

Sermon, 12 October 2008—Proper 23

Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6,19-23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

Last Sunday, I commented that the story-tellers of the Torah have set out on an anguished analysis of what it is to be human. These stories are not accurate accounts of historical moments, but what I want to call confessional anthropology: all the stories they tell are an excruciating description of human, not personal, failure. We are all implicated. They are trying to understand and depict accurately our consistent failings, hoping that careful self-accounting will become the first step to transformation.

Today's story is the most lurid and absurd of all the rebellions in the desert. The tragedy we witnessed last Sunday has remained untended and neglected. Forty days have passed since the people turned away from God's call to know and to love God directly and inserted Moses between God and themselves, and their has gone bad. The putrefied fruit bursts and spills and stains. They cannot endure their own choice not to know God, so they impatiently invent gods for their void.

Even though they have asked Moses to be their intermediary on the mountain, they cannot watch with him for forty days, just as Jesus' disciples could not watch an hour. They have not worked out their share of their choice, what commitments and loyalties it calls them to, what vigil or fast or prayerful attention they are to contribute. Their spiritual will is infirm. They cannot hold their attention on the emptiness God left behind when God yielded to their request for mercy on their frailty. They crave distraction.

What they demand of Aaron is more of the same: "make us gods to go before us." The irony of the writers seems bitter. Having rejected God, the people cannot do without gods. Having habituated themselves that some

greater being is looking after them and fixing things for them, they are now going to fabricate what they will depend on. They will apply their spiritual technology and construct a mechanism to “go before” them, that is, to lead them in decisions, to rally them in battle, and to guide them on journeys.

What they do once their apparatus is assembled and installed, though, is run it once, then turn it off. They offer sacrifices, but then, rather than set out, carrying this gilded bull at their head—which was the reason they said they wanted it—instead they “rise up to revel.” Of course, the party we witness is not ceremonial celebration, but regression. What they show is not joy in worship, but relief at the ability to shrug off responsibility. They show themselves to be children: they want to play. They did not, after all, want something to go before them, so that at least *some* decisive action could begin; they simply wanted a patch over an empty spot, and now that it's there, they can kick back—at least for a while. Rather than awareness of God, with the rumbling darkness of the mountain looming over them, where Moses and God are struggling over their fate, they reach for distraction.

So it is in Jesus' Parable of the Wedding Feast. There, Jesus tells about a double regression: those who refuse the invitation—who at least show decisive opposition—and the man who accepts the invitation, but doesn't see why he should change anything about himself. His lack of wedding garment is the same obliviousness the people show at the foot of Sinai, ready to hitch a ride on a religious encounter, so long as it involves no effort and requires no change: leave me the same clothes, the same habits, the same comforts. This is underscored by the end of the story. When the man is asked why he has done nothing to show his joy at the occasion, he has nothing to say. He has not thought about it. No decision was involved; he just showed up. He has no reason of his own to be there.

Now, there is a curious phrase that Moses uses in his argument with God. He warns God that, if God destroys, or at least abandons, the people, that will confirm those who suspect that the world is run with “evil intent.” All of us, I know, hear this as a constant background whisper every time we pray: the world is a place of ruthless competition, of ineradicable selfishness, of weak, passive, cowardly herds who permit predators to prowl among them and pick them off. Even if we do not believe it, nevertheless we pray in the middle of that cultural static: the world is dangerous and treacherous, and we ourselves are unreliable and needy.

The people of Israel, grumbling and sniping in the wilderness, have more than once suspected evil intent: “you brought us out here to starve us, to have us die of thirst.” This bitter and suspicious view of the world has veered them towards distraction. Where everything is so unreliable and so treacherous, distraction is a relief. From this perspective, to drug ourselves so we don’t feel the knife slip between our ribs cannot be a bad thing—and everything, even religious ritual and fervor, can become a drug. The more addicted religious practitioners become to fantasies of religious contracts—our safety in exchange for sacrifice, the persistent bribery of prayer—the more the evidence accumulates that they believe the world to be evil and that God must be paid, whether with sheep or with good deeds or with pious thoughts, to delay the blow which they know will come, because everything runs on “evil intent.” So why not rise up to rebel? Why not eat, drink, and be merry, since tomorrow we will die? And I should say, if this is the god that runs the world, then to hell with such a god—which is not flippant blasphemy, but merely giving you the correct address to direct your prayers.

This, of course, is not the only story in this selection of Exodus. At the same time that the writers are depicting human faithlessness at the foot

of the mountain, they are also depicting human faithfulness at the peak of the mountain. What links these two portrayals together are four statements about who is responsible for bringing the people out of Egypt.

The people use the phrase twice. First they say “this man Moses” brought them out. It is hard not to hear their petulance: “this wasn’t our idea, it was his!” Then they exclaim that somehow the gods of the golden calf they manufactured brought them out, and now will go before them as multiple deities. If one god is good, many must be better. It is hard not to hear their satisfaction at having created a manageable decoy: “we won’t have to make decisions, these gods will make them for us!” This is the full absurdity of idolatry: expecting what I have made to assume responsibility for me and to guide my decisions. We still, in our own day, do the same.

Moses and God also throw the same phrase at each other. God’s pique is understandable. Remember what we heard last Sunday. The very first of the ten words that God roars, which go ricocheting down the slopes of Sinai, so percussive they blow the people aside like grains of dust, is this: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” So thorough is the people’s deliberate rejection of the unmediated and undistracted knowledge of God that they now are saying that the man they asked to stand in between them and God, so that they did not have to listen to God directly, is the one who brought them out of Egypt. They have installed Moses in the place of God, not to venerate, but to ensure that knowing God cannot come up as an option. God peevishly borrows the words of the people of Israel, and he says to Moses what they have said about Moses: “*your* people, whom *you* brought up out of the land of Egypt.”

Only Moses is shown as holding on to the facts. Yes, they are his people; he is not the child of Pharaoh’s daughter, but the son of a Hebrew

slave. However, the story of this people did not start with him, but with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with whom God has an abiding contract. He hands back to God the same words God flung at him: “*your* people, whom *you* brought up out of the land of Egypt;” and he adds that God did so “with great power and with a mighty hand.” Even if no one else remembers, Moses remembers. Moses knows he himself did not do this on his own and could not have done it on his own. Once again, as happens tellingly in the Bible, a human being backs God down: Moses reminds God that God took an oath, using God’s own self as collateral, and God cannot break such a promise without all Creation collapsing into self-contradiction and chaos.

Moses proves himself to be God’s friend, as Abraham was and as Jesus will be. A friend is someone who, not only thinks the best of us, but who helps us be the best we can be. A friend helps us, not only look good, but become good. So Abraham, bargaining God down from destroying the Cities of the Plain, helps God remember the goodness that is the heart-deep longing of the Creator. And Jesus, healing and teaching, helps God bring about the goodness God intends; even after pleading in Gethsemane for an alternate course, he shoulders his portion of what must be done to bring about the goodness both he and God envision together: faithfulness of God and humanity to each other. Moses, in his own day, demands of God that God not let the capricious and suspicious account of reality driving the decisions of the people at the foot of the mountain become true. When he says this, insisting that God make good on the promises God has made, he proves himself to be God’s friend.

So, what do we make of all this?

First, spiritual distraction compounds the account of the world as run with “evil intent.” When we opt for distraction, we confirm that discomfort

and suffering and effort are the alternatives we see. Not everyone chooses distraction. To suspect evil intent galvanizes some people: at least, they cry, in our day what can be done to resist evil will be done; at least we, they insist, will not embitter our lives with oblivion. The fact remains, though, when we would rather revel than act, we allow evil to increase in the world.

Don't misunderstand me. God in Creation set up a day of rest, a day when the appreciation of the beauty of the world and our gratitude for it can have free rein. Distraction, though, is not appreciation, but a dragging away of our attention to what leaves our mouth dry and our belly bloated and our head throbbing and our heart sinking afterwards. One of the most precious gifts of Judaism is the Sabbath. One of the ten words blasting the top of Sinai clean and scouring the desert is the institution of the Sabbath.

Thankful rest is good. Thankful rest is only possible in a world which we know is not run with "evil intent," but is seen by its Creator as "very good."

Second, spiritual friendship with God brings about the goodness God intends. This is the exact opposite of distraction. Seeing the goodness in the world and coming to know the further goodness God wants to bring about turn us into God's friends, not only admiring what has been done, but eager, for the sheer joy of companionship, to share the projects that remain. Our own good deeds have less to do with duty, than with an overflow of gratitude and an imitation of what we love. "Rejoice in the Lord always," our dear older brother Paul says; "again, I say, rejoice. Whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, if there is excellence and anything worthy of praise, think of these things." This, of course, only strengthens our friendship with God, who is all these things—and God's friends can reasonably expect to be invited to God's house for the wedding banquet, where we will rejoice in the praise of the One God for all eternity.