

Exodus 32:7-14

The Lord said to Moses, 'Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they 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 worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" ' The Lord said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now 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.'

But 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? Why 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. Remember 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 for ever." ' And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Psalms 51:1-10

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgement.
Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

SERMON:

(Take a deep, full breath, sensing God's presence.

Prayer: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me, and may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, my Rock and my Redeemer.)

What did you do/eat/wear on Tuesday, August 6? Can you remember? That's 40 days ago.

Raise your hand if at some point this week you walked into another room for some reason - a good reason, and you got there and couldn't remember what brought you in there?

So easy to forget! There are lots of theories about why we forget (4, I think, but I can't quite remember, theories about what causes us to forget and what helps us remember. What helps us remember has a lot of science around it, and much of it has to do with reinforcement - retrieving and rehearsing what we learned so it sticks, so it's in here (point to heart), returning again and again to what we've learned until it's written on our hearts.

In our story today, the people of Israel have forgotten. They've forgotten big time.

Anyone heard of the Ebbinghaus forgetting curve? Maybe you once did, and well, you just forgot.

Back in 1885, Hermann Ebbinghaus, a German psychologist, came up with a theory - The theory is that humans start losing the memory of learned knowledge over time, in a matter of days or weeks, unless the learned knowledge is consciously reviewed time and again.¹ Use it or lose it. Study what you've learned, or chances are it just won't stick.

Figuring out how to make what we've learned stick...

Let's jump into our story and set the stage for what's going on.

¹ Praveen Shrestha, "Ebbinghaus Forgetting Curve," in *Psychestudy*, November 17, 2017, <https://www.psychestudy.com/cognitive/memory/ebbinghaus-forgetting-curve>.

It's been a little over 4 months since this weary band of people, the Israelites, fled Egypt. All kinds of amazing things happened - God has been with them, creating dry land for them to cross the sea of reeds, giving them this weird food, that they call manna, to eat, getting fresh water when their leader, Moses, hits a rock with his staff. They mumble and complain, but God shows them again and again that God is present with them. They are not in this alone. You'd think what they've learned would stick. That'd they'd have learned - when we get in a tight spot and we can't find our way - God provides! But no. They forget. They learn, they forget, they learn, they forget. Sounds like us, doesn't it?

You see, about 3 months into their trek, this band of weary travelers came into the wilderness of Sinai and set up camp. This people who see, in tangible ways, that God provides when they get anxious, and are in need - they forget. Sometimes they even look longingly back at their lives as slaves - 'at least there we had all the meat we wanted...'

Now, their fearless leader, Moses, heads up the mountain and disappears. The guy who brought them through it all, who listened to their grumbling and brought their concerns before God - he is gone. And that's when the trouble began.

This is how chapter 32, this story begins, "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.'"

Tired, hungry, and now their leader, the one who connected them to this unknowable God, this God who took these slaves and offered them freedom, he's gone. Nowhere to be found. 40 days - will he ever return?

Recent research shows that persistent anxiety and memory loss are associated. The research shows that to some degree, there is an optimal level of anxiety that helps our ability to remember, but when we have high levels of anxiety, we tend to reach a tipping point, which is a game changer. Researchers have found that acute stress disrupts the process behind collecting and storing memories.² When we're really stressed, this knowing is gone. Poof! We can't remember those lessons of being cared for, of being loved and supported - we forget that this manna, this stuff that feeds us daily, is not of our own making. We forget that everything we have is a gift

² <https://www.rivier.edu/academics/blog-posts/the-relationship-between-anxiety-and-memory-loss/>

from God, not the creation of our own hands. When we're anxious, afraid, tired, we forget, we're on full alert, we move into get me out of this mode!

That's how we find the Israelites in our story. Anxious, really anxious at this point. Probably weary and irritable too. Waiting is no fun. Can you relate? Can you think of a time when you've been over the top anxious - waiting to hear from that child who hasn't called to check in when they're late.. Waiting to hear about a job interview... waiting to hear from the doctor about test results? Waiting is hard, hard work.

TELL STORY OF WHEN MY KIDS WERE WITH SUSAN M... I was calling hospitals, called her ex-husband at work... I was a mess. And my older son, Peter, saw my anxiety and he, too, was all worked up, unable to go to sleep. My anxiety was contagious.

We lose our way, we forget, when we get super stressed. So it was with the Israelites. And so, they looked for a fix. Hey, Aaron, you fix it! We've waited on this God of Moses' long enough. They're nowhere to be found. Give us something else to worship, something else to ease our fears.

We create idol after idol and worship it, believing it will bring us peace, security, connection. What's your idol of choice? What do you turn to when you're stressed? Do you work more - trying to feel important, relevant? Fill your days with work as a way to convince yourself that if you just work hard enough you can fix this?

Maybe your idol is this (pick up phone, computer). Do you turn to this in the middle of the night, first thing in the morning, looking for reassurance that the world hasn't blown up, yet? Do you turn to this, again and again throughout the day, checking your retirement fund to see if it's losing money, do you check it to see what craziness is happening, thinking that if you check, just one more time, you might find a glimmer of good news?

For much of our society guns are an idol that's worshipped. I can protect myself. Protect my family. This will save me. Nothing will harm me if I'm locked and loaded.

You may not have a concealed weapon carry permit, but I bet you have an idol of your own making. We all do. Maybe an idol of yours is a certain belief. I have this idolatrous belief that if I take good enough care of myself - eat right, exercise, if I live right; do the right things, that I have control over my life - the God of my making will bless me with a long life. Do you have any beliefs like that?

We're not so different from these ancient Israelites in our story today, just trying to get by, just wanting to settle, take care of their families, provide for themselves. We're not so different from these anxious travelers who want something they can turn to when they're afraid and scared, not knowing what tomorrow will bring.

Meantime, up on the mountain Moses is just fine. He's spent the last 40 days getting all kinds of instructions from God. The book of Exodus spends 7 chapters - 7 whole chapters- describing what kind of ark the people are to make. Moses up on the mountain is dutifully listening, learning about what kind of wood to use, how to make the lampstands, what type of oil to use, he's got all kinds of information to teach the people. Finally he's ready to come down, off the mountain, carrying the tablets of the covenant.

Look at our text with me. Oh, wait a minute! God says. Hold it! This people, YOUR people, the ones YOU brought out of the land of Egypt, they've forgotten me. In their anxiety and fear, they've gone and made idols for themselves. Idols they think they understand, idols they can manipulate to tell them what they think they want to hear. God's anger burns, rages, as God threatens to wipe them off the face of the earth and start, once again, with the one faithful one - Moses.

And we hear this conversation between God, Yahweh, the LORD, and Moses. Yahweh, this one who brought the people out of slavery, this one who has led them as a cloud by day and a fiery pillar by night. Yahweh, the unknowable God. For remember, even this name, Yahweh, is unknowable. Yahweh, the name God gives to Godself translates to something like "I am who I am" or "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious" or "I will be whatever I will be." Not a name that's easy to understand. This God who names itself "I will be what I will be", that's the God Moses is having this intimate conversation with.

And Moses - oh how I love Moses! I wish I were so bold, so sure of my faith! It's here, when Yahweh says Moses, get out of my way, leave me alone, let me destroy these people, YOUR people, who so quickly forget me, and let me start over, with you. It's here that our text says But.

But.

But Moses implored the LORD his God...

Moses somehow doesn't take the bait. He doesn't say, OK, yeah, I'm special, I'm better than those lousy stiff-necked people who do nothing but complain. Moses doesn't take

the road to glory - start over, make a nation of Mosesites! No, Moses implores the LORD, has a conversation with Yahweh, the inscrutable One, and says REMEMBER.

Remember 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." "

Moses tells God to remember, and God changes God's mind. OK, in lots of ways that's unsettling, and something to unpack another time. That's not where I'm going today.

Moses says REMEMBER. And when God remembers, things settle down. Focus is restored. Then Moses goes down the mountain and all hell breaks loose. The next 2 chapters in the book of Exodus are filled with details that you don't usually find in our children's bibles. There's blood shed and massacre, brother killing brother. It's done as a way of Moses saying 'who remembers?' Who remembers that Yahweh, the God not of our own making, is on our side?

It's ugly. Hard to read. At the end of the gory details, the LORD says to Moses, 'leave this place, go to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' (Ex. 33:1)

Before they leave this place, mournful, tail between their legs, Moses says to the LORD, show me your glory. Moses connects, remembers, and says to God 'show me your ways', Moses is saying, burn into my memory your glory. Help me remember, always remember.

And it's here that this tale of forgetting, of anxiety, weariness and wrath, comes to a close. It's one of the most beautiful, and some theologians say, important speeches of the Hebrew bible.

The LORD tells Moses to stand in the cleft of the rock and God will pass by. You will not see my face, but you will see my back he says. The story, this one that began with God's fierce anger threatening to destroy this people, ends, in the beginning of chapter 34 with these words:

The Lord, said to Moses, "Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones. Be ready in the morning, and come up to Mount Sinai and present yourself on the top of the mountain." So Moses did as Yahweh commanded him. Yahweh, The Lord, descended in the cloud and stood with him and proclaimed,
'Yahweh Yahweh,
a God merciful and gracious,

slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for thousands of generations,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children's children,
to the third and the fourth generation.'

And Moses quickly bowed his head towards the earth, and worshipped. Exodus 34: 1-8

'Yahweh Yahweh,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,'

Before this sorry band of forgetters, known as the Israelites, heads off on their journey, God tells Moses - REMEMBER.

I love the line that says "The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him". God stood with Moses. Stood with him and reminded him. Earlier it was Moses who said to God, 'remember'.

Now God says REMEMBER. I am a God that is merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love. REMEMBER this. Write this on your heart of stone. You'll need it. Rough times are ahead. You'll find a land of milk and honey, then you'll lose it again - going into exile. There's plenty of pain ahead for you all. Life ain't easy.

So remember. I stand beside you. Remember, I am with you. Remember, remember, remember.

What helps you remember? I have a habit of setting things I can't forget to take with me on the floor, right by the door. I literally would have to step over them to leave. It's my way of tying a string around my finger. What's the string you tie around your finger to help you not forget? What's the pile by the door, reminding you not to forget?

HOW DO I, HOW DO WE REMEMBER GOD IS WITH ME, WITH US?

That's where community comes in. We are here to help each other remember. When we forget, when we grow weary, afraid, tired, we need to be Moses for each other, reminding each other -

Remember, God stands with us. This God who is merciful and gracious. This God, not of our own making, is here, with us. Leading, guiding, providing.

I admit, I can easily become anxious. On Friday morning, just after I finished, or thought I finished writing this sermon, I went and read the news. Ugh. I learned, a few days later, that the closely contested and very important election in North Carolina's congressional race didn't go the way I wanted it to go. My fear for the future of our country, of our environment, our world, jumped through the roof. I felt my heart race. What are we going to do? What's going to save us???

In my fear I forgot.

Remembering that God stands with us doesn't give us a 'pass go card' to not do anything. .

But it starts with remembering. Help me remember, as I help you remember. Remembering might be as simple as taking a breath. It might be stopping, looking around, and thanking God for something in right here, right now. Remembering - that's what we're here to do for and with one another.

No matter how many times we forget, how many times we go creating false gods to comfort ourselves when times get rough and we're anxious, overwhelmed, afraid, we need to remember that God stands by me, stands by us. We need to turn to one another. Turn toward each other and say Remember. Remember.