

Groupthink. Being Stubborn. And That Golden Calf.
Exodus | Exodo 32: 1-14, Matthew | Mateo 22: 1-14
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“Groupthink.”

You may have heard that phrase somewhere along the way.

Parents warn teenagers about it.

Watchdogs warn consumers about it.

Advocates warn voters about it.

Leaders warn teams about it.

“Groupthink is a phenomenon that occurs when a group of individuals reaches a consensus without critical reasoning or evaluation of the consequences or alternatives,” I read.

Groupthink plays a role in the spreading of conspiracy theories and in consumerism and frenzy over causes - for better or worse.

It’s a major topic in critical analysis of leadership, social change, and marketing. There are articles about it in Forbes Magazine, and Psychology Today, and the New York Times.

There are many warnings about the importance of avoiding “group think,” and plenty of resources aimed at helping team leaders avoid it.

I guess Aaron just did not have access to such resources.

And this text suggests that the Lord was unhappy with the result. “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them.”

Today we continue in our study of the story of the Exodus of the People Israel from Egypt and into a new way of being. They have been brought out of slavery - out of a life where they were not free to worship the One God or to live and move with any freedom. (This reminds me how very powerful is the claim: it is in God that we live, and move, and have our very being.).

They have already functioned as a Back to Egypt Committee, even in the face of the sure provision of the Lord.

They have been given the 10 best ways to live - instructions that emphasize honoring God and honoring each other, with a clear call to Sabbath uniting these teachings. And they responded by saying “all that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.”

When we tell Bible stories we sometimes kind of mash them together. When we tell the Christmas story, the wise men always show up at the manger even though they were not there in the Luke telling. In Matthew they show up 2 years later. But we kind of smoosh them together in our imaginations and our tellings.

So it is with the giving of the 10 Commandments and Moses' possession of the stones. Here in Exodus, Moses receives the commandments in chapter 20, and then he receives several chapters worth of further instruction about violence, and property, and restitution. About social and religious laws, justice, sabbath, festivals, and conquest. Then he comes down and tells the people and they offer that promise, "all the words that the Lord has spoken we will do." But he does not yet have the stone tablets.

And then Moses and Aaron along with 70 elders go back up the mountain to be with God, and Moses gets called further up, "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 went up the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain - a sure and visible sign of an encounter with the holy. And Moses is there for 6 days - he receives instruction about building the tabernacle, about the ark of the covenant, the lampstand, the table for the bread of presence, the curtain - all of the elements of the tabernacle that will be the way that God draws near to the People Israel as they journey. God is literally, in this story, working with Moses on strategic planning for life in the wilderness. Moses is gone 6 days. 6 days.

I have attended conferences that are that long. Many of you have been on vacations that lasted longer than that.

But before Moses can get back with the tablets and the guidance from God, this Golden Calf movement breaks out.

They have JUST promised "all the words that the Lord has spoken we will do," and to be clear - these words include "you shall not make for yourself and idol."

But "oh me - Moses delayed coming down from the mountain - we should make idols," cry the people.

And Aaron - Aaron did nothing to stay the course. He saw the groupthink of the people and picked up that mantle. Did he have any sense that this was irresponsible, but assess by reading the room that it would be easier to just join the cause? Was he so flexible in his belief that he could be standing on the mountain with Moses one day, and then leading the rally against Moses and the Lord soon after? Was fear easier than hope? Did he fear the power of the people and their groupthink and abdicate his leadership?

“Do you feel lost in the wilderness? Your treasures and your efforts can protect you. Just use your gold to build something. Come and join the effort. This is the only thing that can save you now.”

I wonder if you have heard something like that before? I wonder where you have heard something like that before?

“We are not really sure what is going on here so we better jump into action and make our own plan.”

I have a confession.

I have felt like that many times.

Over the years I have stumbled into situations where I perceive a lack of leadership, or a lack of a plan, and I am ready to rally.

But my work in the last decade has been to talk back to that impulse.

To ask questions. To find out what is already happening. What is known and unknown. For what are we hoping, and what is holding us back? Why are we here? And what might happen if we simply stayed - here - for a while rather than charging towards depleting ourselves in our striving.

Stiff necked. God called the people stiff necked. That means stubborn. The People Israel mistake Moses' holy absence for abandonment, and they build their own thing without him - in defiance of a promise they have made - and God calls this “stubborn.”

The Gospel reading today also has something to do with being stubborn.

It's a weeping and gnashing of teeth parable, so we need to approach it with caution. Some who read parables have the habit of defaulting to comparisons with God - so that one might see this parable about a king and assume we ought to let the king be a stand in for God.

But that isn't the case. All the good commentary agrees. This is not a story about God choosing to throw someone into the pit. Such an interpretation is needlessly careless, and callous.

The stand in in this story is better understood to be the wedding feast - a stand in for the great reunion at the end of time. That begs a lot of questions about how we understand Revelation and the end times - but we can agree to understand that something about the invitation to the wedding feast evokes something about the invitation we each have to the life beyond this one.

There is something about not mistaking holy absence for abandonment.

So many of the invited guests just return to their farms or their work. Some of them turn to violence. And then another round of invitations goes out and one who shows up has simply not bothered to pay attention to the significance of the invitation. I read that in the context of this story, everyone would have known that you must follow the guidelines for what to wear to a wedding feast. There was simply no flexibility in this - it's just about doing what you are supposed

to do. And the one thrown into the pit showed up without acting as if any rules applied to him. Like he simply could not be bothered.

I do find this passage tricky. I would not want one to hear me suggest that what is described in this story as a “wedding garment” is a stand-in for anything about the way we dress or cover our bodies or that it is about earning or losing entrance into heaven simply because one lacks some thing that is required.

I do think it is fair to read this passage as a critique of simply not bothering. Of living as if we can just go about our lives without learning what is required of us and then show up at the feast like - what? I’m here. I’m holding the invitation. I’m holding the Bible. I know Christian words.

And so we see this stiff-neckedness, this stubbornness, this focus on doing things to help us feel secure in this world - building false gods, prioritizing striving over the great feast, and this stubbornness rooted in not even bothering - as an impediment to being changed by the holy.

And that feels true, doesn’t it?

Now this bit about Moses changing God’s mind? That is also complicated. Can you think of other stories that make this claim? Jonah comes to mind for me. There is a lot written about this idea about why stories are told in this way. You and I can explore it together as the idea gets under our skin.

But this I believe: God is good. All the time. And when we get distracted with our fretting, or our building, or our wearing ourselves out with our striving, or when we give up and cannot be bothered with reverence for what is required of us, and when we trade critical reasoning or evaluation of the consequences or alternatives for groupthink - then we risk losing out on feasting.

May our encounters with the holy keep us from being stiff-necked! And may being stiff-necked never keep us from encountering the holy.

So may it be.