggemann, "We are not faced simply with the problem of *presence*, but with the *presence of [this God]*. The matter is not a general religious one, but one concerning the unaccommodating character of this God." Unaccommodating does not begin to tell the truth! What the lectionary understandably leaves out is the rest of the story. After breaking the tablets and burning the calf, Moses orders the Levites to go through the camp, each killing his brother, his friend and his neighbor. When the death toll reaches 3000, Moses calls them back and ordains them to the service of *this* God because each had brought a blessing on themselves at the cost of a son or brother. What are we to do with the unaccommodating character of *this* God? Apparently we are to continue the conversation.

Moses again goes up the mountain and, on behalf of the people, repeatedly asks to *know* God. In fact, says Brueggemann, Moses "wants to be the active agent in knowing. His demand is imperative to the point of abrasion, for he addresses [God] as though [God] were an unresponsive equal." I think of Abraham sparring with God over the fate of Sodom; I think of Jacob wrestling with a nameless stranger at Peniel; I think of Job.

God's response is simply to say, "I know you by name." In other words, *this* God is the

knowing agent, not Moses, not Israel, not you, not me. To Moses' repeated petitions, God speaks and, in speaking, acts in history, summons a people to continue their dangerous pilgrimage in trust, promises to accompany them, but God's face [which is the same word in Hebrew as presence] will not be seen.

Still Moses asks one last time to see God's glory; God instead shows Moses God's goodness. Moses asks for God's face and is given God's back. Moses asks to see God's presence and God instead speaks, is audible. Each request, says Brueggemann, is a quest for certitude. It is "the agenda of religion: a yearning for epiphany", because established religion—which is to say static religion—wants the sort of god who can be the object of "adoration, visibility, observation, veneration". When God's people tire of waiting for the God they cannot see, Israel puts heart and soul and mind and strength into religion: fashions an image, an object to adore. Never mind that *this God is God*: the God of the Exodus; subject and not object; knower not known; summon-er not summoned; the God for whom we were made.

Frankly, the unaccommodating character of *this God* in Exodus kept me from quitting the unaccommodating character who is said to be God in the parable of the Wedding Feast. Though of *this God* in the parable, I would say that the tables appear to be turned: now it is *this God* who is waiting. In the character of a king, God issues an urgent invitation to a feast—a wedding feast. If we pause for a moment to consider the invitation, I think it rings true to say that the invitation is an answer to our every prayer, even to the prayers once ventured at the foot of Sinai. The invitation is an invitation into the eternity that is God's presence, where we will see God face to face. Put another way, the invitation is an invitation to enter into the life that is life, the love for which we were made, the freedom that is God's gracious claim upon heart and mind, soul and strength. The invitation will not compel us, says Karl Barth, "but [will] burst open the door of

compulsion...[and]...summon us from the sphere of harassment.” Who in their right mind would refuse? If it is *this* God for whom *we* wait, then our waiting is about to come to an end.

The invitation goes out once, twice: God waits for the guests to arrive. In the parable, all who are first invited will not come. Invited again, they ignore the invitation, some returning to the Aristotelian city of darning and the Eight-Fifteen, others killing the messengers [the prophets? the disciples?]. The king, who holds in his hand the power of life and death, is enraged. The unaccommodating character of *this* God turns deathly. He sends troops, kills the murderers, burns the city [including the temple]. Here Daniel Berrigan suggests that when Jesus says the kingdom of God may be compared to a king, he means that God’s kingdom compares unfavorably to this king. I would love to go with Berrigan’s interpretation, except that I would be fashioning the accommodating god I want rather than responding to the urgent invitation of the unaccommodating God who now summons us all.

You and I are the next to be invited: the unworthy and unclean gentiles, both good and bad. In a word, simply everyone is invited. The third invitation is the charm. Good and bad show up, filling the wedding hall with guests, save for one poor soul who is thrown into the outer darkness because he is not properly clothed [clothed with Christ? clothed with joy?] for the party. Barth thinks he has failed to come festively, has appeared at the door reluctantly. I do not know what to think!

At the end of all of this, I only know enough to know the one telling the parable: know, in him, that *this* God has invited us to the banquet and, more than waiting for us to respond, has come to find us so that we, with him, may enter into the life that is life, into the love for which we were made, into the freedom that is God’s gracious claim upon heart and mind, soul and strength. The God whose face was “hidden by massive glory on the mountain” is the same God

whose face is “hidden from below in shamefulness and weakness”. In “the concrete, historical, raw face of the crucified”, says Brueggemann, in the face of this “dangerous, threatening king” crowned with thorns, we may know *this* God, the God who knows you, the God who, in Christ, has clothed you with joy and fit you for his wedding feast that, even now, has begun.

As I try to imagine the life and love and freedom that is a foretaste of the marriage feast this side of the grave, I cannot help but think of the life of Steve Jobs. I do not believe he was a religious man, only a man who said “yes” to the invitation that “bursts open the door of compulsion...[and]...summons us from the sphere of harassment”. Speaking to Stanford graduates in 2005, when he thought he had beaten the cancer that finally took his mortal life, he said, “Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life. Don’t be trapped by dogma—which is living the result of other people’s thinking. Don’t let the noise of others’ opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become....Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish.” I take that to mean, “Do not waste your one precious life worshipping idols.” The invitation has been issued. The party has begun. Thanks be to God!