

Three months after leaving slavery in Egypt the people arrived at Mt. Sinai. Along the way they learned to have faith when there was no water, food, or safety. Now they are about to have a hard lesson on faith when there was no assurance that God is near.

Moses has been on the top of Mt. Sinai for 40 days, and the people have become very anxious. They weren't just worried about Moses, but also about their survival because he was their mediator with the God who had kept them alive in the desert. When they left Egypt, they were following a dream Moses gave them. When they reached the Red Sea, it was Moses' outstretched hand that parted the waters. When they ran out of water and food, they brought their complaint to Moses, who brought it to God, and God provided for their needs. When they were afraid of the Amalekites who were attacking them, God delivered them in battle as long as Moses' hands were upstretched to the heavens. And when they were terrified of the thunderous holiness that descended on the top of Mt. Sinai, it was Moses who climbed the mountain on their behalf.

Now Moses has been away on study leave on Sinai for over a month, and the people said, "We do not know what has become of him." But since Moses was their only way of knowing a faithful God was with them, when the people said, "We do not know what has become of him," they were also saying, "We do not know what has become of God."

Maybe, like the Hebrews, on your own journey through life there have been some rough spots along the way. And maybe you were also starting to believe that if you held your hands up to God in prayer, you would be okay. You decided you could handle the loss of anything as long as you knew God was near. But what about the times when it seems you've also lost God? And our mediator Jesus the Savior feels far away. That's when we are tempted to look for something more tangible.

The people gathered around Aaron, who Moses had left in charge, and said, "Come make gods for us," which is what he did. He took the gold from their treasured earrings, formed in a mold, and cast it in the image of a calf. When the people saw the gold calf, they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt."

Later it is clear in the text that God saw this gold calf as an idol. When God was hammering out the Ten Commandments on Mt Sinai, this gold calf problem showed up in the first two of them. But the people had not yet heard about the commandments. So, it is not clear that the people thought they were abandoning or even disobeying God. What is clear is that the people thought God had abandoned them. And they were so anxious that they had to worship or put their trust in something. G.K. Chesterton has written, "When people give up worshipping the God of heaven and earth, they don't worship nothing. Rather they worship everything."

It could be that the gold calf was the Hebrews' back up plan just in case God didn't pull through. In their anxiety in the desert they didn't become atheists, but they weren't monotheists yet either. Maybe they just thought they needed more than one god. We understand that. When it feels like we have lost touch with God, we may still come to worship at church, but don't we all have a Plan B for salvation?

Do you think your life will be fixed if you get a new job? Relationship? Doctor? Exercise program? Or that you'll be okay as long as the financial markets are okay? None of these things are wrong, unless you are counting on them to get you out of the desert, in which case they have become idols.

The Hebrew choice of a gold calf for their extra god seems strange to us because we're 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. And it was a god they fashioned with their own hands, much like our idols of

success, power, materialism, and comfort. Best of all, a gold calf makes no demands. It doesn't come with commandments, and it doesn't call you to do justice, love mercy, or walk humbly. It doesn't expect you to have faith in it when it fails to do what you want. Nor does it expect exclusive loyalty, so you can worship as many idols as you want. We've always like that in a god—all promises; no demands.

By contrast, the Lord God is jealous, completely unmanageable, and has clear expectations for how we shall live. We cannot fashion Yahweh with our own hands; rather, it is we who are made in God's image. And we certainly cannot get a leash around God to come to us whenever we want another blessing. But that is only because the Lord is making room for us to have faith, which is why we were led through the hard times in the desert. The point of the journey isn't to arrive, but to discover faith. And it is in the times when God seems absent that faith comes alive.

According to the well-known preacher, Fred Craddock, we live by faith because of, and by faith in spite of. It isn't hard to develop a long list of reasons for faith *because of* the many blessings we've received. But choosing faith *in spite of* what seems like the absence of God, well, that may be what faith really is.

Sculptors will sometimes speak about negative space. It refers to the empty space created by the positive forms of the sculpture. For example, a chalice has a base, 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 as the chalice demonstrates, the purpose of the positive forms is to create the negative space. In Holy Communion, what was empty can be filled with the blood of Christ, transforming the negative spaces of our lives into a means of grace.

It would be horrible to use that chalice for a martini. It has a holy purpose. In every life there is a negative space, or something missing. It too has a holy purpose. It is the place where you wait upon God in faith. Don't try to fill it with Plan B, or your back up god, because in the end that's just idolatry.

When God seems absent because the reasons for faith are getting slim, and the negative space is gnawing at you, that creates a choice. And there are only two options—faith or idolatry. As Chesterton warns, you're going to worship something.

It is striking that on seeing the gold calf, Aaron says, "Tomorrow will be a festival to Yahweh," using the name for God that was known only in the Hebrews' covenant. Apparently, he doesn't think he's made an idol, but a liturgical symbol. But there is a thin line between our symbols and our idols. The church is full of symbols such as the cross, sacraments, even the sanctuary. So are our lives filled with symbols of God's love, such as relationships, health, homes, and work. But they are all temporary blessings from God. Eventually we have to give up every one of these blessings, and we keep only the holy love that lies behind them all the way into eternity. Symbols just symbolize. If you have to have the symbol, it has become an idol.

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

Moses responds to God in what may be in 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 that fascinating? At the bottom of the mountain the people are dancing around a gold calf. At that top, Moses and God are arguing over just whose children these are.

Notice that as Moses pleads the people's case in prayer, he doesn't say, "Well, sure they're idolators, but they have so many good traits." No, he reminds God of the divine nature to be faithful. He said, in essence: "You're

the one who started this dream with the Exodus. You said it would lead them to a land called Promised. You are the one who vowed to care for them through the desert. And you are the one whose nature is to be faithful, even we are not.” Moses knew that our hope for avoiding divine judgment is found not in our righteousness but in God’s covenant to be merciful.

After this, the text tells us that the mind of God was changed by the mediator Moses’s prayer, and the people were not destroyed. Can God’s mind be changed? That has frightening implications if we take this out of context. My suggestion is don’t take it out of context. Here it just means that God is moved by Moses’ prayer.

God is also moved by your prayers. When the negative space is aching within you, and when you tried to cram an idol inside it, but the ache continues, and so you choose then to have faith in the faithfulness of God and pray for mercy, God is moved with compassion by your prayers.

This is why we just keep praying for the world that so often seems to be coming apart at the seams. Who knows what can happen in a world held by a God who chooses to move away from anger, and toward mercy and compassion? Amen.