

*“When the Cat is Away the Mice Will...”*

Exodus 32:1-14

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This passage of scripture in Exodus contains an example of two things: the deep wisdom found in much of scripture, and the occasional problems found in some parts of scripture. First let's look at the deep wisdom.

The morning of Saturday September 10<sup>th</sup> I was at the studio prepping my paints when my cell phone rang. I looked at the number and recognized it was from Peter, an elder at a church in Sacramento. I was doing a retreat for them the following weekend up at Zephyr Point, a Presbyterian Conference Center overlooking Lake Tahoe. He probably wanted to talk about some last minute details.

“Hello, Peter,” I said, “How are you?”

“How are *you*?” he asked back.

“I'm great. What's up?”

“Do you know where we are?”

What an odd question, I thought to myself. “Um, no...Oh Peter! You're not at Zephyr Point are you?!”

“Yes. Are you coming?”

“I thought the retreat was next weekend.”

It seems we had a miscommunication problem somewhere along the line. They had originally planned the retreat for the 16-18<sup>th</sup> but had changed their minds and forgot to pass that information on to me. I knew it wasn't my fault because I had told them I could not do it on our Homecoming Sunday Weekend.

There was a long pause on the line. “Tim, what are we going to do?”

A half-hour later my cell phone rings again. This time it's Judy, a member of the same church, and a former classmate from the Diploma in the Art of Spiritual Direction program. “Tim, hi, it's Judy. Can I call you back after breakfast? I want to pick your brain about what we might do to make this thing work. We have some musicians here to do music, and I can pull out some of the prayer practices we learned at DASD. But help me put some meat on this skeleton, okay?” “Yes, Judy. I'll be here.”

After I hung up I jotted down some thoughts that came to me. When Judy called 30 minutes later, I said, “This is a perfect opportunity to explore what happens to our faith when the expected doesn't happen, when our well-laid plans Peter-out, when the one who's supposed to be the leader is no where to be found. What happens when the Cat is away?”

Mice supposedly play. But what do humans do?

Our scripture text today highlights the human tendency to seek some sort of security, any kind of security, when the presence of God, or the representation of God's presence, is absent. As God's representative to the Hebrew people, Moses is the voice and face of God, the presence of God. When Moses does not return from the mountain in the expected time, the absence of his voice, face, presence becomes too acute. The people don't know what's happened to him, and they want something to replace him, to fill that gap, that insecurity, that emptiness. It's very much like what often happens at the end of a relationship, and for the same reasons. We fill our emptiness with someone else's arms. It's called a Rebound Relationship. We seek to fill the void by almost anyone who wishes to hold that place for us, to make us feel secure.

Moses had put Aaron in charge while he was gone and Aaron acquiesces to the people's fear and anxiety. "Give me your gold trinkets and we'll fashion a beautiful idol." In our moments of insecurity, we are tempted to fashion a beautiful idol of some sort that plays the role of security, of divinity. I wonder what would have happened if instead Aaron would have invited them to face their fears and insecurity. "Can we wait a little longer? What can we learn about ourselves in the waiting? What would it mean for us if Moses never returned? Could we begin to have the courage to become like Moses ourselves? To listen for God's voice and guidance? To take responsibility for who we are and what we do and who we become?"

The funny thing about who we are as humans is: 1) we need something to make us *secure*, and 2) we need to become free of *false* security. When the unexpected happens, when the security we are used to having is gone, we discover we have a tendency to grasp for something immediate rather than trust in the deeper grace of God. And, when we learn to trust in the deeper grace of God, we find, oddly enough, that we become free from our need for false security. That's the wisdom of this scripture.

Now for the problem.

In this passage, God sees what the people are doing and becomes livid. God is ready to make a great nation of Moses, and wipe out the rest of the Hebrews. Moses then performs an intervention, talking God down from his anger, his intention to annihilate, by reminding God of the promises God has made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and by appealing to God's image: what will the other nations think of you if you do this to your people? The intervention works, but barely. God relents, changes his mind, and does not destroy. But we are left with the feeling that God is always on edge, God's anger and bitterness just below the surface, ready to strike if the people try his patience again.

Is this a true picture of God? For fundamentalists, for literalists, the answer almost has to be yes. But for those of us who understand the Bible as a compilation of human writings, influenced by cultural views of that time, we know that sometimes their picture of God reflects an old picture of God; a tribal God, who was indistinguishable from any other God of that time, who was capricious, narrowly focused on only his people, and always needing to be appeased by his people. Is the God portrayed in this

story with Moses, the same God that Jesus portrays in his parables and actions? For me the answer is no.

In fact this story may actually contain the elements of a new understanding of God that was beginning to come to the forefront. The fact that Moses interceded, and changed God's mind, shows the understanding of God at that time had begun to change: moving from being a tyrant, tribal God, to a God who would be characterized by steadfast love, not just for Israel, but for all people, particularly those who are oppressed.

The adult education class on Sunday mornings, *Sundays at Nine*, is looking at John Spong's book, "The Sins of Scripture." It's a controversial title, one meant to get people talking and it certainly does that. I don't necessarily agree with everything Spong offers, but Spong is on to something. He's saying that within the very thing we as Christians have long called "The Word of God," we will find things that are not the Word of God. This part of our text is one of those things.

I remember as a young adult reaching the point in my life where I admitted that I was selfish. I had admitted that before, emotionally during altar calls at church, and on an intellectual level, because I understood that being a human meant you were selfish at times. It was a part of what it meant to be human. But at some point I came to experience my selfishness as true, true because I could really see it in my thoughts, feelings, and behavior. That was a very humbling and difficult time. Yet surprisingly, letting that truth sink in, actually led to some very positive results. On one level I stopped deceiving myself, thinking I was this really nice and loving Christian young man. I was a nice and loving Christian young man at times, don't get me wrong, but I could see the shadow side of myself. By admitting my selfishness I could begin to see how it played out, could begin to catch it more quickly, could choose to try to be different. I also saw that some of my Christian compassion was actually a way to get praise from others, and so I began to admit when I wasn't so caring. Oddly enough that led me to want to be caring in a real way. What I discovered was this: claiming my selfishness, seeing it clearly, went a long way towards minimizing and curtailing that very selfishness.

A long time ago St. Augustine came up with what he called the rule of love. Every interpretation of any scripture passage, if it did not land on God's great love for us, was not interpreted correctly. St. Augustine was on the right track. At the heart of the Bible, at the heart of the experience of the people who wrote the Bible, is a growing understanding of the incredible grace and love of God, eventually reaching the high-water mark of the teachings and actions of Jesus, and his willingness to suffer death instead of betray that picture of God. But not every scripture passage says that. It may be difficult for us, but necessary I think, to claim that there are parts of the Bible whose understanding of God, and treatment of others because of that understanding of God, is wrong. It's not a true picture of God. Admitting that this is the case can lead us to some positive results. We can actually claim where Christianity has made mistakes, where the bible has lead some of our leaders to make bad choices on the world's stage. And, then, not needing so much to defend ourselves, we can focus our attention on what we believe

are the major pieces of wisdom and insight that the Bible does contain and focus our energies there.

The wisdom of this passage and the problem within this passage seem to have nothing to do with each other. It almost seems like two sermons. But they do connect in one major way. I think the one idol we Christians have most put our security in, has been the Bible itself. By making it perfect, or literally the very word of God in all aspects, we have asked of it what it was never meant to be. Only God can occupy that place. Please don't get me wrong. The bible is full of rich wisdom and spiritual truth. And we need to know it, understand it, glean from it its deep wisdom. But it's human. Claiming that it's human, prevents us from making it an idol and actually helps us explore the deep wisdom in it that helps us now, today, wait on God, listen for God, without anxiously scrambling around to find something that will make us feel secure.

A week or two ago my cell phone rang again. It was Peter again. He called to say their retreat turned out great. And what a good thing it was for them, a church that had been looking for a new pastor for over a year, to spend some time exploring what happens to them when the Cat is away. They found they don't have to be so anxious. They can wait and be patient. They don't want to find another pastor just to feel more secure. They are learning to trust when the unexpected happens, to trust in God. God is with them. May we, too, when the unexpected happens, when the Cat is away, learn to trust more deeply in God. Amen.