

St. Matthew AME Church
Bible Study
October 25, 2010

The Lord called Moses to Him on the mountain (19:3). This is an awesome experience, where a mortal man is summoned to meet with the infinite God. Why does God summon Moses to the top of the mountain, only to send him back down to warn the people not to break through and touch the mountain in order to gaze upon the Divine? (19:20-21) Could not God have given him this commandment while he was still below? God does it because His intent is to bolster Moses power in the eyes of the Israelites. (19:9) From that moment on, the people will recognize and acknowledge Moses' prophetic stature.

Moses spends forty days on Mount Sinai in the Divine presence receiving God's laws, which will subsequently he will convey to the people of Israel. The Israelites saw that Moses delayed in coming down from the mountain. They felt abandoned by Moses and gathered around Aaron his brother and said "we do not know what has happened to him" (32:11). They want a substitute for Moses who will continue to lead them. Their request is clear, "come make us gods that shall go before us." They do not ask for a god that they can worship, but a judge who will assume Moses role. They do not reject their God; all they want is a replacement for Moses who has disappeared.

For the Israelites, Moses has become too much of a focus of power and authority. It is Moses who has brought them out of Egypt, divided the waters of the Red Sea, and miraculously provided them with sustenance in the desert. Moses has become an object of reverence for them, upon whom they are pathologically dependent. Instead of appointing a leader in Moses place or assuming the role himself, Aaron fashions a calf. Aaron does this because he is afraid that if he appointed someone, the Israelites might not want to abandon their new leader when Moses eventually returned, and civil strife would ensue. So Aaron created a symbol of leadership. Why did Aaron give in to the people's demands? It is because Aaron lacks the inner strength to stand up to the people. He is afraid and capitulates to their demands. Even Moses chastises his brother for not taking responsibility and lacking the ability to control the people. (32:25)

The Israelites are in a different place than Moses. They not only have been complaining and rebelling since they left Egypt, but while standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai, they are already turning toward idolatry. Seeing the calf below, God tells Moses that the people have rushed to turn aside from the divine path. (32:8) Moses rushes to embrace the Divine while the people are turning away. Because the people have sinned God commands Moses to go down from the mountain. Notice the language of God. He does not say "my people" but "your people" and not the people He brought out of Egypt, but "you brought out of Egypt." (32:7) When the people of Israel sin, they are identified with Moses ("your people").

Even though God threatens to destroy Israel, He also pledges to Moses that he will become a great nation. Moses responds by imploring God not to be angry at the people. (32:10) God tells Moses that the people of Israel are a "stiff necked people." (32:9) Moses spirits have been broken and his strength has given out. It is difficult for any leader to confront and then deal with a recalcitrant group of followers. Moses recognizes that his people have strayed a mere forty after receiving God's revelation "thou shalt have no other gods before me." Then they have demanded that Aaron provide them with another god to lead them. This behavior requires great patience on the part of Moses and any leader, but with this kind of behavior, patience is very difficult.

Moses urges God not to “let your anger blaze forth against your people.” (32:11) However, when Moses comes down from the mountain with the tablets of stone (Ten Commandments) he himself becomes enraged at the people of Israel. He sees the ugly scene of the Israelites reveling in their sinfulness, dancing around the calf. The sight of the calf and their dancing and merriment makes him so angry that he cannot contain his anger and he throws down the tablets, shattering them. But just as the tablets are broken, so is Moses. He is now separated from the people he is supposed to be leading. It is almost impossible for leaders to maintain their calm and objectivity in the face of distress brought on by disappointment, challenge and personal rejection.

In spite of feelings of rejection and disappointment in the people, Moses resumes his leadership role. He curbs his own anger and maintains some degree of faith in them. Being successful in his prayer to God not to destroy the people, he doesn't give up the hope that God will also forgive those who were not involved in the building of the calf. Moses demonstrates the essence of leadership – the ability to continue to lead and to galvanize followers, even in the face of failure, disappointment, frustration and even anger. This may be Moses finest hour as a leader. It is one thing to encourage and support followers when things are going well; however, it takes more fortitude and commitment for a leader to press forward with the mission in the face of extreme adversity. As a leader he also calls for the punishment of those who clamored for the building of the calf.

Moses can resume the mantle of leadership because puts his life on the line for the people of Israel. He gives this ultimatum to God: “if You will forgive their sin all well and good; but if not, erase me from the book You have written.” (32:32) Moses is willing to sacrifice his own life for the people he is leading. They are his people and he is devoted to them. God looks up to Moses for his commitment to the people of Israel and his commitment to leadership. God instructs him, “go now, lead the people where I told you.” (32:34)