

When I first read this, God appeared petulant. I don't serve a petulant God, so I needed to circle back and re-think my understanding of these passages. Why would a loving God have a temper tantrum with Moses, saying "Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way." Exodus 33: 3 It sounded like the divine equivalent of "You suck. I'm taking my marbles and going home!" My God is slow to anger, so what's up with this threat?

In the next section, Moses enters the Tent of Meeting where the Lord spoke to Moses "...face to face, as a man speaks with his friend." Exodus 33:11 In my first reading, I imagined Moses chastising God. I imagined Moses indignantly saying "You have been telling me, 'Lead the People', but you haven't told me whom you will send with me." I imagined Moses, exasperated, asking for lessons on God's ways and accusing him of forgetting that the Israelites are his people when he commands God to "Teach me your ways.... Remember that this nation is your people." 33:12-13.

But, this whole interpretation was inconsistent with the identity of God as I have understood him. It just didn't make sense that God would relate to Moses as a petulant, almost juvenile, human. It didn't fit. Why would a loving, powerful, omniscient God relate to Moses this way?

So, I needed to circle back to the story of the Exodus and re-think my interpretation. The people left slavery, wandered, suffered, were encouraged, and then Moses left to talk to God. The people got restless and Aaron tried to pacify them with a golden calf which they, in Moses's absence, decided to worship because they didn't know how to wait and persevere in their faith when God was silent. When he was silent.... God was intimately present with them, visible with a cloud and a flame, providing a path and water and manna on a regular basis. And, then God was silent. Moses was silent. From the Israelites' perspective, God and their leader were both silent. The Israelites, dependent on God's tangible presence were now ready to learn how to remain faithful even when God and their human leader were absent.

Of course, God wasn't absent or silent. He was talking to Moses. God, simultaneously, was teaching Moses while he was teaching the Israelites. Moses was learning God's laws, a 40-day leadership intensive. While Moses was learning about the law, the Israelites were getting an experiential lesson on waiting. And, then God brought them back together at exactly the right time.

When Moses descended from Mount Sinai, he had God's laws and was ready to go. The people had strayed, built a new idol and planned a party. Moses breaks the tablets, and God gets the Israelites' attention with a plague.

And as I re-read these passages, my understanding shifts. I realize my God is not petulant. In my mind, I hear not a petulant God, but a God who clarifies his direction and builds his chosen people's capacity to follow him via experiential lessons that they understand. He differentiates his instruction, giving Moses the law and giving the Israelites an experience in which they have the choice to follow him, the opportunity to stray and come back to him, and proximity to one another so that they can learn from each other.

When I read it from this perspective, Moses and God reunite in the Tent of Meeting; and Moses does not sound demanding. Rather, he sounds curious as he, himself, circles back. It doesn't sound like Moses is chastising God or exasperated. Rather Moses sounds genuinely curious when he asks God to explain. I imagine him cocking his head to one side in the Tent of Meeting and asking with genuine curiosity...But, Lord, if you don't go with us then "What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the Earth?" Once Moses asks this question, perhaps it is a signal to God that Moses is ready for his next lesson. It was as if Moses was now able to focus on the essence of what God knew Moses needed to know and what God wanted Moses to share with the Israelites. The focus shifted away from getting to the Promised Land and centered on what God wanted Moses to pursue: the knowledge that God is available to him...that God knows him. God, himself, gives him the answer. He says he will go with Moses "because I am pleased with you and I know you by name." God gives Moses the law, also in response, because the Israelites still needed a tangible resource to manage uncertainty.

And, when I read this my heart breaks open again. I hold my head in my hands and my eyes fill with tears because I feel, again, the enormity of God's love for me and for all people. God isn't petulant. God isn't juvenile. God was dedicated to teaching the Israelites that they are capable of pleasing him and that they just have to ask him to go with them. They don't have to go to such extremes to find stability when he is silent. He is, rather, just making space for them to choose him. And when they do, he will respond in ways that grow their capacity to follow him in all kinds of contexts: leaving, wandering, floundering. All they have to do is circle back to him, confident that he cannot go with them if they choose to leave him but is ready to travel with them when they ask. When they ask, they can be confident that he is pleased with them, equipped to lead them, and that he knows them by name and, therefore, will give them a tangible resource to help them manage the uncertainty of following him. And, then God wrote the laws down, embedded them in a story about circling back, and invited a leader to create a blog so that I would know it too.