

## Be the People Who...

Kristin Ziman, a former police chief and consultant loves to say she went to Harvard, if only for only three weeks to attend the Harvard Kennedy School of Government “Executives in State and Local Government” program. Toward the end of the course, Marty Linsky, one of the professors stunned Ziman with this statement: “Leadership is about disappointing people at the rate they can absorb.”<sup>1</sup> Ziman found herself wanting to argue back:

Leadership is inspiring people to align with a vision. It’s about taking people where they need to go but otherwise wouldn’t. It’s about setting clear goals for your people and getting work done through others. Great leaders do the opposite of disappointing people.<sup>2</sup>

Six years after Ziman took that course, Linsky’s statement suddenly made all the sense in the world, “Even with the best of intentions, a leader is going to upset someone.”<sup>3</sup>

Deep in the heart of the wilderness on the heels of water from a rock and manna and a covenant forged between God and the wandering Israelites, it appears that Moses’ leadership has disappointed the people well past the rate they can absorb. Moses has been up that mountain for forty long days, and the people are beyond disappointed; they are at their wits end.

Aaron, Moses’ brother and second-in-command seems to be disappointment averse to the extreme. And honestly, it’s hard to blame him. There are hundreds of thousands of anxious, confused people demanding gods or a god they can see and touch and follow. We wondered in bible study on Wednesday what would have happened if Aaron—or anyone in the crowd, honestly—had had the wherewithal to press pause and remind the people of all that God had done for them thus far. What if Aaron had rehearsed the salvation story of

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<sup>1</sup> From Kristen Ziman’s blog: <https://kristenziman.com/leadership-is-about-disappointing-people-at-the-rate-they-can-absorb/>

<sup>2</sup> Ziman

<sup>3</sup> Ziman

plagues and Passover, the parting of the Red Sea and the gifts of daily manna, and perhaps more significantly a refresher on the covenant they made with God in chapter 20 when God gave them the Ten Commandments? Would that have changed the story? As we discussed a few weeks back, the “what if” game doesn’t help us work with what is. And “what is” with Moses up that mountain is not good. As scholar and president of Union Presbyterian Seminary, Dr. Jacqueline Lapsley writes, “The relationship between God and God’s people is at its lowest point in the whole Bible in this passage.”<sup>4</sup> The. Lowest. Point. That’s a big claim, and it’s an accurate claim. God has brought this stiff-necked people out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. And in response, they have covenanted to be God’s people which means they have promised to worship none other than the one God AND not to worship any human-made image of God. While it’s not entirely clear who the people imagine this golden calf to be, it is very clear that they have at least violated one commandment if not two. And they are not the only ones at their wits end. The Lord of all is ready, it seems to incinerate them and start over with Moses as the new Abraham. As the psalm reads, Moses stands in the breach, rehearsing the very story we were wishing Aaron had re-told the anxious Israelites. And God chooses not to destroy them. That does not mean everything is hunky dory. This is not the end of the story. Moses is livid when he discovers what has happened and God does punish the people. And that is not the end of the story either. God once again chooses to move forward with these frightened stiff-necked people, and that may be some of the best news I have heard in a while.

Because I am more stiff-necked than I’d like to imagine, and more fickle than I’d wish. And when I grow weary of waiting on God, I too am tempted to grasp at something I can see or pin all my hopes on someone standing right in front of me or making big promises from the nearest screen. And that is where I get myself in trouble. My grasping and my hopes-pinning largely stem from my putting ultimate faith in something or someone who is less than ultimate, someone or something that is not God. The people have placed their faith in Moses, rather than in God, it seems. Moses has been up on the mountain for 40 long days; God has not

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/golden-calf-3/commentary-on-exodus-321-14-9>

gone anywhere. And in Moses' absence, the people get restless and disappointed and stir one another up and lose their way. And when Moses comes down that mountain, after intervening on their behalf, he topples the calf into the fire, and it is destroyed. If the thing or the person I put on that pedestal cannot withstand the flames, I have placed my faith in the wrong thing or hitched my hopes to the wrong person. That commandment that tells me not to worship anyone or anything other than the Lord of all and not to make an image of that Lord is not intended to be oppressive. Instead that commandment is freedom and grace. No one and nothing can do what God can do; no one and nothing can save me or save us other than God. Idolatry is not simply a matter of worshipping a calf hastily made of gold earrings. Idolatry is placing my *ultimate* faith in anything or anyone other than God— a leader, a nation, a bank account, a political party, a zip code, or anything else in this beloved and battered human realm. And idolatry is an absolute guarantee that I will be disappointed if not left utterly bereft when that person or thing tumbles off that rickety pedestal. God knows this, and God wants more for each and every one of God's beloved children, including us.

So what are we to do? How can we not find ourselves dancing around a shiny cow when we grow weary in the waiting? This answer should not come as a tremendous surprise, but for me, it's the church, the imperfect, messy, occasionally disappointing church, the joyful, loving, doing-its-best-to-be-faithful church. One of you reminded me of the encouragement from the book of Hebrews this past week:

Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.<sup>5</sup>

We need each other; I need you. We human beings are quite gifted in provoking one another, stirring one another up, for ill **and** for good. I need the church to provoke me in the very best way. I need to be around children asking fantastic and fantastical questions about life and faith and God. I need to hear the stories of those who have been faithful for more years than I have been alive and those who are wise beyond their years. I need to be inspired by humble church leaders who do not claim to be perfect and who try to do their

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<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 10:24-25, NRSVue

compassionate best. I need to gather with people who cry together over losses of every kind and listen when there are just no words. I need to sing alongside babies who gurgle and fuss in the silence. I need to pray with those who can't always find the words and to puzzle over scripture with me when what God calls me to do and be seems impossible. I need to hear the splash of the water when I am reminded that God loves me no matter how deeply or frequently I have disappointed him or anyone else in the past week. And I need to taste the soft square of bread and the tart cup of juice around this table with you, being reminded that by the work of the Holy Spirit, Christ is in fact in the midst of us, his befuddling and beloved siblings, no matter what.

There is a saying that we should aspire to be the person we needed when we were children, to be the encourager, the consistent presence, the wise and compassionate grownup we needed when we were growing up. In this gathered community of faith and faithfulness and in communities of faith across this huge wide world on this World Communion Sunday, I see you being the people I need when I am stuck at the bottom of that mountain. I cannot be faithful on my own. I need the community of faith to encourage me and to hold me accountable as we follow Christ together. I believe we are called to be provokers of the best kind, to be for one another who I wished Aaron and the people had found a way to be for one another at the foot of that mountain. You point me to hope in the one true God when leaders with feet of clay let me down. You “provoke [me and] one another to love and good deeds,” when cynicism seems to make the most sense. You remind me of the story of God’s saving ways when I am tempted to forget.

We will disappoint one another, dear ones. And more powerfully, by the grace of God, we will also provoke one another in all the good ways, and we will hold one another close and remind one another over and over and over again of the love, power, and saving grace given to us and to all in the God we meet in Jesus Christ. For it is this God who can be trusted to meet us in every desert; it is this God who can be trusted to lead us in the way of life; and it is this God who can be trusted to bring us into the promised land of milk and honey, love and justice, hope and wholeness, as only God can.

Thanks be to God. Amen.