

“Learned and Received and Heard and Seen”
Exodus 32:1-14; Philippians 4:1-9

Exodus 32:1-14

¹When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, 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.”

²Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” ³So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron.

⁴He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”

⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD.”

⁶They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

⁷The LORD said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a 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!’

⁹The LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.”

¹¹But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with 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 consume them from the face of the earth’?”

“Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’”

¹⁴And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Philippians 4:1-9

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and

received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

The Sermon

“I am in my late 60s,” the letter begins, “a former journalist turned college professor. I stand closer to the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder than the top, where I probably belong. I cannot stop brooding about my parents.

“Although he was a good provider, my father was psychologically abusive. When I earned a 93 on a difficult chemistry test at a difficult school, he replied, ‘What happened to the other seven points?’ And that was probably the nicest thing he ever said to me.

“I was not only a good student but also a good ballplayer, yet my father kept telling me I would never amount to much.

“My mother did nothing to counter his talk. And both of them were physiologically abusive, with incessant smoking.”ⁱ

The letter to the counselor ends with one question: “How [can I] stop the brooding?”

It’s easy to look back at the Israelites and shake our heads at their faithlessness. But these people were in a wilderness.

They were without a home, but still responsible for their families: there’s no functioning macroeconomy, and no secure sense of their future.

They were living as transients, and had been following a guy who, yeah, may have led their escape from Egypt,

but when having enough food for you and your family is now a day to day proposition, wherein you have to trust that every single person in your nation is going to have the guts, and the moral courage, and the superhuman restraint to resist the urge to make it a competition and take for themselves the limited amount of food available—manna—the only leadership question that matters is: what have you done for me lately?

What has to happen, what does it take, in order to cause people to look for a new idol, a new god, a new leader in whom to invest their ultimate trust?

Seth Godin has written about two related phenomena, “FOMO” and “KIMO.”

“FOMO,” he says, “is [the] fear of missing out.’ It can completely undermine a life well lived,” he says, “because it drives people to follow a crowd out of fear.”

“KIMO” on the other hand “is in the past tense. ‘Knowing I missed out.’”ⁱⁱ

Over and over the people remember, first romanticizing and then mythologizing their memories, that back in Egypt, where they were enslaved and oppressed and treated with harsh cruelty for the crime of having been born into the race they were, they still had enough to eat.

Every time they accuse Moses of having brought them out of Egypt just to kill them in the desert with hunger and thirst, there’s a past tense at work. “You *brought* us out here.” They *left* the place where there was food on the table. And every time their stomachs growl or they look at their 538th bowl of plain manna, it’s KIMO. I know I missed out on staying behind in Egypt, where this plate of manna wouldn’t even qualify as food.

But then something else happens. Moses has been gone for a while, up on the mountain being instructed by God. And there's no cell phone coverage out there; nobody knows what's happened to him or even if he's still alive.

He is the Lewis & Clark expedition, gone off to someplace where there is literally no way to know his status. He is Michael Collins, doing a low orbit around the far side of the moon, becoming for an extended moment the most isolated living human since the creation of the world. And they fear he is Amelia Earhart, having flown off, out of radio range, into the unknown.

But their fear is not for Moses. It's for themselves as individuals, and themselves as a people. He went to talk with God. Everybody knows no mortal does that and lives.

“When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for Moses, the one who brought us out of Egypt, we have no idea what has become of him.”

What has to happen, what does it take, in order to cause people to look for a new god in whom to invest their ultimate trust?

Maybe an answer to that lies in the answer to a more immediate question: how can I stop the brooding?

I'm hungry; I'm worried about my family and my security;

I ran out of patience so long ago I can't remember having had it to lose;

I can't stop thinking about, can't stop brooding about, the slights and the cruelties I have absorbed at the hands of people who were supposed to help me grow into this world; the bad decisions, the failures on my part and on other people's part; the fear-based and dim-witted hatreds that

people are spouting from every available medium, and the moronic way those flames are fanned by people who could be tamping them out.

And I keep compounding all my accumulated feelings of Knowing I Missed Out with the Fear of Missing Out on even more.

So first I invest my treasure in some fantasy that I hope can protect and lead me, turning over not just my gold but my family's too;

and then I invest myself, in following it and worshiping it—when I already have a God who has already rescued and delivered me.

When J.B. Phillips wrote *Your God Is Too Small* in the 1950s, he described a number of different ways people imagine who or what God is, all of which will, guaranteed, eventually prove inadequate: resident policeman, parental hangover, managing director, perennial grievance, projected image, God-in-a-box.

But I need a God who is bigger than this moment. Because I do not feel bigger than this moment.

I need the God who went the cross to give up everything, and in doing so, redeemed the whole universe.

I need the God who, in the words of Terry Eagleton, “is not [some] mega-manufacturer,” but is “what sustains all things in being by [divine] love, and would still be this even if the world had no beginning,” who “is the reason why there is something rather than nothing,” who “is not a celestial engineer at work on a superbly rational design that will impress his research grant body..., but an artist...who made the world with no functional end in view but simply for the love and delight of it,” who “made it—as gift, superfluity, and gratuitous gesture—out of nothing, rather than out of [some] grim necessity.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I need the living God who is big enough that I can go about living my small life and doing my small acts of kindness and generosity;

the God who is vast enough to bind together all of our small acts, quiet acts, neighborhood acts of goodness and giving and forgiving and welcoming, and speaking up for people and standing by people, and refusing to retreat into silence when the voices of hatred and division and intimidation and fear are pounding at the door;

the living and loving God who, unlike any lifeless, spiritless god, decides to stand and wait with open arms for my return, even when I had lost my nerve and tried to turn to invented gods.

“Your people,” God said to Moses, “have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them.”

Oswald Chambers, the Scottish minister whose devotional book *My Utmost for His Highest* was published a few years after his death in 1917, said, “We are not made for the mountains, for sunrises, or for the other beautiful attractions in life—those are simply intended to be moments of inspiration. We are made for the valley and the ordinary things of life, and that is where we have to prove our stamina and strength.”^{iv}

And I would submit that it is also where we have to learn, and face, the fact that our own stamina and strength can never be entirely adequate. They can be great, epic, inspirational—we seem to set the bar way low for ourselves and doubt the strength of people who are made in the image of God, which we all are. But *our* strength and stamina are also finite.

We are made in the image of God. But we are not God. Only God is big enough to be God.

And God is big enough. Bigger than my life, and yours, and all life.
Bigger than eternity. Bigger than this moment.

Sarah Bessey recently wrote, “Set out, pilgrim. Set out into the freedom and the wandering. Find your people. God is much bigger, wilder, more generous, and more wonderful than you imagined.”^v

Which I suppose is similar to the words of Madeleine L’Engle, when she said, “Faith is what makes life bearable, with all its tragedies and ambiguities and sudden, startling joys.”

We don’t need a new god. We can’t even comprehend the real God.

But we know God, and God has already shown us what it means to be fully alive, fully human, in the person of Jesus, who on the last night of his earthly life reminded his followers: “You know the way to where I am going” (John 14:4).

We know how to do this.

A lot of people are frazzled right now, and feel like we’re at the end of our rope. But God is infinitely bigger than this moment, and we haven’t forgotten the way God commanded.

“Beloved,” wrote Paul to the church at Philippi,
“whatever is true,
whatever is honorable,
whatever is just,
whatever is pure,
whatever is pleasing,
whatever is commendable,
if there is any excellence
and if there is anything worthy of praise,
think about these things.

“Keep on doing the things
that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me,
and the God of peace will be with you.”

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church
Montreat, NC
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ⁱ Hara Estroff Marano, “An Endless Grievance,” *Psychology Today* (June 2020), 17

ⁱⁱ Seth Godin, “FOMO and KIMO,” *Seth’s Blog*, July 16, 2020

ⁱⁱⁱ Terry Eagleton. *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (The Terry Lectures Series) (Kindle Locations 93-103). Kindle Edition.

^{iv} Oswald Chambers, “The Place of Exaltation (October 1)” in *Chambers, My Utmost for His Highest*, Updated Edition. Discovery House. Kindle Edition location 5018.

^v Sarah Bessey, *Out of Sorts: Making Peace with an Evolving Faith* (Howard Books, 2015)