

**SERMON TITLE:** “Two Ways of Waiting”

**TEXT:** Exodus 32:1-14

**PREACHED AT:** Lethbridge Mennonite Church

**BY:** Ryan Dueck

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When I pray with our kids at night, we almost always begin by rehearsing what we are thankful for. We usually thank God for the usual things: for families who love us, for friends, for our church, for a good day at school, for a warm house, for fun things to do, for food to eat, for pets, for toys, for forgiveness when we do bad things, etc.

We ask for things, too. We ask God to help us in the day ahead, to make us more kind and good, to make us better friends and neighbours, to help us with this or that problem, to help this or that person going through a difficult time etc, but it struck me this week **how much time we spend thanking God** for his gifts to us.

I think this is a very good thing. You probably do too.

It’s a very appropriate thing, given that today is Thanksgiving Sunday, to celebrate being thankful!

I remember Thanksgiving services in our church growing up where we would always have huge displays with pumpkins and bread and produce and all other manner of tangible reminders of God’s provision of bounty for us. I always liked Thanksgiving because it meant that harvest time was (mostly) done, and that hockey season had arrived! Thanksgiving meant good food, happy people, and a full church.

But even as a kid, I often wondered about how we talked about Thanksgiving. We were often told that it was our duty to be thankful because there were so many people who had so much less than us.

Indeed, many people in our own congregation had come out of impoverished backgrounds. They knew firsthand what it meant to go without. For them, the imperative to give thanks was especially urgent!

I understood the logical connection. It’s hard to go without, so when you have enough, or more than enough, you should be grateful! It makes sense. It’s the **right thing** to do.

But my nature was always to ask questions, I suppose, and so I wondered. What about those who still don’t have enough? How does my being thankful for my plenty help them?

It's kind of like when I tell my kids to finish every last morsel of their supper because "there are starving children in Africa who would love to have what you have." How does my child eating past the point of being full help a starving child around the world?

There are other examples of this. This past Wednesday, when Katrin had a group of us making paper airplanes in the basement, a gentleman showed up at the church looking for some relatives of his.

He was a trucker from Missouri who was on his way back home from Alaska. He had Mennonite connections in the area and wanted to see if anyone here knew them.

We didn't know who he was talking about, but I ended up having a very pleasant conversation with this guy. He had been all over North America and all over the world, including Egypt and other places in the Middle East.

He spoke highly of his time overseas, but he said that he couldn't believe how bad things were over there. His next comment was a familiar one: "It sure made me thankful to be an American."

Again, the experience or observation of conditions worse than our own are the spur to being thankful.

But how does our being really, *really* thankful for all that we enjoy—whether today, on Thanksgiving, or any other day—address the painful reality of a world where some have so little to be thankful for?

**The question is this: Should our thankfulness depend upon our experience of goodness and plenty?**

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Our text this morning is, perhaps, a bit of a strange one for Thanksgiving Sunday, but I think it can help us as we think about cultivating a lifestyle of thanksgiving that **includes**, but is not **limited** to our daily experience of goodness and blessing.

As you already heard, we are in the book of Exodus today, and we are looking at one of the many less than inspiring examples in Israel's history.

Before we get to the story of the golden calf, though, perhaps a quick setting of the scene is in order.

The book of Exodus is an absolutely foundational book for all of Scripture. Old Testament writers constantly look back upon Exodus's foundational event—the deliverance of the Hebrews out of Egypt through the Jordan.'

Jesus is portrayed by the gospel writers—especially Matthew—as a kind of “new Moses.” Moses spends forty years in the desert, Jesus spends forty days in the desert; Moses goes up a mountain to get the law of God, Jesus gives his most famous sermon (“law”) from a mountain (Matthew 5-7). Moses leads his people through the Jordan River to the promised land, Jesus gets baptized in the Jordan, setting the example for his followers, and leading the way to freedom.

The book of Exodus looms large over all of Scripture.

Very quickly, here’s what’s happened before our story this morning:

- Israel is oppressed in the land of Egypt, enslaved by Pharaoh
- The call and commission of Moses, the story of the burning bush
- The miraculous deliverance out of Egypt, with the ten plagues
- The Passover, crossing the Red Sea, Pharaoh’s army being swallowed up by the waters after the Israelites go through
- The journey in the desert to Mt. Sinai

AND THEN... we arrive at the foot of Mt. Sinai and the passage Zachary read for us this morning.

Moses has been up on the mountain with God for a long time, and the people start to get restless. “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.”

So, someone has the bright idea to melt down their jewelry and make a golden calf to worship, and Aaron complies. They even declare that this is the god that brought them out of Egypt!

It is hard to overstate how truly pathetic this scene would have seemed. Mere weeks after being led out of oppression and slavery in Egypt in a great display of power and justice by their God, we see the Israelites having a party around a golden calf!

This isn’t the first time that we have seen Israel behaving badly. At least three times prior to this, there are incidents where, despite having seen abundant evidence of God’s miraculous provision and power, the people grumble and complain, and long for the security and predictability of Egypt (Exodus 15:22-25; 16:1-5; 17:1-5).

Rather than responding with gratitude and trust, even through hard times (because wandering around a desert with minimal food and water can’t be fun!), the Israelites repeatedly grumble and complain about what they don’t have.

Rather than thankfully living with God through the ups and downs of this new journey, they bow down to a false god.

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What we see in this story is, essentially, a **waiting** problem. And a **thanks** problem.

Moses is on the mountain for a long time—eight chapters, according to Exodus! The people grow impatient. What is taking so long? Is he coming back? Is he even talking with God? Can we trust him? This is boring...

And so the Israelites fashion their golden calf.

The calf isn't an arbitrary symbol. There were many Ancient Near Eastern cultures in that day—including Egypt—that had some kind of a bull or a calf as a symbol of their deity. These often represented fertility or strength.

In the midst of uncertainty and confusion and apprehension, in the midst of difficult circumstances where the way ahead wasn't clear, Israel reverted to familiar gods.

They took their eyes off the God who had delivered them, the God who had defeated their oppressor, the God who had provided for them, the God who had promised to lead them into a good land of plenty, the God they had seen do incredible things, and adopted the customs and ideologies and worldviews of those around them.

Again and again in Israel's story we see this pattern—forgetting God, failing to give him thanks and praise, and chasing after the gods of surrounding nations.

I wonder, do we do the same thing?

When God seems absent, when the way isn't clear, when things are tough, do we take our eyes off the one true God and “bow down” to the gods around us, whether the gods of money, of entertainment, of distraction, of sex and power, of reputation and prestige?

Do we lose patience with God's unwillingness to act, and look around for more convenient and obvious gods?

Do we forget who God is and what he has done for us?

**Do we only thank God when his presence and blessings are obvious?**

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This Thanksgiving we, like the Israelites at the foot of Mt. Sinai, are faced with a question: **How will we wait for God?**

We are not waiting in the same way as them, of course. We are further along in the story. We are in on the secret that the cross and the empty tomb are God's solution to the brokenness of our world. We know that death is a defeated enemy... We have the teachings of Jesus to guide and shape our paths.

But, like Israel at the foot of that mountain, we are still waiting in uncertain times where we walk through deserts, where God's presence and blessing is not always obvious.

Like Israel, sometimes our experience is one of lack and of pain.

Like Israel, while we have been promised a good land, we are not there yet, and we do not know everything that will happen before we arrive at our destination.

We are still waiting, and we must choose how we will wait.

We can, like the nation of Israel in our text this morning, grumble and complain, and render honour, praise, and thanks where it is not due.

We can thank God **only** when his blessings and presence are obvious, and wander off to false gods when it is not.

**OR, we can choose to wait thankfully and expectantly, confident that the God who has shown his presence in the past, and who has promised good for our future, is faithful—more faithful than we are!—and that he will keep his word.**

This is what Moses banks on, isn't it? In a remarkable few verses at the end of our passage, Moses essentially challenges God to remember the promises he made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—to refrain from wiping out his people for his name's sake.

Remarkably, Moses changes God's mind.

Moses gives us an example of how to wait—expectantly, boldly, gratefully, and confident in the character of God.

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Why be thankful?

Not *just* because we are instructed to do so by God—although we are.

Not *just* because of the many blessings we enjoy from God's hand—although there *are* many.

**Fundamentally, deciding upon a life of thankfulness while wait for and participate in God's coming kingdom is a way of properly locating ourselves in God's world.**

All that we are and all that we have comes from God. And by deciding to live with gratitude and expectant hope, we become better people.

I like how Catholic writer Ron Rolheiser puts it in an essay called “The Value of Praying a Doxology”:

Spiritual writers have always told us that we are either growing or regressing, never neutral. This means that we are either praising someone or demanding that we be praised, offering gratitude or muttering in bitterness, blessing or cursing, turning attention away from ourselves or demanding it be focused on us, expressing admiration or demanding it, praying a doxology or doing violence....

The main reason our faith asks us to constantly render glory [and thanks?] to God is that the more we praise the less we slander, gossip, or pass judgment. Offering praise to God, and others, is what saves us from bitterness and violence.

Offering praise and thanks to God—in good times and in bad—saves us. It saves us from wandering after more convenient gods, but it also save us from becoming less than we were created to be.

May God help us to be people who wait thankfully, who are continually growing and leaning the value of praying and living a doxology.

May God make us a people who are thankful not only because of the blessings we enjoy, but because of the hope to which we are called, and the One who has called us his own.

Amen.