



# PRONE TO WANDER

*SERIES: THE TABERNACLE: GOD'S PRESENCE WITH HIS PEOPLE*

Exodus 32:1-14

Ninth Message

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Maybe some of you have made New Year's resolutions. You've embarked on the year with renewed resolve to be different, to be better, to try harder, to achieve some goal. But how long do such resolutions last? If you have made any, are they still intact at the end of this first week? What happens when our resolve hits up against the hard realities of life? Israel was full of resolve when it entered into covenant with God at Mt Sinai. Today we'll see what happens to that resolve as days stretch into weeks.

We return to our series on the tabernacle. The Lord has delivered the Israelites from harsh slavery under Pharaoh in Egypt, has brought them to Mount Sinai to meet with himself, and has entered into covenant with them: "I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you." He has given them his commandments, to which the people confidently replied, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient" (24:7). The people have pledged their allegiance, promising to be loyal. The Lord then called Moses to ascend Mt Sinai to receive the stone tablets inscribed by him with the Ten Commandments. Here, atop the mountain, Moses has been in the Lord's Presence, receiving instructions for how God would put his Presence among the people: "Let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst" (25:8). Our attention now turns to the foot of the mountain where the people are waiting for Moses to return.

## The Golden Calf (32:1-6)

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD." And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play. (Exod 32:1-6 ESV)

Moses on top of the mountain has been enjoying God's Presence, but at the bottom of the mountain the people have been getting increasingly anxious. It is Absence not Presence that they are feeling: absence of God and absence of Moses. Finally they reach breaking point and gather against Aaron, a hostile crowd making demands on Moses's brother. "As for this Moses...we do not know what has become of him." But "this Moses" has been doing what they asked

him to do, protecting them from God's Presence. So terrified were they by God's appearance atop Mt Sinai that they had asked Moses to act as mediator, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die" (20:19). And so Moses has engaged in shuttle diplomacy, up and down the mountain again and again, mediating between God atop Mt Sinai and the people encamped at the bottom.

Moses had not told the people how long he would be gone on this particular mission; he had told the leaders to simply wait. But waiting is hard. When we wait we have to live by faith not by sight. Waiting is a time of testing, and so it should not surprise us that Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights (24:18), forty being the number associated with testing. In his absence Israel was being tested in its resolve to obey the Lord, to live by faith in his word, and to maintain loyalty and allegiance.

Waiting is hard. The people didn't know how long they had to wait, but they knew they had to wait. If only they had waited just a little longer. The Lord has finished speaking with Moses, and has given him the two stone tablets. Moses is just about to come down. But they couldn't wait! They jumped the gun. They felt they had to do something. A little episode from King Saul's life illustrates how hard it is to wait. Samuel had told Saul to go down to Gilgal and wait for him there seven days until he came to offer sacrifices (1 Sam 10:8). But as the deadline approached Samuel hadn't shown up, the Philistines had come up to fight, and the Israelites had begun to scatter. Saul saw this, he was afraid and he panicked. He could wait no longer; he needed to do something. He offered the sacrifices himself, and just as he finished Samuel arrived (1 Sam 13:8-10). This test revealed Saul's heart: he lived by sight not by faith, by what he saw not by what he had heard. He was therefore unsuitable to be Israel's king.

Waiting brings out our fears. The Israelites had plenty of fears. They were convinced that God and Moses had brought them out of Egypt only to kill them in the wilderness. They were constantly worried about food and drink. They romanticized the past, remembering "the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full" (16:3). Later, driven by a strong craving, they would "remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic" (Num 11:5). Their revisionist history would get so bad that eventually they would blame Moses, "you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey" (Num 16:13). They wanted immediate gratification; they wanted food and drink. They wanted their comfort.

And they wanted a leader, someone to go before them, someone to lead them out of this uncomfortable place of waiting. Forget God to whom they had pledged their allegiance just forty days earlier. Forget Moses whom they had asked to stand between them and God. They wanted a leader they could see—here, right now!

“Up, make us gods who shall go before us,” they demanded of Aaron. “Make us gods.” What an oxymoron: how can mere mortals make gods? But alas we do. In a quip attributed to many different people, “In the beginning God made man in his own image, and man has been returning the compliment ever since.” When we make gods, we make them like us, and we inevitably become like them; after all, they are in our image.

Aaron should have put an immediate stop to this. He has been closely associated with Moses. He was Moses’s spokesman before Pharaoh. He was present for the fellowship meal with God after the covenant was sealed. Moses had left him in charge when he went up the mountain. But instead of rebuking the people, Aaron capitulated to them. He offered no resistance at all. Far from it; he was only too happy to oblige. And so he asked for their gold earrings. This gold had been given them by the Egyptians in a move orchestrated by God (12:35-36), and the Lord intended that it be used for the tabernacle (25:3). But Aaron melted it down and fashioned a golden calf. The people joyfully exclaimed, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”

When Aaron saw that the golden calf went over so well with the people, he built an altar in front of it. But there already was an altar at the foot of the mountain, on which Moses had sealed the covenant and at which the people had pledged their allegiance. Building an alternate altar in front of the golden calf was an implicit rejection of all that had happened at that first altar; it was the construction of an alternative narrative.

Under Aaron’s leadership, or lack thereof, the people have broken allegiance with God. They have denied the opening premise of the Ten Commandments, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” It is because of this that they belong to God! But they reject this identity. They have broken the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.” They have broken the second commandment, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (20:2-4). Their resolve to live a life of faithful obedience has collapsed in just forty days. But this is worse than just breaking a resolution. This is treason, a breach of allegiance.

But Aaron was untroubled; he was on a roll. Next he proclaimed “a feast to the LORD” for the morrow. The people rose early the next morning; they were eager, excited, rejuvenated. They were caught up in the excitement of what was happening. They sacrificed offerings at this treasonous altar, again rejecting the sacrifices that had been offered at the legitimate altar; the blood of those sacrifices was the blood of the covenant, binding God and his people together.

Then the people partied in front of the golden calf. They “sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.” Later verses describe singing and dancing. The people are happy. Life has returned. They’ve forgotten all their fears and worries. They have full stomachs and happy partying. Their carnal desires have been gratified. They are living in the realm of sight, and that’s all that matters to them. But they have been far too easily pleased. C. S. Lewis writes,

our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.<sup>1</sup>

How different this meal in the presence of the golden calf was from the meal that followed the covenant, when God invited Moses, Aaron and seventy elders to come up to him: “they beheld God, and ate and drank” (24:11). That fellowship meal with God was about much more than satisfying physical appetites; they were spiritually nourished by the beatific vision, by gazing upon God. He was their food and drink.

The Israelites have reduced God. Aaron may claim that this is still a feast to the Lord, but the Lord would not have seen it that way. He would have seen it as entirely a human creation. On top of Mt Sinai the Lord has been giving Moses detailed instructions on how his Presence will be among his people, and how he is to be worshiped. But Aaron and the people have reduced God’s presence and God’s worship to their own imagination. They have trivialized him to a golden calf and a party, things of their own creation.

The people have reduced God by fitting him into their plans rather than seeing how they fit into God’s plans. Driven by sight not by faith, they want a god who will meet their need for immediate gratification.

I’ve lived in countries where people do prostrate themselves before man-made statues in man-made temples. The Western world is too enlightened, too rational, too sophisticated to do that. But we are still very good at creating idols. We too easily give our devotion to that which has not created us. But more subtly, we align God to our programs rather than aligning ourselves to God’s program. We fit God into our plan rather than seeing how we fit into God’s plan. This is what happens when our thinking begins with self not with God. We co-opt God whenever we make him God of our cause, whether that cause be our comfort, our success, our nation, or *our* whatever. This is to trivialize and reduce God. He is up to things far grander than *my* comfort, *my* success, *my* nation. He doesn’t promise me life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. He invites me into his love, to be part of his people over whom he spreads his glory. He invites us all to participate in Christ Jesus as full members of his family.

The Israelites have found life, meaning and hope in a golden calf and a party, but it is all ill-founded. What is God’s reaction to this blatant act of treason, this rejection of what he is doing? We return to the top of the mountain to find out.

### God’s Displeasure (32:7-10)

**And the LORD said to Moses, “Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” And the LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you.” (32:7-10)**

Enough, says God. The people have disowned him and so he disowns them, saying to Moses, “*your* people, whom *you* brought up out of the land of Egypt.” They’re no longer *my* people. The people have corrupted themselves; they have gone to ruin, no longer able to serve the purposes that God intended for them. He considers them ruined beyond the point of repair. God said a similar thing of all humanity at the time of the Flood: “God saw the earth, and behold it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth”

(Gen 6:12). Both the earth and humanity had gone to ruin. God responded by completing the ruin, destroying both earth and humanity. He wiped the earth clean with the Flood, and started over again with Noah. He intends to do the same thing to Israel. He has seen “this people” and it is a stiff-necked people. This stiff-necked nature is grounds for the most extreme judgment. “Let me alone,” he says to Moses, so I can finish them off. Don’t act as mediator anymore; don’t try to intercede; don’t speak up for Israel.

Moses alone continues to find favor in God’s sight: God proposes to begin again with him, making him into a great nation. This is exactly what God had promised Abraham. Israel was supposed to be the fulfillment of that promise. But Israel has gone to ruin, beyond recovery. So God will wipe the slate clean and start over with Moses, just as he had started over with Noah and Abraham.

Imagine how Moses might receive this. The people have caused him nothing but trouble, grumbling and murmuring the whole time. They’ve made incessant demands on him. They’ve questioned his leadership and his motives. They’ve shown no gratitude. Wouldn’t it be nice to be rid of them! God is promising a greatly enhanced role for himself as the progenitor of a new humanity. How that must appeal to one’s ego! How does Moses reply?

### Moses’s Intercession (32:11-14)

**But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth?’ Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, ‘I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.’” And the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people. (32:11-14)**

No, Moses will not leave God alone. And he does not take him up on his invitation to be a new Abraham. Moses intercedes for the Israelites, the first of four intercessions we’ll see him make in chapters 32–34. He “implored” the Lord *his* God. “Implored” is an interesting word, meaning to soften by caressing the face. This is a daring way of conceiving of the relationship between the Lord and Moses. Such is the intimacy that Moses enjoys in God’s Presence, that he is pictured as reaching up and stroking God’s face to calm him down.

Moses marshals a powerful set of arguments as to why God should back down from his anger, why he should reverse course. Firstly, he refuses to accept God’s rejection of his people: they’re “*your* people, whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt.” Secondly, the redemption of Israel from Egypt was a display of God’s great power and mighty hand. How can he deny that? Thirdly, what about God’s reputation among the nations? The Egyptians will say that God brought the Israelites out only to kill them, which is of course what the Israelites are repeatedly afraid of. Israel’s god would thus be seen to be a capricious, unreliable god, of whom one should be afraid—just like most people are afraid of their man-conceived gods. But the Lord had told Moses that one of the purposes of the plagues was that the Egyptians would know him to be the Lord. Indeed, a major theme of the book of Exodus is that God makes himself known. If

the Lord were to destroy his people, what picture of him would the nations have? Fourthly, Moses reminds God of his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Rather than accept God’s offer to be a new Abraham, he reminds God of what he had started to do with Abraham. God had promised him both a nation and a land, and those promises to Abraham are as yet unfulfilled. God should be faithful to what he has already started.

And so Moses makes his daring request: change your mind. Turn from your anger, and change your mind about the great calamity you were going to bring on your people in destroying them. No, Moses does not leave God alone. He continues his role as mediator. He looks both ways. He enjoys intimacy with God; God’s Presence is what is most important to him. He can thus reach up and stroke the face of God. And he looks on Israel with compassion.

I imagine that God is very pleased that Moses would not leave him alone; that Moses did not accept the exalted role offered to him, but instead chose to persevere in the hard work of mediation. The psalmist says that “Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them” (Ps 106:23). And so God changed his mind. He relented from the disaster he had said he would bring. He would not destroy Israel.

The Bible makes no attempt to whitewash Israel: it is a stiff-necked people that grumbles its way through the entire wilderness journey. It does not whitewash Aaron, though many commentators have tried to do so, offering excuses for his behavior in this chapter; but he is beyond excuse. The Lord would continue to persevere with this stiff-necked people, and would allow Aaron to fill the role of high priest. There is hope for us here. If God would work with this sort of Israel, perhaps he’ll work with us in all our weaknesses and failings.

Israel owed its continued existence to a mediator who stood in the breach between God and humanity. It would not be the last time that Moses stood in the breach. But ultimately Moses and the law he mediated were unable to stand permanently in the breach. The law was unable to soften the stiff-neckedness of the people, and Moses himself was a human, like the other Israelites, and he, too, succumbed to sin and disobedience.

But God has provided another mediator, one birthed from Israel but greater than Moses. He is one who is both fully God and fully human. He has a far greater intimacy with God than had even Moses. Since before the beginning the Son has been in the very bosom of the Father, in his closest embrace. The Father loves the Son, and the Son returns that love to the Father. The Father and the Son are One. But the Son also became incarnate; he entered into the human story, into our story, becoming one of us, yet without sin. He became like us so that we might become like him. God, by the incarnation of his Son, gathers into One things earthly and things heavenly, things past and things future. Having completed his earthly mission the Son, as Christ Jesus, has returned to the Father, now as a human fully in God’s presence. He is therefore able to represent us. He fully represents the Father and he fully represents us humans. He is the bridge-builder between heaven and earth. He stands in the breach between heaven and earth, between a holy God and sinful humanity. And so, we have confidence to draw near to God; we have confidence that we are welcome in his presence. And God pours out his Spirit on us to transform our stiff-necked nature, so that we become supple.

Israel broke its allegiance to the Lord after just forty days. Their resolve to be obedient to him petered out in the face of the harsh

realities of life at the foot of the mountain. It's important that we gather regularly to reaffirm our allegiance. This accounts for the design of today's service. We started by reciting together the *Te Deum*, "We praise you, O God," seeing ourselves as part of a great company: the apostles, the prophets, the martyrs, the church throughout the world, all gathered together to praise God and acclaim him as the Lord. As is stated in the worship folder each week, "We gather in worship to remind ourselves who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing in his Spirit in us." We remind ourselves of what story we're in. Israel lost sight of that story. It created its own story, one of its own making, one that centered around a golden calf and a party of immediate gratification. They forgot God's story: he had redeemed them and was taking them from the land of slavery to the land of promise. We have gathered today to affirm our allegiance to the triune God. God has appointed a mediator to stand between us and himself. As a result, he looks on us with a friendly face. It is a great privilege to gather as his people, to pledge our allegiance, and to know that he is for us.

*The LORD bless you and keep you;  
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;  
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.  
(Num 6:24-26)*

1. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory" (1941), in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), 26.

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