Being a Community, Not A Crowd

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Rev. Jennifer Gleichauf

Somebody in the Israelite camp packed a golden calf mold for the trip out of Egypt, which tells you something about how ready we are, even in our best moments, to reach for the wrong thing when we're scared. Our story from Exodus today illustrates two of the most dangerous situations we can find ourselves in as people: being part of a crowd ruled by fear or being a lone voice isolated from community. Both are situations that almost always lead to trouble, as they do here.

The crowd of Israelites were in the desert, away from all they had known. They had things that connected them – the experience of being slaves, their miraculous escape from Egypt, the experiences of God showing up to provide manna and water. But they were people between places and still working out how to be together. And their leader, Moses, disappeared up the mountain and had been gone for forty days (which is scripture's way of saying A LONG TIME) and they are getting more and more agitated and nervous and afraid every day. So, they get it in their heads they need to try something different. Despite God's past faithfulness, it's been at least what feels like a long time and they aren't sure God is going to come through for them this time, so they decide they should try worshipping one of the Gods they had seen the Egyptians pray to. Maybe a golden calf would save them, get them out of the desert. Again, it seems strange that someone packed a golden calf mold on their way fleeing from Egypt, but when you've got one, you're going to want to use it. And so we see a crowd, driven by fear, make a classic human move towards an idol and hoping it will save them. A crowd without practices and structure to ground them, quickly becomes a mob because fear feeds off group uncertainty and if it doesn't have a more productive place for it to go, things can go the wrong direction pretty quickly.

And then, there's the other danger of the story – a person alone without support trying to stand up to negative peer pressure. Moses went off up the hill and left his brother Aaron in charge. But Aaron doesn't have anyone to lean on or to help him withstand the pressure of the crowd. We don't know exactly why he gave in to them and agreed to make the golden calf. We know he eventually becomes a good leader as the high priest of Israel, but in this moment, isolated and being pressured by the crowd, he gives in though he surely knows it is the wrong thing to do. But, that's often what happens to people who are isolated from supportive communities and practices. Without connections to sustain you and strengthen you, it is all too easy to lose your purpose and resolve.

Notice what was missing in that desert. The Israelites had a shared history. They had a shared fear. What they didn't have was a shared practice. Nobody stood up and said, "Let's gather and remember what God has done." Nobody said, "Let's pray before we decide anything." Nobody had a rhythm to fall back on when Moses went quiet.

And that's the difference between a crowd and a community. A crowd is gathered by fear. A community is gathered by memory and practice. A crowd asks, "What can we grab onto right now?" A community asks, "What do we already know about who holds us?"

Thousands of years later, our first impulse may not be to make a golden calf, though there certainly are those who still seem to take comfort in golden statues, but the impulse to look for other things to save us or to help us feel in control is strong. We know all too well what it is to feel out of control or afraid – to feel uncertain about what is happening and what our future looks like.

And what do we do when we are impatient or afraid or both? We turn to all kinds of idols to try and make ourselves feel better. We may try to gain greater power or status for ourselves thinking that if we have more influence and control we will be able to fix things ourselves. We may think if we just learn more and educate ourselves on whatever it is, then maybe we won't feel afraid anymore. Or the opposite, we may think if we just stick our heads in the sand and not pay attention to anything around us, maybe that will calm our fears. We may put our faith into technology and think new machines or tech advances will save us. We may make ourselves as busy as possible both for the sense of importance that can give us or just look for the relief of distraction to keep us from having time to be afraid. Some of us may turn to alcohol or drugs or other extreme physical experiences to find periods of escape from our other emotions. We may put our faith in the idea that having enough money or enough stuff might insulate us from things we are afraid of. In other words, there are all kinds of ways for us to get swept up by other crowds into things that in better circumstances we know are wrong. There are all kinds of idols to worship individually and collectively when we are feeling out of control and afraid.

And of course, the reason we turn to those things, is that they do work. For a time. To a point. All of those other things will cover over or take away our feelings of fear or make us feel like we are in control – until they don't. These idols feel good in the moment, but eventually each will destroy us. Why? Because they are never enough. They fool us into thinking we might be able to have enough money, enough stuff, enough power, enough knowledge to finally feel in control, but each time we reach one goal, we find the goal line has moved and now if we want to feel in control or safe, we need more. And not

only do we find we always need more, each of these idols turn us inward more and more. They convince us to focus more on ourselves; to choose ourselves first every time; to not trust other people. The more we do that, the more isolated we become which in turn makes us more afraid. It's a nasty circle.
The only thing we can count on when we are at the end of our rope, or come face to face with how little control we have, or are afraid of whatever we are facing is that God will be there. Because God is what is beyond our control. Which I mean in both ways – we cannot control God, but also God is what we find when we get out into the wilderness of life beyond whatever we can control.

Paul, author of Philippians, our second reading today, knew something about this. Our passage in Philippians this morning is one of the most beautiful and oft-quoted scriptures in the bible with reminders to rejoice always and peace surpassing understanding and thinking on what is honorable, just and pleasing. It sounds like a passage written by a wise monk sitting at his quiet desk. But Paul wrote this letter from prison where he had every reason to believe he might die and he was writing to a community who were facing persecution.

And yet, Paul, from jail, with shackles on his wrists clinking away, writes out the words "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice." All around him, the church is being assaulted, the apostles are being persecuted, families are being torn apart, and fear is reigning in the hearts of the believers; and Paul's word to them, while facing his own death, is: rejoice.

He takes it even further and tells these people with everything to worry about "Do not be anxious about anything" And if he left it there then I would be fully ready to dismiss Paul altogether. What kind of advice is "do not be anxious about anything?" What kind of a terrible platitude is that?

But he does not leave it there. He goes on to say "but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." Prayer and supplication with thanksgiving.

Prayer and supplication means coming to God honestly and vulnerably. It means opening our hearts and being honest about our fears and what feels out of control. It means trusting God to meet us in prayer and to be there with us in whatever situation we find ourselves. It means remembering that we are not alone, not the first to face hard times, not abandoned.

But Paul doesn't just want us to pray and give God our laundry list of worries. He also says by prayer and supplication *with thanksgiving*. Because we are quick to forget our blessings when things are hard. We are quick to forget all the other times God has seen

us through. Fear made the Israelites forget how God parted the Red sea, made food fall from heaven, brought water out of a rock in the desert. Those are pretty big miracles to forget. But that is how powerful fear can be. This is why we need a practice of thanksgiving – gratitude – to remember. It is how we remind ourselves, and each other, that the God who has carried us this far is not finished.

Because what really would have made the difference in that desert? Not a better leader. Not a better plan. One person next to Aaron saying, "Wait. Remember the sea. Remember the manna. Let's pray first." That's what it takes to turn a crowd into a community. People who remember out loud, who practice our faith and invite others to join in.

Our theme this stewardship season is Grounded in Connection: The Life We Share. This is the answer to both of the dangerous situations in our Exodus story. Being grounded, rooted, in relationship with God and with each other is how we become a community instead of being a crowd swept away by fear or being so isolated that we lose our resolve and go down the wrong path. Together we become a community by grounding ourselves with practices and structure for our lives together. We do things like: pray together and make sure we remember all we have to be grateful for. We worship together and make a point of telling the stories of our ancestors and all the ways God has brought them through hard times. We sing together to remember what it feels like to bring our voices together and be united in strength of purpose. We eat together to find the joy of life and remember how many needs we have in common. We serve together to remember that our blessings are never for hoarding but for the purpose of caring for each other. We give our time and talents to each other, for each other, because we know that is the only way we can weather the hard times. And we give our money which is particularly important because money is one of our oldest and most constant idols. We hoard and worship money because it promises the most safety. So, when we give some of it away, we're practicing, with our hands and our bank accounts, a different belief: that God is our security. Giving is how we say out loud, "I trust that there will be enough, and I trust that we're in this together."

So may we be a community and not a crowd, rooted in the stories that shape us, held by the practices which support us, and anchored in the only One worthy of our trust. Amen.