

Read Exodus 32, John 6:63, Galatians 5:16-25

Have you ever been outside late when all the stars are out? Not around the city – but somewhere like in East Texas or up on a mountain in Colorado where you see the Milky Way and you just have a sense of the greatness and presence of God. Have you been outside at such a time where you are inextricably drawn to God and you pray? You somehow know God's bigness, and sense God's presence right there, listening to your small voice.

Contrast that experience with one of those really hard times in the middle of the night when you can't sleep, when you toss and turn, full of anxiety, and every thought of prayer bounces off the ceiling. You lie there endlessly trying to connect with God and the prayer disintegrates into a pile of doubt. God seems nowhere to be found. God seems absolutely non-existent.

Have you been there?

If you have, you are not alone. St. John of the Cross defined it as "the dark night of the soul." Most people experience it from time to time. Seeking God at such times, Martin Luther wrote this hymn, "*Out of the depths to Thee I raise the voice of lamentation; Lord turn a gracious ear to me and hear my supplication.*"¹

Often we sense the depths and call to God.

Mother Teresa's journals reveal that, although she had intense closeness with Christ and even had visions of His presence and a clear sense of call, much of the time she had a deep sense of aloneness; that God was not present. She in fact experienced incredible emptiness and lack of faith. She writes that it caused her extreme pain and agony.

Do you know those moments? You look at the world and the God whom you thought might be there seems to be suddenly gone, and you perceive nothing more than what you see right there before you.

Israel experienced God's presence at the foot of Mt. Sinai. But then Moses ascended the mountain and was gone. It seemed like he was gone forever. And the people's anxiety rose. They didn't sense God's presence at all.

What do you do at the times when you experience such loneliness for God? When you can't pray, when God seems absent, what steps do you take to resolve the situation? That generally depends on what you think about religion.

Israel was new at religion. They had stood at the base of the mountain with Moses as God settled on the mountain in this magnificent display of presence and power. It nearly scared them to death! They said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen. But don't let God speak directly to us, or we will die!" (Ex 20:19). God for them was on the outside. God for them was

¹Martin Luther, "Out of the Depths," Presbyterian Hymnal #240

intimidating. They had not incorporated the relationship aspect of knowing God personally. That was a whole new concept of religion.

And so when Moses did not come back and it appeared God was gone, the people ditched the ways of God for a visible sign. They demanded an image; something created that they could see and hang on to. Aaron said the calf represented God. But the image was exactly what they had been told NOT to do by God. *"You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea"* (Ex 20:4).

Israel ditched the command God gave to worship in the tabernacle, and they ditched the law God gave to them. Instead they went to Aaron and asked him to make them a god, and Aaron complied.

Aaron was a really bad leader. Leaders and elders, take note. Leadership is not driven by the demands of the people. Leaders must understand the vision and will of God and guide people into it. Aaron did not do that. He acquiesced to the people's desires and he led them completely astray, to their great detriment.

What did God want? God commanded that God be worshiped. Remember last week's lesson? God asked the people to build a sanctuary (Ex 25:1). God designed a place for worship - like this sanctuary.

Why was worship important? And why is worship important for us?

- **Worship gives us a correct focal point.** Have you ever heard someone say, "I don't go to church; I can worship God anywhere, anytime. That may be true, but you will not focus on God without direction. God insisted that Israel set aside a particular place, with its symbolic elements that facilitate a special encounter with God. We too have symbols - baptism and the Lord's Supper - to help us connect with Jesus Christ.
- **Worship always brings God's presence.** A woman who was raised in this church moved away and quit going to church. But she drove past a church every day on her way to work. The church had a marquee like ours that caught her eye. She felt God saying, "You may have forgotten about me, but I haven't forgotten about you." The experience of worship in church had a part in drawing her back.

What has worship meant to your family? A lifestyle of worship draws you back when you fall. Worship has an important function.

In addition to worship, God gave the law. Why was the law important?

- **The law gives us identity** – It tells us what God expects. Christians? Oh, those are the people who . . . love God, keep the Sabbath, don't make images of God, who love their neighbors . . .

Now right away God was aware of what the people had done. God knew they had broken the covenant and instead turned to a calf, which had nothing to offer, except an excuse to party. In a completely crazed moment, Israel gives up their identity as God's people to become just like the

surrounding cultures, people partying in a drunken frenzy, engaging in sexually inappropriate behavior, out of control and without hope or purpose because they gave up on God.

They purposely and intentionally rebelled. It's in our nature. The Bible says every one of us fight that battle. The Reformed faith says "we are prone to hate God and our neighbor" (Heidelberg Catechism #5).

Idols show that your faith is all on the outside – idols won't touch their heart, and God wants to touch your heart.

What was God to do?

- They deserved punishment –
- God could wipe them out
- God would start over with Moses

Now if you feel appalled by God's intense anger at the people, put yourself in His shoes. Have you ever been betrayed by someone? Did you want to just ditch that person and go find somebody else? God felt the same pain.

But Moses desperately prayed '*don't give up God, have mercy!*' Listen to his argument and as you hear it think of Christ, who stands before God pleading for you:

- God, you've gone to a lot of trouble to free them and bring them this far;
- Egypt will think you purposely killed them because you couldn't take care of them;
- You should have pity on your own people, it's human fallenness;
- You must keep your promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- Moses even said 'wipe me out instead of them.'

Now that's a good leader. That's a leader who understands the vision and call of God. You can be that kind of spiritual leader in your family by praying for your loved ones who have fallen away. And, God will listen to you. How do I know? God is a God of grace. God was moved to pity and had mercy on them.

When we hear this story, we need to remind ourselves that it's about us too. We too live in covenant with God and we walk away every day. We too tend to keep religion on the outside. We turn to the idols of our own culture and they are just as purposeless. We turn to self-indulgence, drunkenness and inappropriate sexual behavior, all those things listed in Galatians 5.

But God has mercy. Even though we fail to see God, God gives the Holy Spirit, who battles that doubt and draws us to God. Mother Teresa overcame her sense of abandonment by God through abandoning herself to God. Her motto was "keep smiling," as she herself resolved to be "an apostle of joy."²

Ask for the Holy Spirit, who moves our religion from the outside to the inside.

²<http://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/08/the-dark-night-of-mother-teresa-42>, accessed 6/17/10.

Martin Luther also resolved his struggle with doubt. Here's the end of his hymn:

Therefore my trust is in the Lord and not in my own merit.

On God my soul shall rest; God's word upholds my fainting spirit.

God's promised mercy is my fort, my comfort and my strong support;

I wait for it with patience.

Jesus is the one who pleads for mercy. Jesus carries us. Let your doubt be overcome today by that wonderful gift of God.

AMEN