

# *Filling in the Blanks*

A sermon expositing Exodus 32:1-14

By Brent Bowden

First Baptist Church of Rochester

Does it sound familiar at all? The moments that the Hebrew people were living through in our reading this morning? You'll recall, as we've touched on their story several times this year, that they have been led by Moses out from slavery in Egypt through the parted waters of the sea and out into the wilderness where their journeying has carried them through drought and famine and brought them now to the foot of a sacred mountain, Sinai. Called by God, Moses ascended that mountain and the people's expectation was that he would return with a word from God on what would happen next, on who they would become as a free people, as a holy nation.

Let's say that again, in this way: They had seen in the days and months prior, things that none of them had ever seen or expected to see. Their entire way of life had shifted almost overnight and for a period of time they had been wandering without the luxury of planning their route. Their days were marked by improvisation without much more of a goal than to simply get through to the next day and do it all again. But those dramatic events and unstructured days had carried them to an inflection point. In the days ahead they, with God's help, would begin to forge a new identity, a new way of being together, a new way of being in the world – but in those moments while Moses was on the mountaintop they simply waited to see what was about to happen.

Does it sound familiar at all? If it doesn't seem familiar at all I'd like to welcome you to the year 2020. I hope your ten month nap has been a good one. You're probably wondering why we're all wearing masks and doing church by computer. We have that and a whole lot more to fill you in on.

We know what it means to stand and wonder what happens next. We know what it means to sense that everything that has been normative in life to this point is up for renegotiation. We know what it's like to find both fear and hope in that tenuous reality. We know in 2020 just a bit about what life was like at the foot of Mt. Sinai. That's why it is good that we make notice of what the people did there.

The problem was that Moses was taking forever. God, I guess, was taking forever to do whatever work was happening up there. The people knew that the project of becoming something entirely new in the world would not happen overnight, but they did expect a road map or a blue print sometime soon. "What's the plan here?" they thought. As the moments passed slowly their patience grew thin. They began to wonder if the answers were coming at all. Had something happened to Moses up there? Had he been injured or worse or had he climbed up and snuck off the other side to escape the pressure of leading in such a tenuous moment? In those moments of impatience they did what we all do, what our minds are geared to do. They did this:

1, 2, 3, 4....

Red, White, and....

Lions and Tigers and....Oh my.

Praise God from whom....

Just now the collective mindset of this congregation has happened upon the number 5, the color Blue, Bears, and some of you are probably still singing the doxology even though I've formally mentioned none of them. You've simply experienced the human capacity to take established patterns, anticipate their likely outcome, and predict what happens next. You've filled in the blanks and all I needed to do for your mind to automatically step into that roll was to simply leave an open moment.

That's where the Hebrew people were. They were in an open moment and when the openness of that moment became too much, they filled in the blanks. You've probably heard that what they did in creating that golden calf was to turn away from God to seek some other deity, but that isn't what happened at all. They didn't cast an image of some other god, they cast an image of their own god using what they already had. Literally, they used the metals and materials already in their possession, but also their past experiences and expectations and anticipations about what God should be. The real damage there isn't that they created a statue, it's that in so doing they did the same thing with their expectations of life. While Moses was on the mountaintop receiving from God the framework of a whole new, unique and beautiful way for the people to relate to god and to exist in the world the people were down below recasting their lives in the molds they had picked up back in Egypt.

They never gave up on following God into the future, they just recast God and therefore recast the future in the image of their own expectations. We stand where they stood. As people of faith, our understanding of the character of God has everything to do with the way we live our lives. Thanks be to God, there are a few things we *know* about God that can inform the way we show up in the conversation about what comes next and in the way that we respond to whatever ultimately *does* come next. God is good. God is just. God is peace. God loves and provides for everyone, but is biased toward the poor and the vulnerable. If we are guided by this image of God in the days ahead we cannot go wrong, but there are other more complex questions at play in this tenuous time. You will hear all around you these days, the voices of those who are absolutely certain they know the answers to the most pressing questions. They have filled in all the blanks. Both what they believe to be true about the world and where they think society should go have been cast in precious metal. Those who wish to honor God, though, do well to leave some room for mystery, to avoid casting God into a set form, to act with resolve in the areas we can be certain of God's character, but in times of uncertainty to continue to wait and listen.

Amen.