

Left Behind

Exodus 24:12-18

The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.” Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Have you ever had something suddenly go from a one-day project to a six-week project?

Last fall, we decided to turn an unused bedroom in our house into an office. But first, we had to move the stuff that we were storing there to make room for the desk. When we moved some boxes, we were concerned to find they had water damage. So we pulled off a piece of the wall paneling. Behind that, it was obvious there was serious water damage to the wall. So we cut into the dry wall to discover the source of the water. But before we could even get to that, we discovered an asbestos-related insulation. This should have been at most, if we were lazy, a two-week project. But it is now four months later, and we still have a giant hole where our shower should be.

That’s kind of what I think it might have been like for the Israelites in this story. God tells Moses to gather 70 of the leaders among the people, come to the foot of the mountain, and worship there. Once they have worshiped, God calls Moses to come up the mountain alone, to receive the commandments. Once he goes up the mountain, Moses is there for 40 days. That’s almost six weeks.

When Moses heads up the mountain, and no one knows how long he’ll be gone. But something tells me they expected him back at most within a week. You know, if it were me, after Moses had exceeded even our wildest expectations, I would want to step in. I mean, at some

point, someone had to wonder if Moses was hurt or lost. I think I would have organized a search party to go after our beloved leader. But that doesn't happen. The 70 leaders do, however, get tired of waiting. Because after we read through pages and pages of the specific directions God was giving Moses, we learn what was going on meanwhile.

Aaron, who had been with the 70 leaders, is no longer in the foothills. He is now back at the camp with all the Israelites. So at least some of those leaders decided to return home. Maybe they ran out of supplies. Maybe they were tired of waiting. Maybe they were worried about what was happening back at camp without any leadership. We don't know why they returned, but we do know what happened when they did. Let me read what happens in Exodus 32:

When the people realized that Moses was taking forever in coming down off the mountain, they rallied around Aaron and said, "Do something. Make gods for us who will lead us. That Moses, the man who got us out of Egypt - who knows what's happened to him?" So Aaron told them, "Take off the gold rings from the ears of your wives and sons and daughters and bring them to me." They all did it; they removed the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from their hands and cast it in the form of a calf, shaping it with an engraving tool. The people responded with enthusiasm: "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from Egypt!"

The people were tired of waiting. They knew God had summoned Moses, and that Moses was going to see God. They were a little jealous about that; they wanted to see God too. But they were willing to live with hearing a first-hand account from Moses. But now they're not sure if Moses is ever going to come back to tell them about his encounter with God. So the people take it upon themselves to make God visible.

Aaron gathers all their gold jewelry and melts it down. Then he reforms it into the form of a calf. Why a calf? Remember the Israelites only recently left Egypt. One of the powerful worship cults in Egypt worshiped the bull. This was an image the Israelites easily equated with divinity. But they were not actually worshiping some other god. After Aaron has finished making

the calf, he reminds the people that the next day is a feast to Jehovah, the God of the Israelites. They have not reverted to worshipping Baal, or any other god. But they have violated the covenant with God by worshipping an image. By worshipping something less than the full reality of the Almighty God.

The Israelites wanted to experience God fully, just like Moses. But when Moses didn't show up, they gave up on him. Notice they gave up on Moses, but not on God. And why did they give up? Because they weren't willing to wait 40 days. Would you wait 40 days if you knew at the end you would see God? And there's part of the problem. The Israelites had no idea how long they were going to have to wait.

So now, as we enter the season of Lent, we have a huge advantage over the Israelites. We know that Lent is 40 days. We know that in six weeks, Jesus will rise from death. We know that on Easter Sunday, we will see and feel and celebrate the power and presence of our God! And yet, how many of us will be able to wait these 40 days?

The tradition in church history is for people to give something up during Lent. Our catholic brothers and sisters often give up meat. You know why so many people have a pancake supper to celebrate Mardi Gras? Because the ingredients (eggs, sugar, lard) were some of the foods the early church gave up during Lent. It was a way to enjoy them one last time while also clearing out the cupboard. More recently, people have chosen to give up non-food items, like television, or Facebook, or smoking.

Why give something up? Well, when we find ourselves craving that food or activity, we are reminded how much we depend on things of this world, when we should be depending on God. We can stop to ask ourselves, "Do I really want to be hungry for chocolate? Or would I rather hunger to know God more?" That's the purpose of fasting.

And in that way, even though fasting can be difficult, it's actually supposed to make it easier to endure 40 days of waiting. It gives us a way to focus our thoughts. To remind ourselves that this 40-day period is only temporary, but God's love and grace and power are forever. So why is it so darn hard to give something up for Lent?

Well, first of all, we live in a culture that moves at lightning speed. We want everything immediately. Remember when the internet was first available, and everyone had a dial-up connection? Just getting connected took a couple minutes. Now if it takes longer than five seconds to go from one internet site to another, we curse how slow the connection is. There was a time in our history when placing a long-distance call meant giving some information to the operator, then waiting while the operator set up connections. In 1918, the average time to connect a long-distance call was 15 minutes. Today, we can't even wait to get home to make a call; we all carry cell phones so we can make that call the instant we think of it. You want to talk about waiting 40 days? In our rapid-paced society, waiting 40 hours is a stretch.

Another reason we have a difficult time giving up anything for Lent is that we are a culture of gratification, not a culture of self-denial. Burger King tells us you can "have it your way." Nescafe says "it's all about you." L'Oreal reminds you to buy their stuff because "you're worth it." And these slogans are the norm, not exceptions. It's not very often that we hear the message that we should delay our gratification. That we should deny ourselves something we want now in order to afford something bigger and more valuable later. And so, not surprisingly, we're not very good at saying no to something we want, even when something bigger is at stake.

A third reason we have a difficult time giving things up during Lent is because we are creatures of habit. It's hard for us to change the way we act, or even think. Slightly less than half of Americans make New Year's resolutions. Of those, only 8% will achieve their goal. How long

do the other 92% last? Well, half of them give up before the end of January. Even when we have good intentions, even when we stand to benefit, we have a hard time going out of our comfort zones.

All of that is the bad news. Our culture makes it extraordinarily difficult for us to engage in special Lenten practices. But just like your Mom used to tell you, sometimes the best things in life are the things that are hardest to accomplish. Or maybe she said it: anything worth having is worth working for. It turns out, the effort is worth it.

So to help us all make an effort this Lent, to help us all find a spiritual practice we want to explore, to help us make it easier to wait 40 days for the majesty and wonder of Jesus' resurrection, I'm going to start assigning homework. For the next six weeks, I will have a sermon series in which we look at a different spiritual discipline each week. And I'll give you something specific you can try during the week.

One of the disciplines I won't have time to preach on is worship. Simply coming to and engaging in worship is a discipline. So your homework this week is to start Lent off with a bang, by coming to worship on Wednesday night. Ash Wednesday is a special service, and nothing all year is quite like it. I can't promise it will be easy to fit into your schedule. I will promise that the service will be worth your time.

Prayer, fasting, worship, service... they are called spiritual disciplines for a reason. Sometimes we have to dig deep to find the strength and resolve to keep going. But we are reminded in the Psalms that "God is awesome in the sanctuary. The God of Israel gives power and strength to his people." Blessed be God. Amen and amen.