

Sermon for Sunday, October 15, 2023

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

“Practicing Faith Amid Turmoil”

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Beloved People of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

When I was a kid, one of my favorite books was *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. A movie version of this came out about 10 years ago, it's also lovely.

In our story today, I think it's safe to say that Moses is having a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. Everyone around him is behaving badly, even God apparently. The people that God and Moses have been leading out of Egypt and through the wilderness seem to have lost their minds. They're dancing around a golden calf that Moses' brother Aaron has made them. They're dancing, partying and saying to a golden statue, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” Which means they are breaking rule #1 of the ten commandments that God has just given them: “You shall have no other gods ... you shall not make for yourself an idol.” But with those words still ringing in their ears, the people ask Aaron to make a god for them.

God sees this all unfold and lets loose. Moses experiences God, at first acting like a petulant teenager, “Let me alone so that my wrath may burn hot.” Then when God tells Moses, “Your people, whom you rescued, have acted perversely,” it sounds like one angry parent saying to the other, *You'll never believe what **your** son did.* I imagine Moses' head is spinning, that there's a huge pit in his stomach. Everything is out of control. Everyone is flying off the handle, behaving in shocking, and yet also understandable ways.

The people are anxious and afraid. They feel vulnerable in the wilderness. Moses has been up on the mountain talking to God for a long time, and now he's been delayed even further. *What is he doing, does he have food up there? Is he still alive?* They start to panic. And when we're panicked and afraid, we don't make good decisions. Gripped by fear, our brains don't function fully; it isn't easy to regulate emotions. We react impulsively, make snap decisions, try to do something, anything, to help us feel less anxious. All that seems to be at play for the people in the wilderness and for Aaron who gives in to peer pressure and makes an idol.

God's reaction is even more shocking and yet it, too, is understandable. God is in real relationship with the people and cares deeply about them. God is not some unmoved mover who stands at a distance from humanity, separated from the pain and pathos of our lives. What we do matters to God, it impacts God. So, when the people turn away from relationship, God grieves.

Where does all this leave Moses? His life's work has been to lead these people on God's behalf. Now God is erupting with anger at them, threatening to destroy Israel and start a new nation with Moses. I imagine Moses feels hopeless seeing all this fear and pain swirling around him and not knowing how to help - the way many of us feel watching events in Israel and Gaza. I imagine

he can empathize with all sides in this conflict between God, Aaron, and the people, and doesn't want to have to choose sides. It seems Moses is facing the perfect storm of faith crisis, family feud, vocational discernment, and national political tensions.

What is he to do? In the face of God's anger, Moses pleads with God on behalf of the people. As he does, Moses responds to God in very faithful ways and helps the situation. His response shows us a helpful way to be in times of turmoil. Moses stands with the people and calls on God to remember that they are God's people, not Moses' flock: *They are your people, you brought them out of the land of Egypt.* Moses recounts God's good and mighty deeds and asks God to consider what the Egyptians will think if God destroys the Israelites. Moses wants the world to know that God is good.

Then Moses pleads with God, "Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people." *Remember your promises to these people!* Moses clings to God's promises even when nothing makes sense. He claims these promises and boldly prays that God will honor them. When Moses is faced with an overwhelming, multi-layered crisis, he roots himself in practices of faith: He stands with God's people and advocates for the defenseless; he recounts God's mighty deeds to show God's goodness; he clings to God's promises and prays for God to honor them.

When nothing makes sense, Moses *practices faith.* And soon he and the Israelites have a powerful experience of the heart of God. They experience God to be gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. We read, "The Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people." And this is the way they experience God from this time forward. It's how they continue to describe God throughout the Old Testament: gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Moses' response to God helps us to see where and how we can stand when we find ourselves confused and shaken as turmoil and chaos swirl around, as we witness people behaving terribly everywhere. When we don't know where to stand, when nothing makes sense, we can stand where Moses did and practice faith.

We can advocate for all of God's people who are fearful, anxious, and afraid.
We can do that in the Israel-Hamas war. There are [resources on the ELCA website](#).
We can confess what God has done to help ourselves and others trust.
We can cling to promises God has made to us all.

When you don't know where to stand, what to believe, or how to think, remember that in baptism, in Holy Communion, in hearing God's word, and gathering as Christ's body, you are planted and rooted deeply in faith. You are forgiven and set free to practice faith for the sake of the world.

You can stand in hope and trust, you can practice faith - even on terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days.

Let's join in a moment of silent prayer and reflection.

Amen