

Come Down and Guide Us into the Promised Land
based on Exodus 32:1-14, David Jahnke, 10/12/14

Moses was up on the mountain of God and he took a long, long time up there before coming down. So the Israelites grew a little tired of waiting on him. They were stuck in a wilderness and did not know how to proceed. They wanted something to believe in and follow out of the wilderness. They had memories of God's deliverance from Egypt and His presence in a cloud and pillar of fire. But that was gone as was their leader. They wanted something concrete and valuable that they could easily believe and rejoice in; they wanted someone and something to lead them out of this insecure and dangerous place.

I think the same could be said of God's people today who might think that Jesus has been up with God for 2000 years. Many do not have the patience for the spiritual life. So instead of placing our hope, trust, value, and concern in someone who may or may not come down again in their minds, they search for these things within the universe.

The philosopher Charles Taylor calls this the "immanentization" of the western worldview; the loss of transcendence in favor of what is around us. And he argues that we are all enveloped by this cultural shift.

A German theologian named Rudolf Bultmann made a similar argument 60 years ago when he spoke of how westerners do not go to their priest or a shaman when they are sick but rather to their local physician. And generally speaking, the same goes for issues with our minds or emotional states. We go to psychologists and therapists for explanations and treatments that have no reference to the transcendent. And just as we seek healing from within the universe, the same generally goes for meaning, joy and value.

But Taylor says there is a cross-pressure that weighs upon modern humans; a memory of the transcendent or at least a memory of belief in it that keeps us wondering and wanting, at least at times.

A song called Helplessness Blues by the Fleet Foxes speaks to this:

I was raised up believing I was somehow unique
Like a snowflake distinct among snowflakes, unique in each way you can see
And now after some thinking, I'd say I'd rather be

A functioning cog in some great machinery serving something beyond me

But I don't know, I don't know! what that will be
I'll get back to you someday soon, you will see [Fleet Foxes, Helplessness Blues]

This is where so many people are these days and especially Gen X and younger. We have been deeply schooled in individuality and reason. But the memory of something more never quite leaves us and we wonder if we are a part of something bigger? Is there a greater purpose beyond me that I can serve? If so, what and why should I? And where is it? And why does it not come down and reveal itself and lead me? We want guidance into the right and the good that both haunt our conscience and gives us hope.

With no explicit clarity from above, we seek something concrete to follow. And this is not all bad. I was struck by the Israelites willingness to give up their gold and offer it in remembrance of their delivery from Egypt. And Aaron said it was a festival to the Lord— and they danced and sang and ate and drank and were merry.

So even imperfect offerings that honor the memory of the transcendent have value. Worldly groups and activities— sports teams, music festivals, support groups, good works of all kinds— can obviously serve God's purposes. But do we see them as a means to the God who is beyond and within and connecting them all? Or are we in danger of replacing the God we are tired of waiting on with a bunch of little gods we can dance around and think we can control?

If the latter, we are heading down a path of the good being at our whim and will; the good as an occasional appeasement of our conscience rather that keeps us from real spiritual change. And the idols can gradually take over to the point where labor or activities either becomes an obsession where we do not rest enough or labor becomes a burden that must be endured for the sake of evening and weekend revelry.

God watches all of this and sends His judgment to get us back on track. God spoke to Moses about "*those* stubborn and idolatrous people" and warned of how destruction would be the end of their self-serving revelry. But Moses prayed that God would remember that these *are His people* and to have mercy upon them.

This is precisely what Christ has done for the world. He is constantly praying for us and warding off so much destruction. He came down from the mountain of Heaven once for us once landing in a manger to show us the perfect parental Love of God; and his whole life was about guiding lost souls into the Kingdom. And when he went back up again, He sent His Spirit down to fill His body on earth—that is all of us and anyone who follows the Way of Love. And he did this so that we might lead the world out of the wilderness and into the promised land.

I watched an excellent documentary that highlights how this works and what it looks like. It was called *Serving Life* and it was about a hospice program run by inmates at a maximum security penitentiary in Louisiana. The program was started by the warden who kind of came down from his mountain of power in order to guide inmates out of the wilderness of their past lives and into the Kingdom of compassion and care for others. He guided them out of lives of taking and into lives of giving.

It was beautiful to behold criminals whose problems were related to fear and insecurity and the subsequent pursuit of revelry and were in prison for murder, armed robbery and drug charges and worse—they were all transformed by caring for their fellow prisoners who are dying. They feed, drink, bathe, and change and caress and do so much more for these dying ones; many of whom received so little care throughout their lives; and now they suddenly find themselves enveloped by love and care.

One of the gentleman working hospice had killed someone's wife for money. And he was shocked when his death sentence was commuted to life in prison. He said, "I was just trying to figure out why God would allow me to [keep living] when I was guilty. I mean I know God uses people for all kinds of thing but I didn't know what my purpose was. And now I know why. I know what my purpose is"; that is to care for the dying; to show love and mercy to those condemned by the world and sin and death, which is essentially what our purpose is.

The warden visited the hospice unit and after gabbing with some of the patients, he turned to the camera and said that he was "as much of a hawk as you will find. But that these are people made by God. And God does not make garbage. And God is all about forgiveness. And when men are at this point, it's time for forgiveness; and it's time for someone to care for them."

God's conviction and judgment had been with these people through their imprisonment and in their conscience. And they all felt that day after day. But prayers had been lifted up and they were all enveloped by Kingdom love and mercy, pointing the way forward to what was ahead.

It seems a bit odd to say that convicted felons are our example but it's true; along with the warden. They came down from different high places. One was in a position exalted by society and the other a self-exalted above the Law place. All came down brought the mercy of God to people desperately in need of it in every way.

May we do the same and thus find the same freedom and fulfillment that these inmates found in prison even while in prison. May we hear God's call to live in hospice; healing each other as sin and death bear down. Because we are *all* leaders with different gifts that are meant to serve as signposts to the Kingdom. Let us be the incarnate body of Christ— brought down to God's lost ones in order to point out the reality of the eternal Kingdom of God. To the God of all grace who calls us to eternal reunion with Christ be all the glory and the power now and forevermore. And God's people say...