"When Moses Went Missing" October 19, 2025
Exodus 32:1-14 Westminster, Greenville
19th Sunday after Pentecost Ben Dorr
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I wonder if any of you saw the news this morning that there was a robbery at the Louvre in Paris this weekend...apparently, priceless jewelry was stolen.

The news report reminded me of what happened
on the morning of August 21, 1911,
when a man dressed in a white smock,
pretending to be a museum employee
entered the Louvre through an unlocked service door.

He walked into a gallery that contained dozens of masterworks from the Renaissance, and he lifted the *Mona Lisa* from where it hung on the wall. Then he went into a nearby stairwell, removed the painting from its frame, hid the painting under his smock, and walked out the same way he had entered, taking Leonardo da Vinci's most famous work of art with him.

The theft happened on a Monday, when the Louvre was closed for cleaning. This meant that the *Mona Lisa* was not noticed as missing until the following day.

The Louvre was shut down for a week.

When it reopened, tourists flocked to the museum.
They wanted to see the bare wall where the painting once hung.

The police searched in vain for some clue as to who stole this treasured work of art. For a time, even the great Pablo Picaso was considered a prime suspect.

Finally, after two years had gone by, an Italian art dealer received a note from someone who claimed to have the *Mona Lisa*. This individual was willing to sell it, as long as the art dealer promised to keep the painting in Italy.

Long story short, the thief was finally apprehended, and in January of 1914—some 29 months after it had been stolen—the *Mona Lisa* was returned. In the first two days after the painting was back, over 120,000 people came to the Louvre to see the painting in its rightful place.

Now...before the painting was stolen, it lived in a gallery with other great Renaissance works...but it was NOT considered to be the flagship of the fleet.

In fact, when *The Washington Post* first reported the theft, it mistakenly ran a picture of the wrong painting...it gave its readers a picture of the *Monna Vanna*, thinking that was the *Mona Lisa*.

As one writer puts it:

"It was *Mona Lisa's* sudden absence...that made her the cultural icon she is today..."

"Part of what makes her so famous is her unattainability...
"We want to possess what is not meant be owned."[1]

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Hold that thought, if you will.
Just tuck it away, in your back pocket.
And let's take a look at our text.

A well-known story.

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[1] Russ Ramsey, *Van Gogh Has a Broken Heart: What Art Teaches Us About the Wonder and Struggle of Being Alive*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2024.

The golden calf.

When the Israelites were at Mount Sinai, Aaron made gods of gold for them.

Why did it happen?
Why did the people of Israel, recently freed by God, suddenly turn their backs on God?

Maybe ol' John Calvin was right when he said that the human heart is a perpetual factory for idols. But our text, I think, goes a little bit farther than that.

The opening verse of chapter 32 reads like this:

"When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, 'Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses...we do not know what has become of him."

Why did they dive into idolatry?
According to our text, it's because Moses...went missing.

At least, the Israelites thought he was missing.
He disappeared into the darkness of Mount Sinai.
And they had no idea when he would return.

Whenever Moses had gone to talk with God before, Moses had always come right back! This time, he was there 40 days and 40 nights, but they did not know it would be 40 days and 40 nights.

All they knew...was that a few days without Moses became a couple of weeks without Moses, which became over a month without Moses.

That's the context for the golden calf...

It's the absence of Moses,
the possibility that they had LOST Moses,
that sets their idolatry in motion.

Look, when we have something in our lives that is important to us, some person or place who means the world to us...the last thing we want is for things to CHANGE.

Just consider the room in which you sit today.
This sanctuary seats how many?
750.

It wasn't always that way.

As many of you know, an expansion of this sanctuary took place about 15 years ago. I wasn't here, but from what I've been told, the instructions were...expand the sanctuary, **but keep it the same.**

And it's remarkable the way that this beautiful, sacred space turned out...incredible work, done by this saints of this church. Because they achieved their goal. They created a larger sanctuary that kept the look of the former sanctuary.

NO CHANGE.

Do you see what we're talking about?
Each of us has a desire to keep what we treasure,
what's important to us,
the same....

It doesn't have to be a place.
Sometimes it's a person.

Sometimes, we are the person who doesn't want to be changed.

Tony Campolo is a name that a few of you may know.

Campolo, who died last November, at the age of 89, was—as his obituary put it: "...one of the most influential evangelical preachers of the past half century..."

Unlike many big-name evangelical personalities, Campolo did not have his own tv show. Campolo's emphasis was on fighting "poverty and racism," and in his prime, he would speak to more than 500 audiences in a single year.

He kept up a large workload of travel and preaching and speaking even into his later years, even after he and his wife had moved into a retirement community.

But in June of 2020, at the age of 84, Campolo suffered a stroke.
He was partially paralyzed.
He writes:

"...after many long, hard months of rehabilitative therapy, it became clear that my condition was...permanent. I would need to accept my new limitations...Doctors tried to tell me this...but it never registered with me.

"Even if I'm stuck in a wheelchair, I can still get out there and speak," I claimed.

But my chorus of naysayers repeatedly let me know that would happen when pigs flew...As the truth of my circumstances began to sink in, I was overcome by a profound identity crisis. For decades, my preaching and teaching and speaking had become the things around which I organized my identity.

Now I stayed awake at night asking myself, "If I'm not a pastor anymore...if I'm not a university professor anymore...if I'm not a speaker on the evangelical speaking circuit, who am I?"[2]

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We want to possess what can never be owned.

Whether it's our health, or the happiness of a loved one,
or our plans for the future...

And when something we thought we had in our possession disappears, when there's an empty space on the wall of our lives where this beautiful piece of our life USED to be...that, according to our text, is when we are prone to make new gods for ourselves.

As a side note, in the New Testament, it's the writer of the letter to the Hebrews who picks up on this theme.

Hebrews 13:5 reads like this:

"Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for [God] has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'"

In other words, according to that writer—who knew the Hebrew scriptures well, and would have known this story well—it's a ***fear of abandonment*** by God, a fear that God might leave us or forsake us—that drives our desire for MORE—more money, more security, more success, more bright and shiny toys....and that's when we make an idol.

Which is precisely what happens in our text for today.

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[2] Tony Campolo with Steve Rabey, *Pilgrim: A Theological Memoir*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2025.

When Moses went missing, it was as if God went missing.

And out of their fear of abandonment,
their anxiety about being left alone in the wilderness,
they decided to take matters into their own hands.

Have you ever done that before?
Tried to take matters into your own hands?
Tried to control a future...over which you never had control?

Now I know...there's a lot more to this story.
There's the text that I read this morning.
When God gets so mad at the Israelites, God says to Moses:
"I'm done with them! I'm going to start over with you!"

And Moses pleads to God:
"Don't do that! Don't let the Egyptians think that you're a callous and cruel God who doesn't care! Remember your covenant. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

And God changes God's mind.
God decides, after Moses intervenes, to give the people of Israel a second chance.

Look, there are times in scripture when it's best for the pastor to raise his or her hands, and say, "I don't have a good answer for you."

Was God really going to destroy the very people God chose to save? Does God truly change God's mind? Does God need reminders about the promises God makes?

I don't have a good answer for you!

There's a lot that we don't know, when it comes to the theological pretzel that this text ties us in...

But we do know this:
God did not abandon God's people in the wilderness.
God stayed with God's children in the wilderness.
And so should we.

This was made clear to me one day not too long ago, when I was all alone here in the church.

Or I thought I was all alone.
It was a Friday evening, shortly after 5pm.
I was getting ready to go home.

But then, leaving my office, I bumped into God.
I didn't know God was still here.

I was on my way out the door, but God said to me—Ben, I just need a couple minutes of your time.

So I figured, this is God, I can give God a couple minutes.
And God sat down in the Atrium with me.
And God had a troubled look.

Clearly, something was on God's mind.
And then God said something, and I wasn't sure at first where God was going with this.

God said to me, Ben, you've got plenty of lawyers in your church, right?

I said, Yes, there are a number of lawyers here.
And God said, That's good!

And God said, You've got accountants and doctors, right?
And I said, Yes…that's right.

And business owners and entrepreneurs and teachers and nurses and retirees and stay at home parents and children of all ages…all those people are in your church as well, right?

I said yes.
God said, This is good.

God said, I get the sense that the people who come to Westminster are people who are eager to use the minds and hearts and gifts that I gave to each of them.

Eager to be generous with them, to be hospitable with them.
And I said, yes, yes….that's exactly it.

And then God said to me:
Just make sure you don't forget the folks in the wilderness.

I said, Well…ok.
But who is in the wilderness, God?

And God said, Oh, you know.
It's not just the Israelites of old.
There are many people in the wilderness, said God.

People who have recently lost their paycheck, they might be in the wilderness. And people who make a lot of their money from the stock market, or whatever their chosen profession might be…they can get blinded by their wealth, idolizing their bright and shiny toys...they can be in the wilderness and not know it, said God.

I said, ah, ok, I get it.

But God wasn't done.

God said, those who are homeless and those who have one home and those who have two homes. Any of them might be in the wilderness.

And God said, parents who have a child who is going through a difficult time, and the parents feel overwhelmed...those parents can feel like I've abandoned them. They might be in the wilderness.

And God said, those who have followed me their entire lives, had faith in me for as far back as they remember, but something just happened to them, the rug was just ripped out from under them…and they're wondering how I could let that happen to them.

They might feel like they're in the wilderness.

So pretty much everyone? I said.
Yeah, God said, pretty much everyone.

And then God said to me:

I wanted to meet with you today, because I want to make sure that Westminster is a wilderness church!

But now I was troubled.
And I said, God, we're on Augusta Street.
It's a nice neighborhood.

It doesn't exactly scream…WILDERNESS.

And God said geographical location does not matter.
God said, there only two requirements for being a WILDERNESS church:

The first is to recognize that on any given day, anyone in our church community or anyone in our Greenville community…anyone we speak with might be wandering in their personal wilderness. We need to remember that, and be gentle, when we're talking with them, said God.

And the second requirement to be a wilderness church is that ***you're willing to be like Moses.***

What do you mean? I asked.
I can't part the Red Sea.

God replied:
I don't you to perform miracles.
I just need your church to be like Moses was on Mount Sinai.
I need you to be PASSIONATE with me!

I need churches that are always willing to talk to me, to question me, to humble themselves before me, to admit their idolatry to me...to listen to me and argue with me and to show your love, even when you're not sure what it is that I'm up to.

Remember Moses on that mountain?
Remember how "in my face" he got?

That's the kind of PASSION I'm looking for!
Not just for me, but for ALL my children!

I need churches that will walk with and stand up for any and all of my children who are vulnerable...and in their own wilderness...

That was the end of the conversation,
and God went God's way, I went back home…
but I can't get that conversation with God out of my head.[3]

[3] For the idea of a conversation with God, I am indebted to a sermon by Dr. Fred Craddock, "Being a Friend of Jesus," found in *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

You see, before God left that day, I told God that we are, in fact, a wilderness church. I told God that we're willing to be passionate with God, and show our love for God, that we will admit our idolatry to God, we are more than willing to be the loving presence of God for ANYONE who is wandering in their own wilderness.

Anyone who thinks that God has abandoned them.
Or forgotten about them.
Westminster will be there for them.

That's what I told God.
But now, I really need to know.

When I told God that we are a wilderness church,
I was speaking on your behalf.

Did I get it right?

(Amen.)