

Waiting in Silence
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Exodus 32:1-14

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I was talking with a friend the other day about ~~growing~~ up in 80s. You know the 1980s – it was a magical time; big hair, metal bands, cassette mix tapes, VHS and encyclopedias. One of the things that we remembered the most about growing up was all the waiting.

We waited for letters to come in the mail. We waited for our turn to call friends on the one house telephone that was connected with a wire to the kitchen wall. If we took a picture on our camera, we had to wait 2-3 weeks for a cartridge of film to come back so that we could look at the picture we took, only to find that most of the people had their eyes closed!

We even waited for information, to learn new things. When I had to do research for a high school paper, I had to get on my bike and ride ten miles to the library to look up some obscure article on microfiche. No Google. Can you even imagine? My daughter just had her first experience with microfiche in her first semester of grad school – she told me how exciting it was to go “old school”.

And still! Even with all the new technology at our fingertips, one of the most frustrating and universal things that we do as human beings is to wait. It can be excruciating. Especially if we are waiting to hear some news or information that we need in order to make plans. Knowing what may be coming helps us make some sense out of our world. But while we’re waiting, the silence can be overwhelming.

Silence feels like a rejection. Maybe you’ve experienced what that feels like waiting for your next job promotion, as the person with less experience is chosen ahead of you. Or you’ve felt the sting of silence after a break-up, you said that you would remain friends but they won’t return your text. The silence of some rejections can cut very deeply. Feeling rejected can trigger bad thoughts about ourselves or the others involved. We are worthless, they are stupid, we are stupid, she is shallow or vain, they are blind or selfish or evil.

So what do we do when we're rejected? After a romantic relationship breaks up, we might take a long break from dating. It's just too painful to be that vulnerable again. On the other hand, we might dive right back in. We might fill our days with activity, we figure that the busier we are, the less time we will have to feel the pain. Some people lash out in the face of rejection, harming, even killing, the person who rejected them.

Now is a good moment to remind everyone that October is domestic violence awareness month, and if you or someone you know is being physically, emotionally or financially abused, please do NOT wait in silence. Here in Monroe, we have an outpost of the Center for Family Justice right across the street at town hall. There are people standing by who can help.

Moses has been up on the mountain with God for some time, receiving God's law. In fact, he was up there so long that the people wondered if he was ever coming back. So they start looking for a new leader and a new god. How do you think they felt about that long silence – impatient, worried, frustrated? Could they believe they have been abandoned? Rejected by Moses or by God?

Let's assume they feel scared, maybe angry, and they believe Moses has forgotten them, that God no longer cares. So they seek out Aaron and ask him to make for them new gods who will pick up where Moses and his God left off – one who will lead them to the promised land.

I'm not sure what Aaron the people pleaser was thinking or feeling when he asked them to bring their gold. He did what he could to satisfy the crowd even if it meant compromising his principles to keep the peace. Maybe he was flattered that they came to him. Maybe he thought they finally saw in him the leadership potential he knew was there all along. Or maybe he was just as frustrated as they were by the silence. Rejection can be powerful, perhaps Aaron was caught up in it rather than helping others break through.

So now God notices that the people have rejected him as their God, and rejected Moses as their leader. God is angry, furious, we are told. God assesses the people as corrupt and stiff-necked and commands Moses to go down and deal with them. God says, "Leave me alone in my anger. Let me destroy them."

I gotta tell you, I'm not a big fan of God as described in this story, and I don't believe this is a true depiction of the God who created, sustains and redeems us. And I don't think this story is meant to tell us something about God, but it's meant to tell us something about people, about ourselves.

I agree with those who say God does not need us to worship or fear or cater to or even believe. God, I believe, is not hurt or angry when rejected by people. God is not insecure, has no sense of being unworthy of love. God IS love. And love is relational. *So though we may not recognize our relationship to God, God knows it is the very ground of our being.* WE are the ones who benefit by recognizing this.

And so the writer of Exodus tells us about a group of people who have tried to minimize their relationship with the God who brought them out of slavery in Egypt. They try to transfer their trust and devotion to an object. Do we see that happening today?

Sometimes ^{the that, is love} God can feel distant. We wait for God's voice and in the waiting the silence comes and we try to fill that silent space with all kinds of idols. Money, success, drugs, violence, power, political figures we treat like gods... you name it and we've tried it. Yes, we can be really good at building our golden calves.

Moses stands in the breach and reminds first God, and then the people, of who they are, about the foundational relationship between them. He reminds God that these are God's people, that God has chosen them, and saved them. And later in the story he calls to the people to turn from their nonsense and live again in covenant, to stand firmly in the relationship that is the very ground of their being.

There will be doors that do not open for us. There will be people who won't love us the way we want them to. There will be a class that won't find your portfolio worthy of admittance. There will be a team or a band that you don't play well enough to join. There will be people who won't come to your party, heck, they won't even RSVP.

And you may ask yourself what it says about you. You may, in addition to feeling hurt or angry, begin to wonder if you are not loving enough, or talented enough or smart enough or good enough to be worthy of love, worthy of joy, of sharing, of affection, of opportunities.

Today I want to say to you what Moses said – you are God’s people. That means that our foundation is the One who is love. The baptism promises we made today with Braeden, Lina, Jaymie and Jade remind us of this precious relationship.

So remember who you are, remember whose you are, and let yourself revel in that knowledge. In the silence, let your thoughts turn to the pure, the pleasing, the commendable, the excellent truth that is love. Your feelings will turn from despair to joy. Your actions will be those that reflect goodness and light. You will share with someone who cares and sees you in the light of God. You will forgive, you will accept, and you will move on into the future with hope.

And hope is more about who we are than what happens to us. In the context of our faith, it is a commitment to a future we will probably not reach in our lifetime. Moses didn’t make it to the Promised Land; he died at the cusp of his goal. And once the people did enter that land of milk and honey land, they found out it wasn’t quite paradise after all – just full of other people with real-life problems.

The hope that our faith gives us is more than shallow optimism. It is a single-hearted devotion to all whom God loves. Love God, Jesus says, love your neighbor, love yourself, love the world. And love, in a biblical sense, is less about feeling and more about what we choose to do. Through concrete acts of love that we can share in God’s future, God’s vision. May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.