

“Learning from the Lesser-Known, Older Brother”

(A Dramatic Sermon)

Exodus 32:1–14

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I’ll bet you didn’t expect to be hearing from me today, the other brother, though I am the older brother. Moses is the guy everyone gushes about, even the psalmist in your call to worship today – the people would have perished if Moses — God’s chosen one — had not intervened. God’s chosen *one*? I thought we both went before Pharaoh? I thought I was called in to help because Moses was a stutterer. Can you imagine that — a stuttering prophet? I was the first-born; I was a Levite, a priest; I had all the attributes needed for leadership, including a strong voice... but Moses, Moses... was called, and I was just a helper.

He did endure a great deal — I will give him that. And he got the people where they needed to go, though they often didn’t deserve to get there. So, I am fine with him receiving his due credit. I just don’t like being forgotten or ridiculed. Do you? One of the wisest thinkers of your time, Elie Wiesel, has said recently that I get too much good press in Jewish tradition, the Midrashim. I don’t know about that. But in scripture itself, and in your tradition, I get put on the back page of section E, right beside the drug store ads. Or I play a “starring” role in a story like you have read today in which I am the goat.

But turning to that story, which is why I am here, there are some misconceptions I need to address. I am not going to deny all responsibility. I am not that cowardly. I am not going to deflect or pivot on your most pressing questions. I’m not running for office! The truth is, it would be a disservice to you if I were to play any of these games, not just because it would hide the truth about me, but because it would hide the truth about you. You can identify with my actions here, whether you admit it or not. That’s the value of this story, but we’ll get to that. For now, let me just say that while I messed up absolutely —

there it is, I confess — the story is a bit more complicated than you think.

You know the basic plotline. Moses is up the mountain talking to God for a long time. The people become restless and fearful. I end up making an image of a calf for them to find comfort in. They not only worship it but break out into a wild orgy of celebration — that’s what the phrase “rose up to revel” really means. And God gets mad and nearly destroys us all. How could I have been so stupid?

Well... let’s start at the beginning. Moses had been gone a long time. You know that he was with God, he was okay and he was coming back, but we didn’t know that at the time. The people became anxious and their anxiety was understandable. I was beginning to get anxious. But they didn’t come to me saying, “We’re afraid, Aaron, could you console us in some way? Say a prayer, sing us a song, calm us.” Your translation says, “The people gathered around Aaron,” but the best sense of the Hebrew here is, “The people gathered *against* Aaron.” The word means, “To assemble for conflict or rebellion.”

So, I faced an angry mob, not a group of teary-eyed handwringers, and they demanded that I make an idol for them and provide leadership in Moses’ absence. So, I did. Did it feel right? No. But I needed to do something, and let me explain what that something was. Again, your translation says that when the image of the calf was cast, the people said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” This would have been blasphemous, but the Hebrew word they used was *Elohim*, which is basically a plural form, but is also the way we referred to the one true God — *Yahweh, Elohim*. “This is your God who brought you out of Egypt,” is what they said.

But, of course, they were referring to the golden calf, as a symbol of God, which made the calf an idol... so, I was still in the wrong. But it wasn’t quite as bad as you think. Did a calf represent God? Well, is Jesus really a lamb? I was trying to help. The people were so anxious and angry. I didn’t just wake up one day and say, “Hey, what can I do to thumb my nose at the Holy One?”

That Holy One did get angry, as you know, at the people, and at me, even tried to deny responsibility for us, calling us Moses’ people.

“What’s wrong with the people?” God said to Moses, “*Your* people?” It was like one parent blaming the problematic behavior of a child on the other parent. Look at what *your* daughter did! And if you believe the story, God wanted to destroy us all and start all over again, just like God did after the flood — though God promised never to do that again, if I remember the story correctly — but Moses talked God down. Moses was the voice of calm, not God. Moses, the chosen *one*...

I’m not sure what to do with that part of the story. I mean, I am speaking now not just as an older brother — a slightly jealous, older brother — but as a priest, a theologian. Did God really lose God’s cool, and did Moses really calm God down? I don’t know. I wasn’t allowed up the mountain...

I guess the main point is that God did not destroy us. God extended grace to us, again. We were not fully restored to “chosen people” status in that moment, but we were not destroyed. We would not immediately enter the Promised Land, but we would get there eventually. God would continue to extend grace. And perhaps we could finally realize who really delivered us from bondage and cared for us along the way — God. Moses and I helped, but God delivered us.

But what does my story have to offer you, aside from a lesson in ancient history and a reflection of your own family systems, sibling rivalry, etc.? One message has to do with how you might address the idolatry in your life, and the first obvious strategy is to deny its existence or at least offer explanations and excuses. I began that way. I wanted to explain myself. This is one of the big ten — right? You wouldn’t dream of breaking any of these rules... except for that one about coveting... and that business of bearing false witness against your neighbor, in a heated election year. But you wouldn’t bow down and worship something as silly as a golden calf.

Well, if only it were that easy... Worship is not just about bowing down or what we do in a temple or sanctuary. It’s about what or whom we honor with the whole of our lives, what or who comes first in all things, including every day, practical matters. God is to come first for us, you know that, and you want to believe that God does, but does God come before your career, your possessions, your wealth? The answer

lies not just in what you say with your lips but in what shapes the way you spend your time and money, the way you vote even and why.

But it's not just that worship is about everyday things, not just what we do in sacred space; the object of our worship, whatever or whomever it is, will not seem silly to us. On a rare occasion, we may bow down before obviously unworthy things. But far more often we simply elevate to the status of ultimate some necessary and good things — like our careers and resources, like our love of family and country. Patriotism, especially in a nation like yours, is a wonderful thing. You should be grateful for your freedom and love your land. But the love of God comes before all other loves, even the love of country.

You can make an idol of your career or wealth, your family or nation, even the basic traditions of faith or the yearning to know more about God. Sacred traditions like your Hanging of the Greens and Toy Joy are created to connect you with God, and I trust that they do. But it is possible to lose sight of the ultimate purpose of all that you do and make the practice itself the purpose.

How do you know when this is happening? When you can't even consider the possibility of changing any aspect of a tradition, which would create a problem this year when everything has to be adjusted. And when it comes to wanting to know more about God, that is a holy desire, as long you understand that you will never know it all. The search for knowledge is holy. The quest for certainty is not. Faith is not about certainty. It's about mystery. It's about trust, not guarantees.

But to frame the question in my terms, when you experience anxiety and unrest, like our people did when Moses did not come back, where do you turn for comfort — to God or to something tangible you can see with your own eyes? This is not a hypothetical question. You are living in an anxious time now. You are experiencing a pandemic that already has lasted longer than Moses was away. You don't know for sure that it will ever end and you certainly don't know when. How do you deal with the anxiety of this time? Where do you turn for help?

You might ask the same questions about the racial issues of your time and the political divisions. When will they be resolved and where do you turn for help until they are?

You can pretend that you have never been tempted to put your trust anywhere other than in God. You can try to deny that you have ever practiced idolatry in any of these ways. And maybe you are the first human beings ever to pull that off, but I doubt it. We are all tempted to find assurance in something other than God, sometimes just our ideas about God. Especially in times of uncertainty we are tempted to forget who has brought us this far and thus is worthy of our loyalty and trust. Rather than denying reality, we are far better off acknowledging our struggle and facing it, confessing our struggles to God and ourselves, because if we can do that, God will extend grace, and in the context of grace, we will have an opportunity to grow.

That is how the story ends, after all, and maybe that's the most important message. We know what God expects of us — complete loyalty and trust. We want to prove faithful to this calling — not because we must to remain in good standing with God but because God has been so good to us, God deserves our devotion. But we all fall short, we all begin to question and search for assurance elsewhere, we all make idols. Yet it doesn't end here, with failure and punishment; we don't end here; we end with grace given to us by God.

Did Moses really play a role in this? I don't know. One person named Jesus plays a role in the story of grace for your faith, but that is different, I think, and often misunderstood. I confess that I struggle with the very idea of my little brother outdoing God in any way... What I know is that we created cause for disappointment in the heart of God, I created cause for disappointment in the heart of God, and that knowledge alone provides all the motivation I need to change and grow. But knowing that God decided not to give us what we deserved, out of pure love, well, that adds another layer of motivation.

Thanks for hearing me out and sorry for all the self-pity. We all have a role to play in this world. I know that. So should you. Good luck with your journey through the current wilderness. You will make it through. You can trust God to guide you to your promised land. But most of all, you can count on God's grace always. Don't ever forget that!