

SERMON CCI Exodus 32: 1-24 Broken Stone, Broken People

Have we ever made a promise and then gone back on our word? Not a simple agreement like “Sure, I’ll bring a dozen cookies,” or “I won’t forget to put out the trash.” But promises that have significant consequences for our lives? Promises that, if we break them, turn our world upside down. Promises that the Bible calls covenants.

A covenant is the kind of promise that a bride and groom make at their wedding with every intention of keeping the promise: I promise to love and honor... for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health and be faithful to him or her as long as we both shall live. But after the excitement of the wedding and honeymoon, in the nitty gritty of real life, that promise can fade. Like the young couple who fell in love and married. They made these very promises to each another, and life was like a fairy tale happy-ever-after-story... for a year. Until she had an affair. It seems she was content to have her husband and a little bit of sex on the side too. But the young husband wasn’t content with that and tore their wedding vows and marriage license into tiny pieces. And they never spoke again except through their attorneys. You see, when a covenant is broken, the pieces lie shattered on the ground.

Today’s scripture reading takes place after Moses had gone to Egypt and had lead God’s people out of slavery. At the time of today’s story, the people of Israel were in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. God had given this promise to the people: **SLIDE**

“If you will obey my voice, and keep my covenant, then you shall be my special treasure among all peoples.... You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Exodus 19: 5

And the people agreed to obey God’s voice and keep the covenant. “We will do it!” they shouted. “We will do everything the Lord has said.” So Moses went up Mt. Sinai to seal the deal. God’s covenant with them was written in stone on that mountain top.

Written in stone is a phrase that indicates something that is secure and long lasting, something intended to be permanent. Which is what God intended the Ten Commandments to be- a covenant promise between himself and his people that would last forever.

SLIDE But Moses was gone on the mountain 40 days... 40 days was a long time. In the Bible, the number 40 is often associated with a time of testing. In Noah's day it rained 40 days and nights. Jonah preached to the city of Nineveh for 40 days. Jesus fasted in the wilderness for 40 days. And here Moses was gone on the mountain 40 days. And back down in the valley, the people of God were failing the test. They began to wonder if Moses had gotten lost, or died on the mountain. Maybe a wild animal got him. Maybe God had left them alone in the wilderness. Who would lead them now?

They asked Aaron, Moses' second in command, to come up with another god to lead them the rest of the way out of the wilderness. These were the same people who earlier had promised God they would do whatever he said if he would be their God. And yet, here they were, ready to toss him aside for another god, any god they could come up with.

This was Aaron's chance to shine as Moses' second in command, to step up and lead, to encourage the people to be patient and faithful to the God they had promised to obey. **SLIDE** Instead, he helped them make a golden calf out of the gold jewelry and household articles they had brought out of Egypt when they left. They shaped the melted gold into the shape of one of the gods of Egypt, the place where they had been slaves for 400 years. And when it was finished, the people said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." This calf they made out of their jewelry brought them up out of Egypt? But now they had a god they could see and touch, and if Moses ever did come back, well, what's wrong with two gods? A little bit of God and a little bit of calf surely can't hurt.

Aaron knew he had a problem on his hands now **CLICK** so he built an altar to God in front of the calf and declared the next day a day to worship the true God. And the people came the next day and burned sacrifices to the God they could not see, and then turned to the golden calf they could see, and began to party. After all, which looks more like god to you?

By the time Moses came down the mountain with the stone tablets God had carved, **SLIDE** the people were eating and drinking and dancing around the calf until they were drunk and indulged in revelry. The word translated as revelry is used to describe fondling someone. I'll leave it to your imagination what kind of orgy they were having around the golden calf. It was certainly not the kind of worship God was looking for. God was furious when he saw what the people were doing and sent Moses down the mountain with the stone tablets. When Moses

saw what was happening, he asked Aaron why he had allowed such a thing. Remember Aaron's answer? "The people gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!" **SLIDE** "It just happened!" In anger, **SLIDE** Moses threw the tablets of God's covenant and they shattered into pieces. The special relationship God had had with his treasured people was broken. Like the young husband whose wife had an affair, God was not content for his people to have a little God and a little calf on the side too. God wanted his people to love him with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength.

What went through the peoples' minds when they saw the stone tablets shatter into pieces? Did they wonder if they could fix this by putting them back together like a puzzle? It wasn't Moses who had shattered the covenant; it was their own selfishness and sin that had broken the promise they had made to God. Could they ever be God's treasured people again? Was God a God of second chances?

It's easy to look back and look down on the Israelites. It's easy to think we would never make an idol. After all, we're modern people; we understand that a block of stone or a statue of melted gold has no life or ability to take care of us or answer prayers. We may believe we would have patiently waited for Moses to return no matter how long it took. That we would have been faithful to God no matter what. But in our more honest moments, we realize that we would not have been so different because we break God's expectations too. Don't we?

SLIDE Think of the laws that were written on those shattered pieces of stone. Have no other gods but me. Show you trust that I'll take care of you by resting once a week rather than working nonstop as though your survival depends only on you. Don't use my name in ways that don't honor me. Don't worship idols as though they are me. Honor your father and mother. Don't lie, steal, covet, murder, or commit adultery. Can we say we always keep these every moment of every day? I can't. Then Jesus came along and made them a matter of the heart, not just actions we take: it's not just enough to not kill people, he said, "Love your enemies, and pray for those who mistreat you." It's not enough to just not to commit the act of adultery, Jesus said, "Anyone who lusts after someone has already committed adultery in their heart." "If you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." "Do not worry, and do not judge." Or what about Jesus' response to the rich young ruler who said he had done all of them- Jesus said "only one thing he lacked- to give away all he had and come follow

Jesus.” Could my belongings get in the way of loving God with all my heart and soul and mind and strength? Could they become an idol I put before God?

And since we’re being honest, sometimes trusting God doesn’t seem like enough to make us feel safe or at peace, or loved, and like the people of God in the wilderness, we long for something we can see and feel to bolster our faith. Sometimes, don’t we settle for a little bit of God and a little bit of calf- oh, we may not want a gold statue, but a dramatic sign of some kind would be nice, or a good parking place just when we need it, or a special bible verse whose chapter and verse match our birthday or the amount of money we need- something to be sure God’s taking care of everything. Sometimes we put people or things up on the pedestal reserved for God. “If my spouse dies, or I ever lose a child, or my home, I don’t want to live.” Are we really so different from the people in the wilderness?

The real issue isn’t that we have broken this commandment or that commandment, but that we are broken people. We have hurt others, hurt ourselves and disappointed God by the things we have said or done or left unsaid or undone. We let other things or people become our reason for living rather than serving God Himself. This season of Lent is a time to confess once again that we miss the mark of how God calls us to live, we need a Savior who will save us from our sins and ourselves. When we admit we need a Saviour, we receive God’s forgiveness and discover that God is a God of second chances. God gave the Israelites a second chance when Moses went back up on the mountain and God rewrote his covenant in stone once again. And God kept his promise to give them the land he had promised to Abraham. Second chances are available to us too.

I invite you to take the stone you received as you came in today. Notice it is not a smooth stone. Its edges are sharp and jagged, as if it’s been broken. Broken like the promises to be faithful that we have broken, broken like the people we really are. We’re going to take a few quiet moments to pray and confess to God our brokenness, our sin, the ways we don’t trust he will be enough to meet our needs. Then as we sing our hymn of response, I invite you to come up and place your broken stone and your sin around the cross on the communion table and leave it there. Or if you prefer, you can bring your stone up after the service. Either way, I invite you to leave it at the foot of the cross because our God is a God of forgiveness and second chances.