

Before Kate left for vacation, she gave a sermon that has gotten more response than perhaps any other. It is based on Exodus 32:1-14 and Philippians 4:1-10, and is entitled "The Peace of God." We offer it to you.

Paul's letter to the Philippians set next to the story you just heard from the book of Exodus gives us an opportunity to explore a primary choice we make every day of our lives – a choice that determines to a large part the texture and color, the vitality and meaning of every moment. In Exodus, the people give us an example. Hear the words again. *"When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain (remember, they had just received the law), the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."*

Don't you love these people? "As for **this Moses**," the guy who only just met God with them...well, he's not around...so what good is he?! Actually, I **do love** these people. They are scared. They are alone in the wilderness and their protector figure is missing. They are starting to panic. I know what panic feels like, and it's not good. And so, they immediately seek a way to ease their distress. They, along with Aaron, make an idol...a golden god upon which to transfer their anxiety and needs, something tangible to ease their sense of loneliness and fear.

Now we might think that's a really primitive or infantile course of action, but it really isn't any more primitive or infantile than the way many of us respond to rising insecurity. Instead looking at it and facing it, we do everything we can to ward it off. Whether it be by padding our 401K's, in essence reaching for gold, or stocking our refrigerators, gorging on food, or surrounding ourselves with never-ending distraction, reveling in avoidance, or by throwing ourselves into the next relationship, the next drink, or the next self-affirming ideology, it all accomplishes the same thing. It takes us **out** of the moment, out of the place where God **is**. Ultimately, it proves to be false security. Choosing to engage with an idol, instead of the living God, leaves us more frightened and insecure than ever.

Now, on the other hand, Paul is writing to the Philippians from a Roman jail. His circumstances are dire. He may or may not get out alive. But hear **his** words. *"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is **near**. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*

Paul is making his choice – to rejoice in the living God, even in his circumstances. That does not mean he is not afraid, but this is not where he chooses to dwell. Instead he dwells in whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, anything worthy of praise. Paul, unlike the Israelites in Exodus, chooses not to run away from the moment, not to make an idol to dull his anxiety or pain, but to **find God deep within the place he is**, in the moment he is living right now...even in prison.

Does this just sound too Pollyanna? I don't think so. It takes a steady heart to choose to remain rooted **right in the moment** to find the God who is dwelling there, a heart courageous enough to be vulnerable to life as it is happening. I can't keep this in the abstract. It is too important. Many of you may remember a few years ago when I first took ill. I had to take a few months off. I had fevers, was losing my hair, and weight was coming off without trying. (First time I ever hit the scale and hoped for a higher number!) It was terribly frightening for me, visiting doctor after doctor, taking test after test, and no diagnosis. I just wanted it all to go away. And then one day, perhaps when I was too tired to be so scared anymore, I made a decision. Instead of running away from the experience, I turned toward it, and stopped hoping for distraction. I began reflecting on a book about death, because that was the main fear looming in me. Instead of keeping it submerged, I began to open up to it. Rather than running away from the possibility, I

began to view it as my next unbidden but undeniable learning experience. I wrote about it in my journal. If I was going to die, I was going to do so mindfully, trusting God to give to give me what I needed.

An interesting thing happened...**every part** of life suddenly became very vivid. The autumn was wondrous that year, and I remember aching over its beauty. I felt a special gentleness toward the people who cared for me and all those who brought cards, food, and flowers. It was as if I had never seen their loveliness in quite that way before. My anxiety seemed to ease in direct correlation to the love and gratitude growing inside me. And where my fear once kept me in a state of anxious isolation, my gratitude seemed to **weave me more deeply into life**. Paul names it well this morning – he calls it the “peace of God which surpasses all understanding.” That peace seemed to live right beyond my fear. If I had kept running, I would never have found it.

There was no sudden cure, but there was deep healing. Perhaps the same healing that Paul was experiencing in prison, finding that God was deeper in him than his fear, and that rejoicing is possible even in dire circumstances. You see, fear and anxiety are **not** who we are. They flutter around the periphery inside, keeping us from our true core. But in the center is God, the spirit of love, courage, and deep peace.

In contrast, the golden calf of the Israelites is a clear symbol of the fruitlessness of running away from fear, a refusal to stay in the depth and the truth of the moment, a refusal to **wait on God**. The problem is, when we mold the calf, or reach for any substitute for the living God, we may find some temporary relief, but there will be no lasting gratitude, no healing, no security, no peace.

So, here is our primary choice – will it be idols or the living God? Admittedly it is not an easy one. Our consumer society is all set up to make the idols more than attractive. In fact, it banks on the notion that we are all looking for God substitutes – something to make us feel special, worthy, safe, beautiful, and good. Something that will take the edge off in this violence-ridden and unjust world. Something that will bring easy relief for the struggles we face day

in and day out. But, there is no true easy relief. The temporary fixes in the end only increase our insecurity.

Authentic security lies in God, who can be found by facing our fears, embracing the moment, and diving down deep beyond the restlessness into the truth of the moment. In facing death, I found **I wasn't alone there**. That discovery has changed me. No, it hasn't taken away all my fears. But it has taught me that a gracious presence meets me in them if I sit still and do not run away.

Every day, every minute, we make a decision whether to fully live in the present moment where God is, where God is speaking, working, and loving, or to dull our senses and our awareness with the idol of our choosing. The idol will engage us, perhaps calm and amuse us, but it will not transform us. For that, **we must wait on God**. For deep within every circumstance, a beating and open heart of **profound love** can meet us, embrace us, and move us on to peace and rejoicing! Amen.

You see, fear and anxiety
are **not** who we are.
They flutter around the
periphery inside,
keeping us from
our true core.
But in the center
is God,
the spirit of love,
courage,
and
deep peace.