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Exodus 32:1-14 – *Feeling the Wait: Distorting Reality*

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Exodus 32:1-14

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.”

² Aaron answered them, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.” ³ So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”

⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord.” ⁶ So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.

⁷ Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. ⁸ They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, ‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’

⁹ “I have seen these people,” the Lord said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰ Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.”

¹¹ But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. “Lord,” he said, “why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³ Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.’” ¹⁴ Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

The Word of the Lord. (**Thanks be to God**)

This past summer, Kristi went out with some friends during the week...

And I stayed at home with the girls.

I was tired, so I went into bed, intending to read until she got home.

9:30PM came and went...

“No worries, she must be having a good time.”

10:00PM...no word from her...so I started clock watching.

10:30PM and I still hadn't heard anything.

I sent her a text to see if she was okay...

No response.

I tried calling her 15 minutes later...

No answer.

And then my mind started to “catastrophize.”

Never heard of catastrophize?

It's when you imagine the worst possible outcome...irrationally...

And then you play it out in your head.

Kristi wasn't responding...

Of course, something awful must have happened to her:

“Maybe she was headed home and got into an accident...” said my mind.

And then the anxiety sets in:

“How will I cope?”

“How am I going to raise these girls on my own?”

“It's going to be heart-breaking them not knowing how much their mom loved them.”

“Do I bury Kristi in Canada or in the US...”

“What state would she want to be laid to rest?”

All because she came home a little later than she normally does.

I was feeling the wait, and started distorting reality.

Something similar is going on in our passage today:

The Israelites are feeling the wait and distorting reality.

Moses, their leader, has been gone 40 days.

The Lord called Moses up to the mountain to meet with him—

God was giving Moses some instructions for the people—

But it's been longer than the Israelites expected.

“A week, maybe two *at most*...” they're thinking...

“But we're almost at a month and a half...”

“And still no sign of him!”

They begin to catastrophize:

“Surely his food supply ran out...”

“A man can't go *that* long without food;”

“Maybe he lost his mind and wandered off;”

“Maybe he was eaten by a wild animal;”

“Maybe the devouring fire of the Lord turned him into a pile of ash.”

They don't know what happened to Moses...

All they know is that he's been gone 40 days.

They're feeling the wait...

And they jump to the conclusion that he's not coming back.

And for them this is a BIG deal.

The Israelites are on a long journey.

They are no longer slaves in Egypt...

But they don't have a place to call their own.

They are headed to a land promised to them by God...

But God has been rather elusive. (Portier-Young)

Since they were freed from Egypt, they've been guided by:

A pillar of cloud by day...

God's presence is in the cloud...

But a cloud doesn't let you see through it clearly.

A pillar of fire by night...

But fire doesn't let you get too close to it without being burned.

Strange food keeps appearing on the ground in the form of manna and quail...

All of these things and yet they haven't seen God...

What they have though is God's servant, Moses.

So when Moses leaves for 40 days...

The people *feel the wait*...

And they begin to distort reality:

“As for this fellow Moses *who brought us up out of Egypt...*” (32:1)

Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!

Who brought them up out of Egypt?

Was it Moses?

Let's have a look:

“Say to the Israelites: ‘I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm...⁷ I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.’” (6:6-7)

“This is what you are to say...to the people of Israel: ⁴‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. (19:4)

Even in the most central part of the covenant at Sinai...

When the Lord gave them the 10 Commandments, it starts off like this:

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt...” (20:2)

In the anxiety of their waiting the Israelites get it wrong.

It's as if Israel removes this crucial piece of information from their memory...

That it was *God* who saved them...

That *God* has been with them all along.

They distort reality:

“Moses is gone...and we’re doomed!”

So they pressure Aaron to, “Make for us gods who will lead us!”

“God’s we can actually see and know that they are there...”

“God’s we don’t have to wait on.”

“Here! This young bull! These are the gods that brought us out of Egypt.”

Such a sad distortion of God’s reality for his people.

We do the same thing.

In the anxiety of waiting, we distort reality.

Maybe we haven’t heard from our spouse or significant other in a while...

And we start catastrophizing:

“What if they’re hurt?”

“What if they’re somewhere they’re not supposed to be...”

“Doing something they’re not supposed to be doing...”

“With someone they shouldn’t be with?”

“What if they’re cheating on me?”

And then we start operating as if this were true.

We get angry and start ending the relationship in our head.

Or maybe we’ve been waiting to hear back from our boss or doctor about something...

It’s been days...or even weeks.

It seems like they’re ignoring us so we jump to conclusions:

“Something must be wrong!”

“Is my boss mad at me?”

“Am I about to get laid off?”

“Is my doctor afraid to tell me something?”

“Am I going to die?”

There are a lot of things that happen in this broken world:

People *do* get sick;
 Marriages and relationships *do* end;
 Sometimes we *never* find that spouse we've been hoping for;
 Or maybe we *won't* be able to have children;
 We *do* lose our jobs;
 We *do* suffer in life situations we don't like.

When we feel the wait—

When we're in a time of waiting, longing for things to get better—

Sometimes we *do* distort reality—

And like the Israelites—

Often this has to do with God...

We begin to question his faithfulness:

“God must have left;”

“God must not love me;”

“God must not be powerful enough to do anything about my situation;”

“Or maybe he just doesn't care.”

But this is God we're talking about.

Our faithful God.

God promises the Israelites his continued presence.

Even after they get Aaron to make a young bull for them—

This idol they bow down and make sacrifices to—

Even after this gross apostasy/distortion...

God is faithful.

Was God mad?

You better believe it!

He tells Moses,

“Go down, because YOUR people, whom YOU brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt.”

God goes right along with the language the people are using...

The language that comes out of their distorted reality.

These are usually GOD'S people...

The ones HE saved from slavery.

Now the Lord's anger is so great that he threatens to completely destroy them...

To no longer consider them his people.

But he leaves the door open for intercession...

He allows himself to be persuaded. (Childs)

"Leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them." (32:10)

If God wanted to destroy them...he could have.

Instead he invites Moses to intercede on behalf of the people...

And what Moses does is appeal to God's faithfulness:

"Lord, you promised that these were your people." (32:11)

"You made a promise to bring them to the land and to increase their descendants."

"You are faithful."

God does relent.

Because God is faithful to his promises.

Even after the people—in their waiting—turn from God...

He renews his promise to go with them:

"My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." (Exo 33:14)

"As you journey through the wilderness—"

"Unsure of the dangers that lie ahead—"

"I will go with you."

"You might not see me in the cloud;"

"You might not see me in the fire;"

"You won't see me in the manna;"

"But..."

"You are still my people..."

“And I am still your God.”

“When the road gets long and difficult...”

“I promise that I’ll be right there.”

This is the reality that they are to live out of...

The promise of God’s continued presence...

Because God is faithful.

Today we live in the same promise...

But our reality looks different.

There was a distance between God and his people back then:

You couldn’t see his face in the fire or in the cloud;

Only a small number of Israel’s leaders could come *a little way* up the mountain;

And *only* Moses was allowed to go all the way up to meet with the Lord;

And even Moses, when he asked to see God’s face...

Was only permitted to see God’s back...

Just a glimpse of his glory (33:22).

There *was* a distance that existed between God and his people back then...

But it no longer exists for God’s people today.

Today, God is present with us in Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ—God the Son—lived among us.

He was born of the virgin Mary, becoming human like us.

People could see God;

People could smell God;

People could hear God;

People could touch God!

God himself was a man.

Then he did what Moses did:

Jesus interceded for the people.

He made it so that God and his people would be right again.

Jesus gave up his life so this could happen.

Now, here we are 2,000 years later...

And we are still feeling the wait.

But this is the reality *we* live out of:

That Christ has died, Christ is risen, and *Christ will come again*.

In Christ, we know that God is faithful.

When the weight seems to be unbearable:

When our loved one's get sick;

When we read of wars and disasters around the world;

When we hear about humans causing other humans to suffer;

When we experience suffering ourselves—

In our marriages and relationships;

In our families;

In our school;

And in our jobs...

When we feel life's brokenness as we wait—

We live out of the reality that God has already come.

He's already lived on this earth as one of us.

He has done everything necessary to make things right...

His presence is here with us now in the Holy Spirit...

And now he's working out his plan to renew everything.

This is our reality:

That Christ has come...

Christ has died...

Christ is risen...

Christ is here with us now in the Holy Spirit...

And Christ will come again.

We know that God is faithful...

And makes good on his promises.

We know that as we wait, he strengthens us...

Assuring us of his love and of his presence.

Let this be our hope as we wait this Advent season.

Amen.