## While We Are Waiting

### Exodus 32:1–14 | Philippians 4:1–9

Waiting rooms are strange places. Nobody really wants to be there. You sit in a chair somebody else picked out, under lights that are a little too bright, listening for somebody to call your name. And the longer you wait, the more your mind starts filling in the blanks. Maybe they found something. Maybe something went wrong. Maybe they forgot about me. Nothing has actually happened yet. But give us enough time without an answer, and we can imagine quite a lot.

Israel is sitting in a waiting room at the bottom of a mountain. Moses went up. And Moses has not come back. Exodus tells us exactly what starts this whole story: "When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain…" He delayed. These people have seen things we would think would make faith easy. They watched God bring them out of Egypt. They walked through the sea. They ate bread in the wilderness. They stood at this mountain and entered into covenant with God. They know what God has done. But Moses is taking too long. And eventually yesterday's faithfulness begins to feel less convincing than today's uncertainty.

So they go to Aaron. "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us." Aaron gathers their gold, melts it down, and makes something they can see. Something they can touch. Something they can point toward and say, "There. That's what we're following." We call this the story of the golden calf. But I wonder if the calf begins before anybody melts the gold. Maybe it begins with the fear that God has disappeared. They cannot see Moses. They cannot see what God is doing. They do not know what happens next. And apparently they cannot live very long with that uncertainty. Neither can we.

We like answers. We like plans. We like knowing where things are going. And when life changes faster than we expected, we reach for things that make us feel secure again. Churches can do that too. We remember people who once filled these rooms. We remember programs that worked. We remember traditions that mattered. There is nothing wrong with remembering. Memory is one of God's gifts. But fear can take even a good memory and turn it into something we have to protect. We can become so concerned with preserving what God did yesterday that we stop looking for what God may be doing today.

And here is where Exodus surprised me. While Israel is frightened at the bottom of the mountain, something is happening above them that they know absolutely nothing about. God sees what Israel has done. God is angry. And the words are severe. God tells Moses, "Let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them." That is difficult Scripture. We should not make it prettier than it is. But Moses does something remarkable. He refuses to walk away. These are the very people who have turned their backs on the covenant. And Moses

pleads for them. Remember them, God. Remember Egypt. Remember Abraham and Isaac and Israel. Remember your promise.

And notice what Moses is doing. He isn't telling God that Israel really isn't that bad. He doesn't defend the calf. He doesn't pretend their failure doesn't matter. Moses reaches for something deeper than Israel's behavior. He reaches for God's character. Remember who you are. Remember what you promised. There are moments when that may be the most faithful prayer we have. When the diagnosis comes. When somebody dies. When the future we planned disappears. When we cannot reconcile what is happening with what we believe about God. Faith does not always have an explanation. Sometimes faith simply holds onto what it knows about God. You are merciful. You are faithful. You have not abandoned your people. Moses cannot make Israel faithful. So he entrusts Israel to the faithfulness of God.

And then Exodus gives us one of the most startling sentences in the story: "The LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people." Think about what Israel does not know. Down below, they are dancing around the calf. They do not know that Moses is pleading for them. They do not know mercy is being spoken on their behalf. They do not know that the story they have nearly destroyed is somehow still being held open. They think they have been abandoned. All the while, they are being held by a mercy they cannot see.

That doesn't make the calf harmless. There will be consequences. Grace does not mean that what we do doesn't matter. It means our failure does not get the privilege of becoming God's final word about us. And Christians know something about being held by a grace we did not create. The story of Moses is not simply the story of Jesus told ahead of time. But it does reveal something about the God we finally and fully encounter in Jesus Christ. God does not abandon covenant relationship when human faithfulness fails. And in Jesus, we see how far that faithfulness will go.

Jesus comes toward sinners. He touches people others avoid. He eats with people others dismiss. He makes room for people who had been told there was no room for them. And finally he gives himself for people who still do not understand what God is doing. Before our faithfulness, there is Christ's faithfulness. Before our reaching toward God, there is God's reaching toward us. Before we ever knew how much room we needed, grace had already made room for us.

And I think that matters for the kind of church we are becoming at Valley. People are walking through our doors whose stories we do not know. Some come to worship. Some come to exercise. Some come to dance. Some come because a friend invited them. Some are searching for God. Others may not know what they are searching for. Some have believed for a lifetime. Some have questions they have never felt safe enough to ask in church. And we have a choice about how we see them. We can see unfamiliar people as interruptions to the church we

remember. Or we can wonder whether God has already been at work in their lives before they ever found our door.

That changes hospitality. Christian hospitality is not standing inside saying, “Come in and become like us.” It begins with humility. Maybe Christ is already at work in the person approaching us. Maybe there is a story there we need to hear. Maybe before we decide what somebody needs from us, we should learn their name. And we can make that kind of room because our future does not depend upon our ability to protect everything familiar. Our security is somewhere else.

That is true for a congregation. And it is true for us. Some of you are waiting right now. For test results. For your body to heal. For grief to become something you know how to carry. For someone you love to make a decision. For a relationship to change. For some sense of what this next season of your life is supposed to be. And waiting can make us wonder where God went. Israel knows that feeling. But what Israel could not see from the bottom of the mountain was that their inability to see God did not mean God had stopped dealing with them. Something was happening beyond their sight. Mercy was still at work.

Years later, Paul sits in circumstances he cannot control and writes to a congregation in Philippi. He does not promise them that everything will turn out exactly as they hope. He does not explain every unanswered question. He gives them four words. “The Lord is near.”

Maybe that is what we need when the future of a church isn’t completely clear. Maybe that is what we need when our own future isn’t completely clear. And maybe somebody will walk through these doors this week carrying questions we know nothing about, wondering whether God has forgotten them too. We do not have to give them an explanation. We can give them a place beside us.

Because Israel kept staring up the mountain, wondering where God had gone. All the while, they were being held by a mercy they could not see. And so are we.

The Lord is near.

Amen