

Sermon – Exodus 32 v1-14

Today's reading from Exodus is a story of impatience and (mis)remembering.

Do you ever get impatient waiting for someone to come back? I certainly do. Imagine you're at an event; perhaps a wedding reception, it's crowded and the person you're with goes to get the drinks from the bar. You watch them go, disappearing through the crowd. Ten minutes later they're not back - perhaps the queue is long. 20 minutes and they're still not back. I begin to wonder if they've stopped to chat on the way - have they forgotten I'm waiting? And I start to get impatient. It's like arranging to meet a friend and they are late; more than a little late and you get frustrated and impatient. I'm an early person so for me lateness is a quick trigger for impatience.



Our reading today begins with the continued journey of the people of Israel to the Promised Land.

Now they are waiting at the bottom of the mountain for Moses to return from speaking with God. But they get impatient waiting for Moses return. It's been days....

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Their impatient response is to gather around Aaron and say to him
“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” (v1)

See how they want to do something to fill the time? They want gods made that can go before them in the desert. There’s no point in waiting for Moses who brought them out of Egypt as anything could’ve become of him.

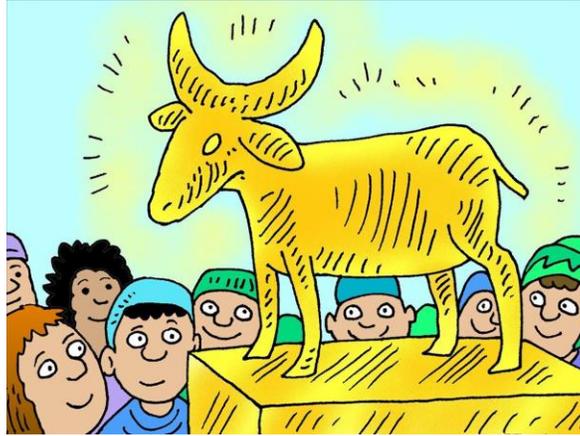
At this point in the reading we see misremembering in action. Like when you retell a story and someone says “That’s not how it went!” - you’re not deliberately changing the story, you’ve misremembered.

The people of Israel are saying Moses brought them out of Egypt. That’s not true, Moses led them but it was God who brought them out of Egypt. It was God who provided the plagues that led to Pharaoh allowing them to leave; it was God who parted the Sea of Reeds so they could cross. You’d think they would remember something so important correctly.



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And so Aaron gathers the gold and they make a golden calf or young bull (the bull was a symbol of Baal.)



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When it's finished they declare "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" (v4) Oh no, they're misremembering again; it's not Moses that brought them out of Egypt but the gods they have made. Have they really forgotten? Forgotten it was God who went before them sending the pillar of cloud and of fire to guide them? They didn't need idols to go before them to get to this point, so why would they need them now?

On hearing their words Aaron builds an altar in front of the calf and proclaims "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord." (v5) This seems a contradiction for the calf is still there and present as an object of worship and the two can't go together. The next morning they gather and worship, but after they bring their offerings and sacrifices they eat, drink and rise up to revel (v6) This revelry was not just a party, it was much more, the type of behaviour that wouldn't have been part of the worship of God.

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All this comes from misremembering who it was that led them out of Egypt and their impatience. If only they had been content to wait. I'm terrible at waiting; I want to get going – and we can be like that with God's plans. We know what the plan is but we just want to get on with it and rush on. Sometimes that may be right but other times God says "This is the plan but...wait...for the time is not yet right." Israel was required to wait at the foot of the mountain so that God could equip Moses. But waiting was hard.

Moses is high up on the mountain speaking with God. God is aware of what is going on and says Moses should return at once. "Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt" (v7) "have turned aside, made an idol and worshipped it." Notice God says they are Moses' - people who Moses brought out of Egypt. They have disowned God and God uses the language they used in verse 1. The people of Israel are called stiff necked people (v9), which means they're like an ox that goes its own way even when led by a rope. They are stubborn and cannot be guided.

And so God sends Moses back so his wrath may burn against them and consume them, but Moses will still be made into a great nation.

What an opportunity for Moses: God has given Moses the credit for leading the people out of Egypt, just like the people themselves said. Moses could have jumped at this opportunity: it would be a new start, freed from the people. Is God really saying it was Moses that brought them out of Egypt? Or is God testing Moses – that's what they are saying down at the bottom of the mountain – what do you say Moses?

Moses' response is one to bring joy, for he pleads three reasons that the people should be spared:

1. The particular relationship of Israel and God - they are **“your people.”**
2. Vindication of God’s name – if Israel is destroyed, other nations will rise and say **“God had led them out only to destroy them.”** In this Moses makes clear that he remembers that God was the one leading the people out of Egypt.
3. The **promises of God to Abraham, Isaac and Israel**, to multiply their descendants and that they will inherit the Promised Land forever. How can this come true if they are destroyed?

Our reading today simply concludes with the words **“And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people”** (v14)

What can we learn from this reading today as we journey onward as a church community:

1. As God delivered Israel from Egypt, it is God who delivers us from our sin and bondage, God who saves and restores us. This story makes clear that what is happening at this point is part of the longer story of the relationship of people with God and God’s unchanging nature. We are part of that same story.
2. God provides us with human leaders to help guide us, as he sent Moses. We discern together where God is leading us.
3. Misremembering is a human condition, particularly when we are in stressful situations. It’s not deliberate but it can easily set us off in the wrong direction. There are core things we can hold onto in those times to help us remember: we can hold onto the creeds and affirmations of faith we say each week; we can hold onto the truth of our Bible; we can spend time in prayer alone and together; and we can keep a record of our own faith journey – to read and remind ourselves of God’s consistency.
4. Don’t get impatient. Sometimes the next step is simply to wait.