

Moses and the Journey of Faith

Week Three

Monday, February 28th

Exodus 18:13-27

¹³The next day, Moses sat as usual to hear the people's complaints against each other. They were lined up in front of him from morning till evening.

¹⁴When Moses' father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, "Why are you trying to do all this alone? The people have been standing here all day to get your help."

¹⁵Moses replied, "Well, the people come to me to seek God's guidance. ¹⁶When an argument arises, I am the one who settles the case. I inform the people of God's decisions and teach them his laws and instructions."

¹⁷"This is not good!" his father-in-law exclaimed. ¹⁸"You're going to wear yourself out--and the people, too. This job is too heavy a burden for you to handle all by yourself. ¹⁹Now let me give you a word of advice, and may God be with you. You should continue to be the people's representative before God, bringing him their questions to be decided. ²⁰You should tell them God's decisions, teach them God's laws and instructions, and show them how to conduct their lives. ²¹But find some capable, honest men who fear God and hate bribes. Appoint them as judges over groups of one thousand, one hundred, fifty, and ten. ²²These men can serve the people, resolving all the ordinary cases. Anything that is too important or too complicated can be brought to you. But they can take care of the smaller matters themselves. They will help you carry the load, making the task easier for you. ²³If you follow this advice, and if God directs you to do so, then you will be able to endure the pressures, and all these people will go home in peace."

²⁴Moses listened to his father-in-law's advice and followed his suggestions. ²⁵He chose capable men from all over Israel and made them judges over the people. They were put in charge of groups of one thousand, one hundred, fifty, and ten. ²⁶These men were constantly available to administer justice. They brought the hard cases to Moses, but they judged the smaller matters themselves.

²⁷Soon after this, Moses said good-bye to his father-in-law, who returned to his own land.

Points of Interest:

- 'let me give you a word of advice'—Moses has entered a new phase of his hero's journey now, or perhaps has begun a new adventure altogether. Moses has become an expert on getting Pharaoh to let the people go, but he's pretty much a novice at leading the people now that they are free. Jethro serves as a mentor here, helping Moses prepare well for this new phase of his journey.
- 'You should continue to be the people's representative before God'—it's obvious to Jethro as he watches that Moses cannot do everything he is trying to do himself. So, Jethro tries to help Moses prioritize. Serving as the liaison between God and the Israelites is something that Moses alone can do; so he should make sure he leaves himself enough room to fulfill that role effectively.
- 'find some capable, honest men who fear God and hate bribes'—Jethro communicates two things to Moses here. First of all, he's telling Moses that Moses doesn't have to do everything himself; there are, in fact, people who are capable of doing some of the things Moses is currently doing himself. Secondly, he's communicating to Moses that he needs to find the right people for the job. There are more people capable of responsibility than Moses is noticing, but that doesn't mean there's no need for qualified leadership.
- 'Appoint them as judges over groups of one thousand, one hundred, fifty, and ten'—Jethro proposes an appeals system, with Moses as the Supreme Court but several levels of court below him to take care of more basic cases.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* I'm sure that Moses feels a little frazzled in this passage: he's working from dawn to dusk; at the end of the day he still has a long line of disappointed (and possibly demanding) people expecting to talk to him; and he probably doesn't even get to the things he was hoping to do or expecting to do. Jethro helps Moses discover that at least some of his overwhelming busyness comes from the fact that he is spending too much time doing the wrong things. Have you been feeling frazzled recently? As you reflect on how you spend your time, are there things that are clearly taking too much time? What would it take to responsibly adjust what you are doing? Are there people who could be good partners to you?

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- *For your six:* Jethro shows up in the right place at the right time to offer some much-needed help and wisdom to Moses. Pray that God would give you the opportunity to be in the right place at the right time to help your six.
- *For our church:* As you may have noticed if you've been around our church for any length of time, it takes a lot of work from a lot of people in order to fulfill the dreams we as a church have. Pray that we would become better and better at calling and equipping the right people for all of the right roles.

Tuesday, March 1st

Exodus 19

¹The Israelites arrived in the wilderness of Sinai exactly two months after they left Egypt. ²After breaking camp at Rephidim, they came to the base of Mount Sinai and set up camp there.

³Then Moses climbed the mountain to appear before God. The LORD called out to him from the mountain and said, "Give these instructions to the descendants of Jacob, the people of Israel: ⁴You have seen what I did to the Egyptians. You know how I brought you to myself and carried you on eagle's wings. ⁵Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the nations of the earth; for all the earth belongs to me. ⁶And you will be to me a kingdom of priests, my holy nation.' Give this message to the Israelites."

⁷Moses returned from the mountain and called together the leaders of the people and told them what the LORD had said. ⁸They all responded together, "We will certainly do everything the LORD asks of us." So Moses brought the people's answer back to the LORD.

⁹Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to come to you in a thick cloud so the people themselves can hear me as I speak to you. Then they will always have confidence in you."

Moses told the LORD what the people had said. ¹⁰Then the LORD told Moses, "Go down and prepare the people for my visit. Purify them today and tomorrow, and have them wash their clothing. ¹¹Be sure they are ready on the third day, for I will come down upon Mount Sinai as all the people watch. ¹²Set boundary lines that the people may not pass. Warn them, 'Be careful! Do not go up on the mountain or even touch its boundaries. Those who do will certainly die! ¹³Any people or animals that cross the boundary must be stoned to death or shot with arrows. They must not be touched by human hands.' The people must stay away from the mountain until they hear one long blast from the ram's horn. Then they must gather at the foot of the mountain."

¹⁴So Moses went down to the people. He purified them for worship and had them wash their clothing.

¹⁵He told them, "Get ready for an important event two days from now. And until then, abstain from having sexual intercourse."

¹⁶On the morning of the third day, there was a powerful thunder and lightning storm, and a dense cloud came down upon the mountain. There was a long, loud blast from a ram's horn, and all the people trembled.

¹⁷Moses led them out from the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸All Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the LORD had descended on it in the form of fire. The smoke billowed into the sky like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain shook with a violent earthquake.

¹⁹As the horn blast grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God thundered his reply for all to hear. ²⁰The LORD came down on the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses climbed the mountain.

²¹Then the LORD told Moses, "Go back down and warn the people not to cross the boundaries. They must not come up here to see the LORD, for those who do will die. ²²Even the priests who regularly come near to the LORD must purify themselves, or I will destroy them."

²³"But LORD, the people cannot come up on the mountain!" Moses protested. "You already told them not to. You told me to set boundaries around the mountain and to declare it off limits."

²⁴But the LORD said, "Go down anyway and bring Aaron back with you. In the meantime, do not let the priests or the people cross the boundaries to come up here. If they do, I will punish them."

²⁵So Moses went down to the people and told them what the LORD had said.

Points of Interest:

- 'they came to the base of Mount Sinai'—just as God had predicted when he first called Moses in chapter 3, Moses now returns with the entire people of Israel to the place where he first met God. It's an

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interesting twist on the hero's journey. In the typical hero's journey, the hero goes to the special world, and eventually returns to the ordinary world with a magic elixir to save the people. In one way of looking at the story, Moses indeed follows that pattern: he goes out into the wilderness, gains God's power, and returns to Egypt to save the people. But, from another perspective, rather than bringing the elixir to the people, he brings the people to the elixir. He leads the whole people of Israel out of their ordinary world and to the exact place where he met God and it changed his life. This hero's journey is not just for Moses; the whole people of God have the opportunity to join in with him.

- 'Give this message to the Israelites'—the hero's journey often starts when a herald or messenger comes to the hero with an invitation to join the quest. God himself served as a herald to Moses, and now Moses does the same for the people.
- 'you will be to me a kingdom of priests'—of course, the priests are usually only a very small percentage of the population, but in Israel's case, the whole nation is a priesthood. The job of a priest is to serve as a mediator between a people and their god. Just like it is the job of one person, the priest, to connect the people and God, it is the job of this one nation to connect the rest of the nations of the world with God. Perhaps this is what God meant when he told Abraham, 'Through you, all the nations of the world will be blessed' (Genesis 12:3). This is Israel's heroic journey: they are meant to be the priestly nation that leads the whole world toward God, just like Moses led them here.
- 'All Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the LORD had descended on it in the form of fire'—this is a re-enactment of the burning bush, but on a scale large enough for thousands of people to see. Similar to Moses removing his shoes on holy ground, the people show their respect for the holiness of the event by cleaning themselves, putting on nice clothes, and avoiding touching the mountain. When God called Moses, it was from a burning bush. Now, he calls the people from a burning mountain.
- 'Go back down and warn the people not to cross the boundaries'—it seems that the people respond to God's presence with equal doses of fear and attraction. On the one hand, they are literally shaking with fear, but on the other hand God is afraid that they will come too close to this fiery manifestation of his presence.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* In this passage, Moses experiences a promise of God being fulfilled. Despite the odds, it turns out exactly as God had predicted. Have you ever had that experience? What was it, and how did it feel?
- *For your six:* The Israelites directly experience God's presence for the first time in this passage. They find the experience powerful, almost overwhelming, but also undeniably attractive. Ask God to give your six the same privilege of directly sensing his presence.
- *For our church:* Ask that God would make us a church full of priests, ushering everyone around us into a deeper connection with God.

Wednesday, March 2nd

Exodus 20:1-21

¹Then God instructed the people as follows:

²"I am the LORD your God, who rescued you from slavery in Egypt.

³"Do not worship any other gods besides me.

⁴"Do not make idols of any kind, whether in the shape of birds or animals or fish. ⁵You must never worship or bow down to them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not share your affection with any other god! I do not leave unpunished the sins of those who hate me, but I punish the children for the sins of their parents to the third and fourth generations. ⁶But I lavish my love on those who love me and obey my commands, even for a thousand generations.

⁷"Do not misuse the name of the LORD your God. The LORD will not let you go unpunished if you misuse his name.

⁸"Remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹Six days a week are set apart for your daily duties and regular work, ¹⁰but the seventh day is a day of rest dedicated to the LORD your God. On that day no one in your household may do any kind of work. This includes you, your sons and daughters, your male

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and female servants, your livestock, and any foreigners living among you. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and everything in them; then he rested on the seventh day. That is why the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as holy.

¹²"Honor your father and mother. Then you will live a long, full life in the land the LORD your God will give you.

¹³"Do not murder.

¹⁴"Do not commit adultery.

¹⁵"Do not steal.

¹⁶"Do not testify falsely against your neighbor.

¹⁷"Do not covet your neighbor's house. Do not covet your neighbor's wife, male or female servant, ox or donkey, or anything else your neighbor owns."

¹⁸When the people heard the thunder and the loud blast of the horn, and when they saw the lightning and the smoke billowing from the mountain, they stood at a distance, trembling with fear.

¹⁹And they said to Moses, "You tell us what God says, and we will listen. But don't let God speak directly to us. If he does, we will die!"

²⁰"Don't be afraid," Moses said, "for God has come in this way to show you his awesome power. From now on, let your fear of him keep you from sinning!"

²¹As the people stood in the distance, Moses entered into the deep darkness where God was.

Points of Interest:

- 'Then God instructed the people as follows'—what follows are the famous Ten Commandments. These commandments are not meant to be a set of random rules. Rather they are part of a covenant, or an agreement, between God and his people. God and the Israelites are essentially signing a contract with one another here. In yesterday's passage, God mentions his part of the deal; he is going to make Israel his special treasure (he'll go into more detail later). The Ten Commandments are Israel's part. The hero's journey gives us another perspective on the Ten Commandments. Perhaps these commandments are the elixir; these laws are what the Israelites need in order to have a successful, happy life.
- 'Do not worship any other gods besides me'—this is actually the first time in the Bible in which the LORD makes it clear that he wishes to be worshipped exclusively. In his contest with Pharaoh, the LORD has clearly shown that he is a god with real power. Now, he reveals that he wants to be **the** God of the Israelites. This agreement is meant to be an exclusive contract. If they enter into a covenant with the LORD, they can't make agreements with any other gods.
- 'Do not make idols of any kind'—the gods of Egypt and of any other surrounding culture were given physical representation in the form of idols. These idols were considered to be the actual presence (though not the only or exclusive presence) of the god. This commandment is in some ways a continuation of the one above. God is basically saying in a different, more specific way, 'Don't worship any other god.' As well as saying something about who to worship, he's also making a statement about how to worship. He is saying that he cannot be worshipped through an idol. Any idol is automatically considered a different god—not a representation of him. Perhaps God does not want to be limited to a static representation; he wants to be able to move as he wishes and to appear where, when, and how he wishes. It might also be the case that he wants to make clear that the Israelites cannot control him. There is some indication that the people of the ancient near east treated their idols somewhat like voodoo dolls. They believed they could use spells and charms cast on the idols to force actions on the god (*Bible Background Commentary* 95). God wants to make it clear that he cannot be bound in this way.
- 'but I punish the children for the sins of their parents'—this sounds a bit harsh and unfair, but perhaps it is simply a statement of the unavoidable truth that our sins always affect the people around us, and particularly our family. It's a truth upon which much of modern psychology—at least the 'nurture,' rather than 'nature' end of things—is based. It's also encouraging to see that God's blessing on a family lasts a thousand generations. His blessing far outweighs his punishment. Three or four generations pass by quickly, but there probably still haven't been a thousand generations since the time of Moses.

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- 'Do not misuse the name of the LORD'—this commandment is often interpreted to be either a prohibition against using God's name while swearing (e.g. 'God damn it!') or a warning against breaking promises. While doing either one of those things is probably not the best idea, this command most likely has something different in mind. Remember in chapter 3, when Moses asked for God's name, and God revealed his name, the LORD (or I AM)? Moses thought of knowing God's name as a key to success in his mission. There is real spiritual power that comes with invoking God's name; it's like using your father's or your company's charge card to pay for an expense. God is giving the Israelites authorization to use his name, but he's warning them not to abuse it.
- 'the seventh day is a day of rest'—no surrounding nature had anything like the weekly day of rest in their religious practice (*Bible Background Commentary* 95).
- The Ten Commandments are often thought of in two parts. The first four commandments are about relationship with God. The other six are about relationships with other people. Jesus summarized it this way: love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength (the first half); and love your neighbor as yourself (the second half). In God's agreement with the Israelites, he is equally concerned with their relationships with other people as he is with their relationship with him.
- 'But don't let God speak directly to us. If he does, we will die'—the people make the sad choice to reject direct communication with God. Moses has brought them to the place where he met God in order to offer them the same sort of relationship with God he enjoys. They appreciate Moses' connection with God, but they are too frightened to make that same connection themselves. They'd rather communicate with God through Moses.
- 'let your fear of him keep you from sinning'—they have no need to fear that God will destroy them if they deal faithfully with him.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* What is the legacy you want to pass on to the next generation? God tells us that both our good choices and our bad choices have an effect on those who come after us. What are some gifts you would like to pass on to your children or other younger people you influence? Choose those things for yourself now. Ask God to grow them for a thousand generations, and spend some time imagining the impact those good choices will have.
- *For your six:* God spends some time demonstrating to the Israelites his power and his willingness to rescue them, without any strings attached. Then, he says, 'If you really want to get the benefits of worshipping me, you have to worship me only.' Have any of your six seen, experienced, and noticed God's power and goodness to them? Perhaps it is time for them to choose if he will be their one and only Lord. Pray that God would give them this invitation, and consider broaching the topic with them yourself.
- *For our church:* Boston is an extremely busy place, where rest is a rare commodity. Even God took a day off, but it's easy for us Bostonians to fall into the assumption that either we ourselves or the world in general could not survive if we stopped. Ask God to give us the faith to rest, following God's example and trusting that his good work on six days can bring us prosperously through the seventh.

Thursday, March 3rd

Exodus 23:20-33

²⁰"See, I am sending my angel before you to lead you safely to the land I have prepared for you. ²¹Pay attention to him, and obey all of his instructions. Do not rebel against him, for he will not forgive your sins. He is my representative--he bears my name. ²²But if you are careful to obey him, following all my instructions, then I will be an enemy to your enemies, and I will oppose those who oppose you. ²³For my angel will go before you and bring you into the land of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites, and Jebusites, so you may live there. And I will destroy them. ²⁴Do not worship the gods of these other nations or serve them in any way, and never follow their evil example. Instead, you must utterly conquer them and break down their shameful idols.

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²⁵"You must serve only the LORD your God. If you do, I will bless you with food and water, and I will keep you healthy. ²⁶There will be no miscarriages or infertility among your people, and I will give you long, full lives.

²⁷"I will send my terror upon all the people whose lands you invade, and they will panic before you. ²⁸I will send hornets ahead of you to drive out the Hivites, Canaanites, and Hittites. ²⁹But I will not do this all in one year because the land would become a wilderness, and the wild animals would become too many to control. ³⁰I will drive them out a little at a time until your population has increased enough to fill the land. ³¹And I will fix your boundaries from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, and from the southern deserts to the Euphrates River. I will help you defeat the people now living in the land, and you will drive them out ahead of you.

³²"Make no treaties with them and have nothing to do with their gods. ³³Do not even let them live among you! If you do, they will infect you with their sin of idol worship, and that would be disastrous for you."

Points of Interest:

- In covenant terms, God is itemizing the benefits he is willing to give the people if they enter an exclusive agreement with him. The benefits include an angelic guide, fighting against their enemies, provision of food and water, protection against, healthy births, long lives, and lots of land. Basically, God is promising them that he will provide abundantly for all of their basic needs if they will trust him. A major part of trusting him is refusing to cut any side deals with other gods or with the people of the land.
- In hero's journey terms, God is foreshadowing for them the 'test, allies, and enemies' stage of their journey to the promised land. Their allies are the angel and God himself. Their enemies are the other peoples and their gods. Their only real test is to listen to listen to their allies rather than their enemies.
- 'I am sending my angel'—apparently, the same angel who has guided and protected them so far is being lent to them on a longer term basis.
- 'Pay attention to him, and obey all of his instructions'—recently, God has been quite concerned to promote his lieutenants in front of the people. In 19:9, God explains to Moses that one of the reasons for his big fireworks show is to prove beyond a doubt that Moses has his confidence. Here, he very clearly gives the angel his own authority over the people. It seems that God is trying to protect against the substitute teacher effect; he wants to insure that Moses and the angel have the ability to control the classroom, as it were. God wants the people to know that Moses and the angel are trustworthy guides, and also that refusing to listen to them will lead to trouble.
- 'never follow their evil example'—like any parent would be, God is concerned about the effect of peer pressure on his people. He is aware that there will be things about the idol-worship of the Canaanites and the other tribes which will be extremely enticing to the Israelites, and he warns them ahead of time to stay out of circumstances which will be too tempting for them.
- 'Instead, you must utterly conquer them'—of course, a parent's answer to her child's temptation to hang with the wrong crowd isn't usually, 'Utterly conquer them.' As I've mentioned previously, God's command to overcome the Canaanites et al. probably comes out of a long history of stubborn unfaithfulness on the part of the Canaanites. It's also true that the Israelites and the Canaanites are in an all-or-nothing situation that is not usually the case in youth peer groups; one or the other of these groups of people is going to control this land. God wants to make sure that it is the Israelites.
- 'the land would become a wilderness'—God intends to give them a fully settled, cultivated land, not some disorderly wilderness. He wants to give them a home in move-in condition.
- 'I will help you defeat the people now living in the land'—the land and the people in this passage are real people and a real land, but they're also, I believe, meant to be a metaphor for our lives. The land represents our lives, and the Canaanites represent spiritual enemies and negative spiritual forces who have camped out in parts of our lives and hold them against us. God wants to kick those enemies out and give us our own lives, to live abundantly and freely.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* God shows here just how delighted he is to provide for his people. He wants to give his people a big home, fully equipped with all of the bells and whistles. He wants them to have a long, full, and

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prosperous life. He wants them to be safe from their enemies. Ask God to give you that sort of life. If you feel as if God has not provided, ask him why. If God has given you any instructions for how to obtain such a good life, make sure to pay attention. Ask God to help you have the trust and discipline to listen to him.

- *For your six:* God's plan is to give your six the power to defeat the spiritual enemies who have camped out in their lives, but, just like with the Israelites and the land, he will only give them what they have the capacity to keep. Have patience with your six and with God as God slowly hands them abundant life piece by piece. Resist the temptation to try to 'fix' your six or to try to force them to address areas of their lives they aren't yet ready to face. Ask God for discernment about appropriate next steps for them, and ask God to drive the enemies out of that 'land.'
- *For our church:* God's hope for the Israelites is that they will be an example to the rest of the world of the greatness of a life lived in relationship with him. But he knows that it is equally possible that his people will completely accommodate to the culture of the people around them, thus robbing them of anything distinct to say. Pray that God would give us the boldness and the power to live a life different from the standards set by the culture around us. Pray that we would be distinct in the right ways, ways that will show the goodness of a life lived with God.

Friday, March 4th

Exodus 24

¹Then the LORD instructed Moses: "Come up here to me, and bring along Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of Israel's leaders. All of them must worship at a distance. ²You alone, Moses, are allowed to come near to the LORD. The others must not come too close. And remember, none of the other people are allowed to climb on the mountain at all."

³When Moses had announced to the people all the teachings and regulations the LORD had given him, they answered in unison, "We will do everything the LORD has told us to do."

⁴Then Moses carefully wrote down all the LORD's instructions. Early the next morning he built an altar at the foot of the mountain. He also set up twelve pillars around the altar, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵Then he sent some of the young men to sacrifice young bulls as burnt offerings and peace offerings to the LORD. ⁶Moses took half the blood from these animals and drew it off into basins. The other half he splashed against the altar.

⁷Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They all responded again, "We will do everything the LORD has commanded. We will obey."

⁸Then Moses sprinkled the blood from the basins over the people and said, "This blood confirms the covenant the LORD has made with you in giving you these laws."

⁹Then Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the leaders of Israel went up the mountain. ¹⁰There they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there seemed to be a pavement of brilliant sapphire, as clear as the heavens. ¹¹And though Israel's leaders saw God, he did not destroy them. In fact, they shared a meal together in God's presence!

¹²And the LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain. Stay there while I give you the tablets of stone that I have inscribed with my instructions and commands. Then you will teach the people from them." ¹³So Moses and his assistant Joshua climbed up the mountain of God.

¹⁴Moses told the other leaders, "Stay here and wait for us until we come back. If there are any problems while I am gone, consult with Aaron and Hur, who are here with you."

¹⁵Then Moses went up the mountain, and the cloud covered it. ¹⁶And the glorious presence of the LORD rested upon Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days. On the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from the cloud. ¹⁷The Israelites at the foot of the mountain saw an awesome sight. The awesome glory of the LORD on the mountaintop looked like a devouring fire. ¹⁸Then Moses disappeared into the cloud as he climbed higher up the mountain. He stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

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Points of Interest:

- 'We will do everything the LORD has told us to do'—the people agree to the contract with God.
- 'Moses carefully wrote down all the LORD's instructions'—not a bad idea. It's well known that it's easier to remember and enforce a written contract than a handshake agreement. If you don't have it written down, the details can start to get a little fuzzy with time. Also, if you're doing something you've never done before, it's often helpful to have written instructions to follow.
- 'He also set up twelve pillars around the altar'—the symbolism is clear. God will dwell in the midst of the twelve tribes of Israel.
- 'This blood confirms the covenant'—it was usual for an animal to be sacrificed to conclude the making of a covenant (*Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, part 1, p.326). The two parties would eat the sacrificed animal together, thus sealing the deal.
- 'Under his feet there seemed to be a pavement of brilliant sapphire'—I wonder if they noticed the floor in such detail because they found themselves looking down, in awe of the presence of God.
- 'In fact, they shared a meal together in God's presence!'—in Wednesday's passage, the people ask Moses not to have God speak to them anymore; they're afraid that if they come into God's presence, he will kill them. Here they find out what really happens when they meet God: he feeds them dinner. God hospitably welcomes them into his awesome presence.
- 'the tablets of stone that I have inscribed with my instructions and commands'—this may be the same set of instructions Moses has just written down, but written by God's own hand—which would, in fact, be pretty cool. But most likely it is more detailed instructions that follow from the Ten Commandments; these more detailed instructions are found in chapters 25 through 32 of Exodus (and possibly in the entire book of Leviticus as well).
- 'Moses disappeared into the cloud'—Moses departs on another short hero's journey. He is leaving the ordinary world of the camp and going to the special world of the mountain, to bring back to the people the tablets on which God has written his instructions.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Israel's leaders had the incredible privilege of seeing God and actually eating a meal with him—they got to hang out with God. In Revelation, the last book of the Bible, Jesus indicates that he is really very eager to do the same with us: 'Here I stand at the door and knock. If you hear me calling and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal as friends' (Revelation 3: 20). Spend a moment today taking Jesus up on his offer: invite him into your day; spend some time with him; and enjoy his presence.
- *For your six:* When God's glory rested on the mountain, the Israelites got a special glimpse of just how awesome God is. Ask God to give your six a similar peek at God's grandeur.
- *For our church:* Moses stayed with God on the mountain for 40 days and nights, seeing his glory and receiving more guidance from him. Pray for the remainder of our 40 Days of Faith, that God's presence would rest on our church like he rested on the mountain, allowing us to see more of him, to enjoy his presence, and to receive the guidance from him that we need.

Saturday, March 5th

Exodus 32: 1-14

¹When Moses failed to come back down the mountain right away, the people went to Aaron. "Look," they said, "make us some gods who can lead us. This man Moses, who brought us here from Egypt, has disappeared. We don't know what has happened to him."

²So Aaron said, "Tell your wives and sons and daughters to take off their gold earrings, and then bring them to me."

³All the people obeyed Aaron and brought him their gold earrings. ⁴Then Aaron took the gold, melted it down, and molded and tooled it into the shape of a calf. The people exclaimed, "O Israel, these are the gods who brought you out of Egypt!"

⁵When Aaron saw how excited the people were about it, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD!"

⁶So the people got up early the next morning to sacrifice burnt offerings and peace offerings. After this, they celebrated with feasting and drinking, and indulged themselves in pagan revelry.

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⁷Then the LORD told Moses, "Quick! Go down the mountain! The people you brought from Egypt have defiled themselves. ⁸They have already turned from the way I commanded them to live. They have made an idol shaped like a calf, and they have worshiped and sacrificed to it. They are saying, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt.' "

⁹Then the LORD said, "I have seen how stubborn and rebellious these people are. ¹⁰Now leave me alone so my anger can blaze against them and destroy them all. Then I will make you, Moses, into a great nation instead of them."

¹¹But Moses pleaded with the LORD his God not to do it. "O LORD!" he exclaimed. "Why are you so angry with your own people whom you brought from the land of Egypt with such great power and mighty acts? ¹²The Egyptians will say, 'God tricked them into coming to the mountains so he could kill them and wipe them from the face of the earth.' Turn away from your fierce anger. Change your mind about this terrible disaster you are planning against your people! ¹³Remember your covenant with your servants-- Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You swore by your own self, 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven. Yes, I will give them all of this land that I have promised to your descendants, and they will possess it forever.' "

¹⁴So the LORD withdrew his threat and didn't bring against his people the disaster he had threatened.

Points of Interest:

- 'When Moses failed to come back down'—as was mentioned yesterday, Moses has been up on the mountain with God for 40 days, receiving more detailed instructions from him on how to live a life that takes full advantage of his blessings.
- 'the people went to Aaron'—Moses had instructed them to go to Aaron if they needed any guidance while he was gone. Aaron doesn't lead them exactly in the direction Moses would have expected. In fact, rather than leading the people according to the covenant that they all just heard and agreed to, he allows them to lead him away from it.
- 'make us some gods'—it's only been 40 days since they were in awe at the vision of God they had received, and as far as we know the cloud of God is still lingering on the mountain, but somehow the people have grown tired of worshipping him. They would rather follow an idol than this very real, awesome God. It's easy for us to wonder what they were thinking, since worshipping actual idols is somewhat rare in our society, but the impulses that drive idolatry are very much still present today. Basically, they got tired of waiting for God; so they decided to make their own gods for more immediate gratification and for the security of knowing that their gods would be where they wanted them, when they wanted them. Then they said to these golden objects, 'Lead us.' It's tempting for us to do the same thing. When following God feels scary, uncertain, or unpalatable, we turn to something else that's safer, more immediate, and easier to control, and we ask that thing to lead us. It could be money, TV, food, education, or any number of other quick fixes that we turn to.
- 'this man Moses'—not so long ago, they asked Moses to be their leader, passing along to them the words of God. Now, they are pretending that they don't know him.
- 'We don't know what has happened to him'—it's possible that they are worried he has died or abandoned them, but this sounds a little suspicious. They all saw him climb into the cloud. Interestingly, as I mentioned in our discussion of Passover, the hero's quest always involves the real or apparent death of the hero at the climax of the story. Of course, this is a dark moment in the story, when all seems like it may be lost. Well, we certainly have a dark moment here, and it's connected to some speculation about the death of the hero. Perhaps the Israelite plan to make idols is their way of coping with the apparent failure of Moses' quest. Moses was supposed to receive the law, and come back down to lead them to the promised land. Since Moses is not coming back, they look for some other way to move forward.
- 'their gold earrings'—these earrings are part of the treasure that the Egyptians gave them to convince them to leave Egypt. They take the gift God sent them out of Egypt with, and they make an idol of it instead.
- 'these are the gods who brought you out of Egypt'—40 days after they promised to follow all of God's instructions, they break commandments number one and two, worshipping other gods and making idols. A case can be made that Aaron also takes the LORD's name in vain by using it to declare a

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religious festival for the idols. If only Aaron made the idol on the Sabbath, he would have gone four for four in breaking the commandments having to do with God.

- 'there will be a festival to the LORD'—perhaps Aaron is trying to do some PR spin here. Clearly they are worshipping an idol here, but he wants to clean it up a little by calling it a festival to the LORD.
- 'Quick! Go down the mountain!'—as we might have guessed, Moses is not dead or missing. As we will find out in our next passage, he has indeed succeeded in getting the instructions from God he went up to the mountain to find. This is the moment in the story when the chase scene comes: will the hero be able to return to the people with the special equipment he has gained before it is too late? That's a real question here. Even the LORD says to Moses, 'Hurry!'
- 'Then I will make you, Moses, into a great nation instead of them'—God makes the astounding suggestion that he and Moses do a 'do over.' Like crumpling up a sketch that doesn't look like you had envisioned, or pressing 'start' on a video game, God wants to start from scratch in building a people who will follow him. He seems to be wondering if these people are just too far off from what they need to be: starting over might be easier, or even the only way.
- 'The Egyptians will say'—Moses reminds God that the world is watching what is happening here. The LORD's aim was to prove to the Egyptians and to the rest of the world that he was a God both willing and able to save his people. His reputation is on the line. If he destroys the Israelites, he will make exactly the wrong statement as to what kind of God he is. Even though the Israelites probably deserve punishment—and perhaps even destruction would not be unjust—God's faithfulness to his own nature requires that he hold back.
- 'You swore by your own self'—Moses also reminds God of his promises. The people of Israel may have already broken their promises to God, but that does not mean that God should abandon his promises to them, or to their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is God's chance to show just how trustworthy his words are: even this monumental failure on the part of the Israelites should not get in the way of God fulfilling his promises.
- 'So the LORD withdrew his threat'—Moses' prayers and arguments apparently change God's mind. Moses is so trusted by God and knows God's character, plans, and words so well that he can speak almost at a peer level with God in this prayer, and persuade God to change his course of action.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Ask the Holy Spirit to increase your boldness and power in prayer. May we all become people who pray like Moses, in full knowledge of God's character and purposes boldly asking God to do what will most display his power and goodness.
- *For your six:* Pray that your six would have the patience to wait for God to come through for them. Pray that they would have the strength to resist the temptation to turn to cheap substitutes and quick solutions to meet their deepest needs.
- *For our church:* The people take the gifts God gave them, and they twist them into something to worship instead of God. God has given us as a church many wonderful things: huge dreams, good ideas for ministry, great programs, a wonderful new building, and much more. Pray that God would protect us from ever turning from a dependence on him to a dependence on those things.

Sunday, March 6th Exodus 32: 15-35

¹⁵Then Moses turned and went down the mountain. He held in his hands the two stone tablets inscribed with the terms of the covenant. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. ¹⁶These stone tablets were God's work; the words on them were written by God himself.

¹⁷When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting below them, he exclaimed to Moses, "It sounds as if there is a war in the camp!"

¹⁸But Moses replied, "No, it's neither a cry of victory nor a cry of defeat. It is the sound of a celebration."

¹⁹When they came near the camp, Moses saw the calf and the dancing. In terrible anger, he threw the stone tablets to the ground, smashing them at the foot of the mountain. ²⁰He took the calf they had made

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and melted it in the fire. And when the metal had cooled, he ground it into powder and mixed it with water. Then he made the people drink it.

²¹After that, he turned to Aaron. "What did the people do to you?" he demanded. "How did they ever make you bring such terrible sin upon them?"

²²"Don't get upset, sir," Aaron replied. "You yourself know these people and what a wicked bunch they are. ²³They said to me, 'Make us some gods to lead us, for something has happened to this man Moses, who led us out of Egypt.' ²⁴So I told them, 'Bring me your gold earrings.' When they brought them to me, I threw them into the fire--and out came this calf!"

²⁵When Moses saw that Aaron had let the people get completely out of control--and much to the amusement of their enemies-- ²⁶he stood at the entrance to the camp and shouted, "All of you who are on the LORD's side, come over here and join me." And all the Levites came.

²⁷He told them, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Strap on your swords! Go back and forth from one end of the camp to the other, killing even your brothers, friends, and neighbors." ²⁸The Levites obeyed Moses, and about three thousand people died that day.

²⁹Then Moses told the Levites, "Today you have been ordained for the service of the LORD, for you obeyed him even though it meant killing your own sons and brothers. Because of this, he will now give you a great blessing."

³⁰The next day Moses said to the people, "You have committed a terrible sin, but I will return to the LORD on the mountain. Perhaps I will be able to obtain forgiveness for you."

³¹So Moses returned to the LORD and said, "Alas, these people have committed a terrible sin. They have made gods of gold for themselves. ³²But now, please forgive their sin--and if not, then blot me out of the record you are keeping."

³³The LORD replied to Moses, "I will blot out whoever has sinned against me. ³⁴Now go, lead the people to the place I told you about. Look! My angel will lead the way before you! But when I call the people to account, I will certainly punish them for their sins."

³⁵And the LORD sent a great plague upon the people because they had worshiped the calf Aaron had made.

Points of Interest:

- 'These stone tablets were God's work'—what a heartbreaking picture! God has given Moses this very special gift for his people, something he's written with his own hands, like a hand-made card or a hand-written love letter. While Moses is in the midst of delivering it, the people do what would hurt God the most: they run off after another god. Moses' destruction of the tablets is a statement that he no longer has anyone to deliver them to.
- 'It sounds as if there is a war'—the party is so wild and chaotic that it sounds to Joshua (who is perhaps a bit naïve) as if there is a battle going on.
- 'In terrible anger'—it was God who displayed terrible anger in yesterday's passage. Here it is Moses. Perhaps Moses is now seeing for himself just how bad the situation is. Now that he sees it for himself, he can understand why God is so angry. This anger also shows what a perfect intermediary Moses is between God and the people. When Moses is with God, he takes the part of the people, calling for mercy from God for them; when he is with the people, he represents God, showing God's anger and disappointment at their betrayal.
- 'What did the people do to you?'—Moses can't understand how Aaron could do such a thing. Aaron has led them so badly that, either mockingly or in earnest, he asks Aaron if he led them into this sin in order to avenge himself for something they did to him. Aaron's failure is so vast that it is impossible for him to see it as an accident—he must have done this to them on purpose for some reason.
- 'Don't get upset'—with me, that is. Aaron shifts blame from himself to the people. He even goes to improbably lengths to make his actions seem accidental. He says, 'I threw them into the fire—and out came this calf,' when in reality he had carefully shaped it into a calf (see yesterday's passage). 'And all the Levites came'—that's Moses' (and Aaron's) tribe. It can't quite be that *all* the Levites came to Moses, because Moses instructs them to kill even their brothers, who would of course also be Levites. So, perhaps it means that as a whole the Levites came to Moses, or the majority of the people who came to him were Levites.

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- ‘your brothers, friends, and neighbors’—while this translation says, ‘*even* your brothers, friends, and neighbors,’ other translations leave out the ‘even’ part. Perhaps Moses is asking the Levites to kill any of the Levites who have been involved in worshipping the golden calf. This would purify the tribe of Levi, which is supposed to become the tribe that will lead the rest of Israel in worship of the LORD. Many of things that God and Moses talked about during the 40 days on the mountain were God’s plan for the Levites and for Aaron’s family in particular.
- ‘three thousand people died that day’—this is tragic. It seems like what is happening here is crowd control. This festival has become an uncontrollable riot, and it takes desperate measures to bring back some semblance of order. In other words, the Levites are taking on the role of riot police.
- ‘if not, then blot me out of the record you are keeping’—God had suggested that he get rid of the people and start over with Moses; Moses offers that God punish him in order to save the people. It’s an offer God doesn’t accept.
- ‘I will certainly punish them for their sins’—God takes the people back, and restores his plans to lead them to the promised land, but there will still be consequences to this action.

Taking it home:

- *For you:* Aaron just doesn’t want to get into trouble—with the people, with Moses, or with God. His neurotic desire to avoid trouble actually brings down a world of trouble on everyone involved. When have you made staying out of conflict or trouble your highest goal? What have been the results? Ask God to forgive you for the times you’ve brought trouble down on others in an effort to escape it yourself. Pray that God would give you the courage to face your own mistakes and to speak boldly against plans that will certainly bring down trouble on others.
- *For your six:* In this passage, we see the Levites display a zeal for God (albeit in very intense, tragic, emergency circumstances). Pray that God would give your six opportunities (definitely less intense and tragic opportunities than this one) to step out and choose to stand on God’s side. Ask God to give them the faith and boldness to do so.
- *For our church:* During the past two passages, we’ve seen the Israelites behave at their worst. Ironically, we’ve also seen Moses’ love for and devotion to them grow to new levels. Pray that God would give us such a fierce love for Boston and Bostonians—a love that only intensifies in light of Boston’s faults and weaknesses.