

Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

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October 12, 2008

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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? ¹²Why 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.

Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23

¹Praise the Lord!

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;

for his steadfast love endures forever.
²Who can utter the mighty doings of the Lord,
or declare all his praise?
³Happy are those who observe justice,
who do righteousness at all times.
⁴Remember me, O Lord, when you show favor to your people;
help me when you deliver them;
⁵that I may see the prosperity of your chosen ones,
that I may rejoice in the gladness of your nation,
that I may glory in your heritage.
⁶Both we and our ancestors have sinned;
we have committed iniquity, have done wickedly.

¹⁹They made a calf at Horeb
and worshiped a cast image.
²⁰They exchanged the glory of God
for the image of an ox that eats grass.
²¹They forgot God, their Savior,
who had done great things in Egypt,
²²wondrous works in the land of Ham,
and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.
²³Therefore he said he would destroy them—
had not Moses, his chosen one,
stood in the breach before him,
to turn away his wrath from destroying them.

Philippians 4:1-9

¹Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown,
stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

²I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³Yes, and I
ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me
in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose
names are in the book of life.

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.

“Standing in the Breach”

(4 stories told in two parts each)

Story One – Part One

Delayed. They thought Moses would be back. They were sure he would be back by now. Come on, what’s the deal? What is taking so long? Where was Moses?

Yes, he had gone up the holy mountain, but by now he should have returned. Shouldn’t he have returned by now? Panic began to set in. What if he did not return? Fear began to set in. How long could they possibly wait? Anger began to set in. How dare Moses be gone so long?

And so it happened. They retreated. They back slid. They reverted back to that which they had known. They cast off the one who had carried them here as they cast for themselves that idol image of a golden calf. Cast from the rings from their noses and earrings from their men they constructed and smelted and cast it. An image of worship not unlike they had experienced in the pagan religions in the land from which they had been delivered.

Story Two – Part One

Broken, broken, broken. It has been the story even this week. Last Sunday the chalice came back to my office cracked and chipped rendering

it unusable. Monday the handle on the top to the butter dish snapped right off. Tuesday my antique Ann of Green Gables plate that hung in my kitchen near the toaster—I knocked it off it's perch—yes, broken. Thursday, edge upon edge of laminate flooring. Friday, the fuser in the copy machine leaks oil.

Of such has been the week ...broken, broken, broken.

What was I to do? There would have been a time when I may have had a fit. I could have had a melt down over the broken items. Instead, the butter dish and the pieces of the Ann of Green Gables plate and the laminate flooring will all be hauled away by the trash folk as they arrive at the curb on Monday morning.

Tis done—broken, broken, broken.

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Story Three – Part One

Moses. Sometimes so strong. Sometimes missing it. Sometimes so wise. Sometimes so sure, and at other times not so sure. But, he was the one. He was the one the Lord had chosen for this task.

And now here with the mess of the idol worship—the mess with going back to what they knew—this whole mess of going back to that which felt the most familiar and yet was the most unhealthy choice the people could make—with that whole mess...it is any wonder?

Is it any wonder that God would not just want to take the whole lot and abandon them there in the wilderness? What better choice? But Moses, God's faithful one, pleads their case. Moses asks God not to hold it against them. And God relents. God keeps from destroying the desert people who have deserted God altogether.

It is the Psalmist in describing the ordeal that says of Moses that he “stood in the breach,” before God on behalf of the people in order to keep God from destroying them.

A breach is a gap or a rift. Moses stood in the breach. Moses stood in the gap. Moses stood in the rift. Moses stood in the breach or bridged the gap between the people and God.

Story Four – Part One

Down, down, and down some more. Economic stimulus package passed. And it is still down, down, and down some more.

She just retired. She was telling me that now is not the time for her to begin drawing down her retirement investments. It is so low, so low that she does not want to draw it down now, and she thinks she will have to return to work.

There is that fear about where this will all go. What will happen next? Can the market continue to close lower, and lower, and lower?

Your 401K, your investments, your stuff. All of it. Around all of it these days there is panic. There are also candidates with promises—clearly none of them really knows what to do. Yet, they all have plenty to say. Meanwhile, fear, panic, and even anger about investments and economics sets in strong and hard.

It’s all about stuff. We have this relationship with stuff. We will give lip service and say things do not matter. But our reactions show otherwise. Stuff, stuff, stuff...we love our stuff, we count our investments.

Story One – Part Two

It is what we do. It is indeed. Not that we cast golden images from our old jewelry. No, but it is what we do. We tend to retreat to that which was formerly part of our living and behaving. Our behavior tends to deteriorate as our mental ability to grapple with uncertainty sets in on us.

And so they made an Egypt like image. At the very moment when God was at work with Moses hammering out the route to the promised land, bringing on the land flowing with milk and honey, ...it was at that very moment that they back slide hammering out a pagan god.

Their trust in the Lord who had already delivered and was continuing to deliver them—there trust in that true God was thin, shallow, feather like. Whoosh and away it goes in the wind like a dry leaf on an autumn day.

Do you see the irony of it—they had been shown a mighty and powerful God over and over again—plagues, sea opened up, manna, quail, water at Rehidim—all of it—but now...out the window.

Instead of trust, they, as the writer of Psalm 106 puts it, “exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass.” “They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass.”

When we revert, ...when we retreat, ...when we go back to those places in our lives where fear, and anger, and panic have the day. Of such is our behavior—we have exchanged the glory of God for that old place in our living where there is not trust, where there is not faith, where love is not held at the center.

Story Two – Part Two

Broken, broken, broken. Yes indeed, chalices and butter dishes...sure, but it really is life that is broken. We are surrounded by brokenness so much so that it is part of our condition.

Just when we think we have things going the way they should be going, ah just then something snaps, and it all falls apart. That's right, we are not talking about Ann of Green Gables plates or planks of laminate flooring anymore. It is life. Just when we think we have the pieces arranged so that the fit is as we need it—then it happens: whether it is job, or relationship, or health, or emotional condition—it happens.

Broken, broken, broken.

And we can either retreat to the old way—anger, fear, panic. So mad that it just broke. So hurt that it just broke. So freaked out that one does not know what is coming next because this just broke. Ahg...what are we to do? We can either retreat to the old way or trust the new way.

The new way—In Philippians 4 it says, *“Stand firm in the Lord...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.”*

When life is broken we can stand firm in our fear, anger, and panic, or we can “Stand firm in the Lord.”

Story Three – Part Two

To stand in the breach – that is our role. It is what Moses did. Moses stood in the breach between God and the golden calf casting wayward people of Israel.

That is our role. To stand in the breach. Too often we make this all about us. And so our faithfulness even becomes a consumer good. It becomes about what I can get out of it and what it does for me.

I invite you—today—stand in the breach. Realize that you are called to be Moses here. That your opportunity is to bridge that gap or that rift in the life of another and connect that other to God.

Stand in the breach. Open your eyes to see more than you and you will discover that there is that someone or ones waiting for you. They are just waiting for you to reach out and pull them over that gap, that rift in the way of discovering who they are called to be.

Do you see—it was only when Moses was standing in the breach that he was able to live fully into his calling of delivering God’s people. Do you see that in your own life? That only as you stand in the breach for someone else—only as you stand up for someone else will you truly live into the fullness of life that God has in store for you.

You grow as you discover that it is not about you—but about you and your relationships and standing in the breach for the other.

I invite you—stand in the breach.

Story Four – Part Two

We love our stuff. We count our investments.

And we question. Will our economy fall? Will our financial markets collapse? Will there be a rift in my retirement income? Will there be a gap in my investments?

Will there be a gap in what I can afford? Will there be a rift in my ability to spend? My ability to save? My ability to count it all up and have

it all add up to the way I want it to add up? Will there be a gap? A rift? A breach?

Will there be a breach?

What about the breach?

Stand in the breach. Stand in the breach. Realize that we worry about stuff---physical stuff—and ultimately, and right now is ultimately, it does not matter much.

Stand in the breach. Consider the lilies of the field is what Jesus told us. That they are clothed so beautifully and they do not toil or spin. Consider the sparrow—God cares for it. Won't God care more for us? Of course.

But when our stuff gets threatened—when the balance is out to lunch---ah fear, anger, panic.

No, stand in the breach. Stand in the breach. Do not retreat to panic, but rely on the trustworthy God.

Stand in the breach. When all of it is broken, “Stand firm in the Lord...and the God of peace will be with you.”