

The Functional God  
Reading from the Old Testament: Exodus 32:1-14

So, there the Israelites are at the lower elevations of Mt. Horeb, looking up at the sky and what do they see? The little spinning color wheel from your laptop. Somewhere, a team of MIT-diploma-sporting software engineers, armed with a terabyte of market research data and four back issues of *Psychology Today*, came to the conclusion that the little spinning wheel of fortune would mollify you until your search engine had enough fuel to find the information for which you were looking. Wrong!

Turns out, the little color wheel seems to trigger in us something akin to jihadist wrath. Mind you, the same folks who will camp outside the Apple Store for days to be one of the first to get their hands on an iPhone 10 will also be the first to get rabidly irate when the spinning wheel appears on the screen instead of the web page for the nearest sushi bar.

Impatience. Timex conducted a survey that asked people how long they were willing to wait for various annoyances before they reacted. How about a car sitting in front of you at a green light; how long would

you wait before taking action? The survey indicated the average person would wait 50 seconds. 50 seconds. I think a better question would be whether anyone here has ever waited 10 seconds without laying on the horn; politely, of course. Just a little beep. I've seen people get honked at down here when the light was still red.

So, how long will the average person wait before taking some measure of action when... People are talking during a movie? 1 min., 52 sec.; when... sitting in the first waiting room at the doctor's office? 32 minutes; when... waiting at Starbucks? 7 minutes; when... waiting for your spouse to get ready? 21 minutes (That will make for some interesting lunch conversation today!); when... waiting on a blind date who is late? The survey says 26 minutes, but I'm thinking it depends on when the waiter gives you the pity face and asks if you want a refill or some bread.

Impatience. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Iago proffers a bit of wisdom to Roderigo, "How poor are they that have not patience! What wound did ever heal but by degrees?" Even though we can acknowledge this to be wise and true, assimilating it and practicing it is one of the

toughest challenges we face in this life. We've all prayed the clichéd prayer, *Lord, grant me patience ... now!* It has been said, "Patience is something you admire in the driver behind you and scorn in the one ahead." (attr. to Mac McLeary)

So, why are the Israelites feeling what you feel when the spinning color wheel keeps spinning on your last nerve? Well, at the lower elevations, let's call it base camp, there beside Mt. Horeb, Moses had come down the mountain and managed to get the people riled with excitement about an imminent encounter with God. They were washing their clothes and getting all cleaned up and keyed up. Sensing something important was about to happen, they trembled with excitement. There was smoke on the mountain accompanied by trumpet blasts. So, maybe they would now directly hear the Lord's voice. Maybe, just maybe, God would now tell them why God called this meeting.

The Exodus account tells us. Moses brought the people out of the camp to stand at the foot of the mountain! It's like the anxious couple waiting for the big reveal on *Fixer Upper* ... "Are you ready to hear the voice of the Lord? ...but let's make 'em watch a few commercials first."

The people stood at a distance and Moses steps into the cloud covering the mountain, like an emcee stepping backstage to check on the special guest. And then ... nothing. He doesn't come back out. So, back to the Timex survey, how long would you wait on Moses before before complaining or just punting and heading instead for the microbrewery of the month? We read in Exodus that Moses was up there for forty days, which is biblespeak for a long time. No kidding. Given that time frame and knowing our own restiveness, how long before you would be calling customer service, queueing over at the complaint department?

Now, it is important to say that Moses wasn't back in the green room playing poker with the Almighty. No, there was important work going on, work that was critical if this loose band of Jacob's heirs was to be formed as a people, a community, a nation. What would establish their identity as the people of God? Worship. Our own constitution in the Presbyterian Church says, "In Jesus Christ, the Church is called to be a royal priesthood, giving glory to God in worship and devoting itself to God's service in the world. Worship is a collective activity of the people of God and an expression of our common life and ministry. It

demands the full, conscious, and active participation of the whole body of Christ, with heart, mind, soul, and strength.” (*Book of Order, W-2.0102*)

As the people waited, Moses was on the mountain receiving instruction about how to bring form and structure to the community so that they may worship and serve God in the world. If Rome wasn't built in a day, neither was Egypt, or England, Ethiopia, or Ecuador. It took 116 days for the U.S. Constitution to be framed; so, 40 days would not be unreasonable.

During this time the Lord provided Moses with detailed instructions on how to form a worship space including the tabernacle, the Ark of the Covenant, the table, the altar, the curtain, the vestments, the process for ordination, etc. It takes time and care and labor and thought for an assembly to become a community. You know the traffic in the hallway of the Chapel building gets pretty on Wednesdays around 7:00 as choir members arrive at the appointed time for their practice, week after week, year after year, many of them coming straight from work, and it's not like their drive along 485 re-energized them. It takes time, thought, preparation, dedication to bring

a community to life, to grow to be a light for the community, a light for the world.

So, the workshop Moses signed up for somewhere up there on the smoke blanketed mountain, was taking longer than probably even Moses expected. I'm guessing it's easy to lose track of time when you're conferring with a God not bound by time. But for the folks back at base camp, patience was wearing thin. There was a whole lot of heavy sighing and watch checking going on. When you are stuck at a standstill on the Interstate, how long does it take before you start convincing yourself that the minivan could make it across that dip in the median without getting stuck?

And thus we read in Exodus, "When 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.'"

You know, there's a reason Aaron wasn't the one to have a close encounter of the third kind with a burning bush. Aaron 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." ... He 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!"

I saw a great meme this week, a giant rock sculpture of a hand and a tourist, looking pitiful with shoulders slumped, is leaning in, his face up against the palm. The superscript reads. Epic face palm. Can't you envision that to be the scene up on the mountain when God and Moses recognize what's happening down below? Perhaps it wasn't thunder the people were hearing. Maybe it was the sound of groaning up above. He 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!"

Scholars highlight how this calamity is for Israel what the forbidden fruit of Eden's garden was for humanity in general; an impatience with God's ways and the foolish thought that we could do it better. Indeed, how often are our prayers not actually prayers, but more like soliloquies through which we tell God how to be God.

Terence Fretheim observes how at every key point, the golden calf building committee contradicts what God has just announced to Moses. First, the people seek to create what God has already provided; Second, they, rather than God, take the initiative; Third, offerings are demanded rather than willingly presented (hmmm?). In addition, the painstaking length of time needed for building becomes an overnight rush job and the personal, active God becomes an impersonal object that cannot see, or speak, or act. Fretheim points out that the ironic effect of the people's impatience is that they forfeit the very divine presence they had hoped to bind more closely to themselves. (Terence Fretheim, *Exodus*)

Again, the proverb schools us, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight." Likewise, so saith the prophet, "Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God"? **28** Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. **29** He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. **30** Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; **31** but those who wait for the Lord shall

renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

Can't you just imagine an echo of Dr. Phil's voice when Moses sneaks up on the people and their golden calf? “So ... how's that working for you?” An air guitar makes no sound and a golden calf offers no wisdom. Maybe Moses had a little Lloyd Bentson in his voice, too: “I've seen God; I've worked with God; and that, folks, is no God.

And yet, the story repeats itself every time we think we've got a better idea than God. God offers a plan, a purpose, and ever impatient, we spend our energy looking for a shortcut. The Israelites here couldn't even be original. A calf? And where'd they come up with that genius of an idea? A golden calf or bull was a sign of military might in ... Egypt. Yes, you heard it right, in effect the Israelites turn their worship toward the very form of power under which they had suffered and from which they had been delivered.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian dissident who endured many years in a Siberian gulag and thus, a man who knew a thing or two about patience, said, “Hastiness and superficiality are the psychic

diseases of the twentieth century.” (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Harvard Address, 1978*)

And folks, he wrote that years before the debut of the iPhone. The art of waiting, the craft of patience are skills that are becoming increasingly endangered among us. We expect the world to be available to us with a thumb click, and even then we are only present to the experience of it until the next text beeps at us.

Can we even comprehend the meaning or the value of waiting on the Lord? In an article on the essentials for teaching and learning, *The Harvard Magazine* queried faculty members about their thoughts on these essentials. Jennifer Roberts, professor of art and director of American Studies at Harvard writes, “During the past few years, I have begun to feel that I need to take a more active role in shaping the *temporal* experiences of the students in my courses ... to engineer, in a conscientious and explicit way, the *pace* and *tempo* of the learning experiences.” She goes on to focus on the slow end of this tempo spectrum, on creating opportunities for students to engage in deceleration, patience, and immersive attention. She says, “I would argue that these are the kind of practices that now most need to be actively engineered by faculty, because they simply are no longer

available “in nature,” as it were. Every external pressure, social and technological, is pushing students in the other direction, toward immediacy, rapidity, and spontaneity—and against this other kind of opportunity. I want to give them the permission and the structures to slow down.” (Jennifer Roberts, *The Power of Patience*)

Professor Roberts offers the example of a research project she requires of her students. “The first thing I ask them to do in the research process is to spend a painfully long time looking at an object. Say a student wanted to explore the work popularly known as *Boy with a Squirrel*, painted in Boston in 1765 by the young artist John Singleton Copley. Before doing any research in books or online, the student would first be expected to go to the Museum of Fine Arts, where it hangs, and spend three full hours looking at the painting, noting down his or her evolving observations ... The time span is explicitly designed to seem excessive. Also crucial to the exercise is the museum or archive setting, which removes the student from his or her everyday surroundings and distractions.”

Of course, the students object and moan and complain, and I’d probably be complaining right along with them. How can there possibly

be three hours' worth of things to see and think about in a single work of art? Yet, invariably the students are astonished by the potentials unlocked in this process. For example, when Dr. Roberts herself did the exercise with Copley's painting, she says, "It took me nine minutes to notice that the shape of the boy's ear precisely echoes that of the ruff along the squirrel's belly—and that Copley was making some kind of connection between the animal and the human body and the sensory capacities of each. It was 21 minutes before I registered the fact that the fingers holding the chain exactly span the diameter of the water glass beneath them. It took a good 45 minutes before I realized that the seemingly random folds and wrinkles in the background curtain are actually perfect copies of the shapes of the boy's ear and eye." (Jennifer Roberts, *The Power of Patience, Harvard Magazine*)

When we force everything, including God, to fit instantaneously into our particular narrow worldview, we miss almost everything God intends for us to see, to know, to experience. Martin Luther offered this stark observation, "Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God, your functional savior." And folks our many functional saviors are about as life-producing as an inanimate carved or

molded cow. Impatience so often kills the Spirit. That's what went wrong at Horeb.

Professor Roberts said she wanted to create opportunities for her students to engage in deceleration, patience, and immersive attention.

People of faith have been doing this for well over 3000 years. We call it prayer, not in the westernized sense of prayer as eloquent soliloquies through which we are actually telling God how to be God. Rather, prayer in the sense of what Brother Lawrence called the practice of the presence of God. Once Mother Teresa was asked, "When you pray, what do you say to God?" She said, "I don't say anything. I just listen." So, her inquirer asked, "What then does God say to you when you pray." And she answered, "He doesn't say anything. He listens."

It's not about saying the right things. As Paul confessed, "We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." Rather, the practice of unceasing prayer is opening oneself to the presence of God and attuning oneself to the presence of God in all things; paying attention, and trusting where that presence

takes you. It takes time. It takes patience. Maybe the great sculptor Rodin's thoughts on his art best describe what we tend to forget in our impatience with God. He said, "Patience is also a form of action." Amen.