**October 15, 2017**

**Exodus 32:1-25**

We *know* the story of the golden calf: When the people didn’t see Moses for a few days, they got nervous. God’s presence made the mountain intimidating; it was dark and covered in clouds. Anything could have happened to Moses. What if he never came back? What if they were left out here with no one to lead them, and no one to guide them? The people got nervous about what they would do without Moses, so they asked Aaron to help them make something to lead them. They weren’t going to worship it. They wanted something to take the place of Moses. If he was gone, “they wanted gods [small “g”] to go before them”. Just like Moses had done. Perhaps this would become the vehicle through which God – YHWH – spoke to them. Perhaps this would be the animal on which God – YHWH – would ride. Whatever the case, they weren’t planning to worship the calf (as the people did in Charlton Heston’s *Ten Commandments* movie). The people were terrified of God. They wanted a go-between themselves and YHWH. A mediator. A protector. A boundary.

It’s strange that the Israelites didn’t first think of Aaron. It’s strange that he wasn’t given a promotion. And it’s strange that Aaron said, “yes,” to their request. But he quickly acquiesced, demanded their jewelry, and made this sparkly thing for the people. The people claimed it as their own, rewriting history. “These are our gods [lowercase “g”], who brought us out of Egypt.” They didn’t give YHWH credit, or Moses. They gave the credit to this sparkly thing. It must have been with them when they left Egypt. It must have been the spirit of what led them into the wilderness… While they danced around the golden calf, Aaron returned to his senses. He called out from the sidelines, "Tomorrow will be a festival for YHWH.” A somewhat half-hearted and chagrinned, “hey, everybody, forget what just happened… pay no attention to the sparkly thing over there… come back to your senses… come back to your roots…” And the people obliged him by worshipping God, but just as quickly returned to their raucous celebration with the calf.

All the while, Moses was up the mountain having a talk with God. The Ten Commandments had been written on tablets by God’s own finger. The people’s relationship to YHWH had been discussed at length after giving the law. There was no question that God had a special relationship with the Israelites. But when the two of them realized what the people were doing down below, everything came to a grinding halt. God became enraged. God called this whole mess into question. It was *Moses*, the one who was generally unsure of himself and dependent on reassurances from God and Aaron, Moses had to remind God of their relationship. YHWH had taught them that God was a relational being. The commandments were a relationship manual. These were YHWH’s people. These were the people God had saved time and again. These were the people that YHWH had specifically saved from slavery in Egypt. If God were to abandon them now, it would look badly to other people watching. YHWH was responsible for the Israelites. God had a job to do.

In these moments, Moses became the true leader of his people. He didn’t doubt his gifts or power like he did in the beginning. He wasn’t complaining like he did through the plagues and leaving Egypt. He stood up to God, courageously and respectfully. He stood up for his people, saying the truth in love. And he held onto the vision with which God had entrusted him. He pursued the call that had brought all of them into the wilderness. Now was not the time to abandon ship.

Aaron, on the other hand, was easily convinced to do something with which he did not agree. He had been Moses’ right-hand man. He had been the encourager and supporter, the Director of Operations. But quickly gave in to pressure to do what the people wanted, instead of what Moses asked. Aaron knew what God wanted. And when he tried to steer the people back to YHWH, he was a day late and a dollar short. His pathetic excuses didn’t get very far. Even he could see the trouble his weakness caused.

The people “had run wild.” With no ability to follow their leaders, and no thought other than their own fears and whims, they fell into ruin.

This story is as much about the leaders as it is about the followers. The Israelites needed strong leaders, but they also needed willing and trusting followers. Their relationship was compromised. Ken McFayden, Dean at Union Seminary (Richmond), said that “A *leadership* crisis is a relationship crisis between leaders and followers.” Moses and God needed to sit down with the people and talk about everything. After being enslaved for generations, it would be difficult to trust authorities. How could God and Moses better communicate the shared vision of freedom and promised land and descendants that would multiply like the stars in heaven? How could the people change their response from one of fear and anger to one of trust and hope?

Of course, this is imposing modern psychology on them, but they needed some sort of relationship coaching.

There are good reasons for leaders to be removed from the people. Leaders must not be easily swayed from the mission. They must be committed to and maintain a clear vision of the mission. When the group’s impulses pull this way and that way, leaders may need to say, “no” to the people. And because of that, leaders may not be friends with the people. Just as a child needs a parent to be an authority in their lives, creating and maintaining boundaries, then correcting when the child runs amok – the people need leaders to be authoritative. The Israelites needed Aaron and Moses to be different from themselves. They needed Aaron and Moses to say, “no” and get their train back on the track. And the people needed God to be more faithful than the other idols and statues. They needed God to be present.

In order to see God’s vision and follow God’s vision, the leaders must be in constant communication with God… sometimes holding each other accountable… even on hard days. Moses stood up to God, unwilling to let God’s impulses break their covenant. Moses reminded God of their long-standing relationship, and reminded YHWH of God’s own character. Moses could not have done this if he did not know God. Moses could not have said this if he did not understand God. He knew the words to say, he knew the approach to take to change God’s mind. He showed real leadership and strength of character.

There are countless of examples of leaders who lose their way, and lose sight of their mission. Presidents who make excuses for white supremacists. Police officers who act in fear when dealing with suspects. Company executives who make company policy with selfish motives. Pastors who acquiesce when parishoners threaten to withhold their tithe unless *their* personal needs are met. Church officers who wait until the meeting is over to share their honest opinion. These are weak leaders. These are leaders who fall victim to the followers’ impulses. These are leaders who are not in constant communication with God.

At Sweet Hollow, we elect officers (Deacons and Elders) to do specific tasks. They need to stay focused. They must be in the midst of us, to lead us forward, and also apart from us. They need to be praying and regularly reading scripture, listening to God’s voice.

We are beginning this year’s officer nomination process. The church officers met together recently and recommended that we downsize our Elder and Deacon nominations (at least for the next year). This came after many discussions about the changing demographics, abilities, and needs at Sweet Hollow. We can no longer sustain a Session of 9 members, and a Diaconate of 12 members. The past year’s Visioning Task Force came to similar conclusions as they realized our volunteer base has changed. The Church Officers have thus instructed the Nominating Committee to elect one Elder to service, no Deacons in this class, next year’s Nominating Committee (who will serve for just a year), and a Pastoral Nominating Committee (who will serve until their work is done). Pending your approval at January’s congregational meeting, these elected officials will be our leaders for the foreseeable future. They will be the ones we trust with our vision. They will be the ones to keep our train on the track. They will definitely need to be in constant conversation with God as we go forward. They may need to tell the rest of us, “no” on occasion.

And we, followers, need to trust them with our vision.

It’s hard wandering in the wilderness. It’s hard to look for and long for the promised land. “Be still and know that YHWH is our God.” He has led us out of slavery of sin and death, and freed us for life eternal with the Triune God. Thanks be to God for leading and sustaining us. May we not run wild with our own desires, but recommit ourselves each day to the journey with God and one another. Amen.