

Do you ever get to those points in your life where you feel as though it has all come crashing down? Do you ever get to those points where you feel desperate because you feel as though you have tried to follow what God wants you to do and you get to the place where your life is in somewhat of a crisis? Do you ever feel as though God has abandoned you? The story we are about to read is a story of people feeling abandoned by God and a story of God feeling abandoned by God's people.

We are going to be reading out of the Old Testament book of Exodus. The story of the Exodus is the primary story out of the Old Testament. It is the story which so defines who God is and what God does. I love reading the story of the Exodus because it is so real and so raw. If we are honest the story of the Exodus matches our own stories so closely.

And as we may discover this morning, this story has some very disturbing parts. But again, if we are honest, we know this story in many ways because it is our story. For this is a story of God being present and engaged and a story of one of God's followers having a very deep and challenging conversation with God about God keeping promises. A story of God being reminded to keep promises to God's people.

We may remember that God's people called the Israelites ended up in Egypt after Joseph rescued his family from famine stricken Israel. But after a while the Israelites became a nuisance to the Egyptians. When people in a country need a scapegoat for their problems it is always easiest to go after the foreigners living among them.

Pharaoh, the king of Egypt and the most powerful person in the land, needed to identify a group of people to blame for his own failings as a leader. So like Hitler blaming the Jews in Germany and like many minorities and foreigners have been blamed in the United States, Pharaoh began to persecute these foreigners from Israel and turned them into slaves. Life for the Israelites moved from privileged status to slavery.

So the Israelites cry out to God and the scriptures say that God hears the cries of the Israelites. God specifically speaks to a man named Moses who had been rescued as a baby and was now being approached by God through a burning bush. God speaks through this burning bush to call Moses out to be the one to lead the people out of slavery into a land of milk and honey.

This journey toward freedom is not easy for Moses and it is not easy for the Israelite people. They start on this 40 year journey out of slavery but are pursued by their adversaries. The Egyptian army is sent out to try to destroy the Israelites because Pharaoh hates to admit that he is not the most powerful.

But Pharaoh and his army are shown once again that there is a power greater than any evil in the world. In the story of the Exodus the Egyptian army is trapped in the waters of the Red Sea or Reed Sea and Moses and the Israelites continue on their journey.

But the journey becomes increasingly difficult. So much so that the people start to complain that it was better when they were slaves in Egypt than this wandering in the desert.

They complain about not having food to eat and water to drink. But at the moments when they feel as though they cannot take another step on this meandering journey, God provides for them food to eat and water to drink. God constantly pushes them to make a decision. Do you trust me? Do you really trust me? "Trust me," God says, "because I will always provide."

Along this journey the Israelites come to a time when they need some rules to live by. Any civilized society needs rules to live by. And so Moses is called away from the people and given rules for them to obey. The most famous of these rules are what we call the Ten Commandments.

But those are not the only rules that Moses is given. He is given lots and lots of rules that are specific to that community and that community only. Rules about what they can wear and what they can eat and who they can touch and what is profane and what is not profane.

Moses then tells the people about what the rules are and they all agree to these rules. "Yep, those rules sound good to us. We will follow them," they declare to Moses and to one another. They affirm an oral contract with Moses and with God.

But I guess God watches the People's Court because God seems to decide that the people need something more than an oral contract. Oral contracts can be misunderstood and people can have different memories of oral contracts. God seems to think that they need to put this contract down on written tablets.

So God calls Moses back up the mountain to give Moses the written contract so that there is no misunderstanding. So Moses heads up the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights.

This 40 day period proves to be too much for the rest of the Israelites. While Moses is away during this period, his brother Aaron had been put in charge of settling any disputes. But the people become worried that Moses and God had now abandoned them. So they need something visible.

Aaron could have reassured them at this point to trust God. Aaron could have reassured them that God was in charge. But Aaron did not do that. Aaron responded to their anxiety out of his own fear that they were alone. Aaron tells them to bring him their gold and he melts it all down. He melts it all down into some type of crude calf decoration which the people begin to worship.

When Moses and God see what is going on, both Moses and God are furious. And this is when the story becomes very real and very raw. Moses returns with the tablets with the written laws on them and becomes so mad that he throws them down and breaks them. But God becomes so mad that God proclaims that God is through with this people. God says that he is through with them.

But Moses pleads with God. “Remember, God, you made a promise. You are a God who keeps promises. If you destroy these people then your enemies will proclaim victory because they said you were leading these people out here in order to kill them.”

And at this point, the scriptures tell us that “God changes his mind.” God decides to change his mind after Moses pleads with God to remain faithful.

God does decide to not destroy the Israelites but then God says that he is so angry that he needs a little bit of separation from the Israelites. God says if I continue with these people I would destroy them. But I will send an angel who will take my place.

So when we get to what we are about to read, the Israelites are at a point of extreme crisis. God is so mad with them for their disobedience that God is threatening to desert them. Moses has failed as a leader. Aaron has failed as a leader. Is this the end? Is this the end? Does this story end with a failed experiment?

Here now these words of Scripture from **Exodus 33: 12-23**.

Moses pleads with God for God to become more intimate with him. Moses pleads with God to see who God really is. But God decides that Moses can't see all of God. God decides that Moses can't handle that. But God does decide that Moses can catch a glimpse of God.

A glimpse of God's back or some translate this to mean that Moses catches a glimpse of God's backside. And that is what Moses catches a glimpse of. Moses catches a glimpse of who God is.

Crisis. Chaos. Unraveling events in life. All of these types of experiences can cause us to lose trust in God. But for Moses, crisis and chaos became a way to become closer to God. Crisis and chaos became a time for Moses to really begin to trust God in a very real and authentic way.

Your life may be in a time of great chaos right now. Maybe you see a close friend or a family member whose life is in chaos. Maybe you see something that is important to you in a time of what you think is chaos.

But chaos and confusion can be a time when we are invited to really grow closer to God. Chaos and confusion can be an invitation to really reach out to God and seek to become a stronger follower of God.

Over the previous 7 weeks we have been lifting up 7 spiritual practices to help us to become stronger followers of God. We are going to keep these 7 practices in front of us. They are listed on the front of the bulletin. Worship, prayer, study, fellowship, serving, healthy living, and rest.

We are invited to keep focused on these 7 practices so that whether our life is in chaos or whether life is coasting along pretty well right now, we seek to take part in these 7 practices to grow closer to God to guide us through whatever we are going through in life.

Chaos and confusion is not something to fear. Chaos and confusion can actually be invitations to grow closer to God. AMEN.

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