

**This Week: Getting to the Bottom of It!**  
**Exodus 32**  
**Preached at The Church Without Walls in Houston, TX on 1/10/21**

This has been, to say the least, an unparalleled moment in history. This week would be comedic if it were not tragic.

Mountain climbers are fascinated about reaching the top of Mount Everest. Despite numerous deaths, people are still intent on reaching the summit of Mount Everest. Reaching the pinnacle has resulted in the ascertainment of a new height for the mountain. The more we climb, the higher we realize it is, more the 29,000 feet, still the highest structure in the world. In May of 2019 recorded the most fatalities at the base camp on Mount Everest since 2015 when massive casualties followed an avalanche. Ever since Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay assaulted the peak of Everest, mountaineers have been fascinated with reaching the summit. Some mountain climbers climb for the sheer thrill of it, others climb for prestige, media popularity and recognition. Still others like George Mallory climb Everest because "it is there." Others do it because they like the risk. Others do it because they like the acclaim.

We have a mountain in this text with another climber. He did not climb this mountain because of a cheap thrill. Nor did he do it because of a desire for acclaim. He was not seeking to make it into the history books. He did so in an effort to have a meeting with the eternal God. He did so to have a face-to-face meeting with the Lord of all creation.

When we find Moses in this text, we see that he has been on the peak for a long time. But this extended meeting is essential. He is receiving, we can say anachronistically, the constitution for the nation of Israel. But his absence has fomented a sense of unruliness among the children of Israel. The people ask Aaron to make a golden calf for them. Aaron, following the whims of the people, chose to indulge. He gave the people what they wanted, a god they could see, a god whom they chose and not the other way around.

They had compromised their loyalty and allegiance to God. They bowed down to this idol they had made. They said that this god was the one who had brought them out of Egypt. They had accredited this new god who had done nothing for them for their liberty, their victory, their salvation. These people who had been freed, whom God had remarkably provided with a promise in front of stopped ceased in their progress towards the promise. They were a people with a promise and future before them, but this pause became an opportunity for a return to where God had brought them from.

God hears that there is insurrection going on at the bottom of the mountain. Moses meted out his own judgment when he came to the base. And God, looking like he may become a cosmic sadist, threatens to wipe out the people of Israel at once and take a nation from Moses. But Moses intercedes on behalf of the people. He besought God to take him instead of those

whom God promised to deliver. He did so not only for the people but to protect the name and reputation of God from cynics. Moses's earnest request was honored; God had mercy.

There is much to learn from this text. Their pause at the bottom caused them to divorce themselves from what God was doing at the top of the mountain. But despite their race to the spiritual bottom away from God, God was still giving his covenant and working his purposes at the top of the mountain. This text teaches us ***God's purpose on the mountain will not be thwarted by the chaos at the bottom of the mountain.***

**God has not Abandoned the Top of the Mountain.** We understand in Scripture that mountains are where God dwells. Mountains in Scripture point to highness, loftiness. The psalmist tells us that we "lift our eyes to the mountains-where does my help come from My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." But we know that God lives beyond the hills, far above anything in creation. And though he lives far above, his help is always near. He is always imminent.

He met Abraham on Mount Moriah and God revealed that he is the provider. He met Moses on at Nebo where Moses looked into the future to see what Israel could become. We could climb with Elijah on several mountains. In one instance, at mount Horeb, Elijah met God. He felt the gust of the wind, the tremble of the earthquake, and the warmth of the fire but God was in none of these things. He was in a still small voice. Even our Lord climbed up the mountain in the New Testament. He put on a living light show, putting on his corona glory. In his transfiguration, he revealed that the people would meet God through him.

And such makes sense. The mountain, the hill, is a quiet place, it is a reverent place. It is a place of meaning, history, and purpose. The hill is symbolic of God's presence.

But you cannot always stay on top of the hill. Once you reach the pinnacle, you cannot stay their long. On Mount Everest, the people who make it past the "death zone" realize, because the air is so thin, you cannot stay there. Those who take pictures on the mountain take them quickly because death can come to those who do not move expeditiously. Every minute you are there, you are risking your survival.

The Scripture reminds of us of the danger of unconsecrated altitudes. We saw this at Babel where those who could not be there with God on the mountain decided to make their own mountain in the tower to be equal with God on the mountain. Genesis 11 tells us, however, that they could not assault the heavens. But God seeing it put an end to it because they could never be equal with God.

As I speak to Christians, I want to assure you, not based on a Pollyanna optimism, some flights of fancy, but on the solid rock of God's promise, that God has not and will never abandon his mountain. When we see what we saw in the Nation's Capital, we know God is stable and controlled. This event was not out of God's purview. Anderson Cooper spoke with Barry Black,

the Chaplain of the Senate. When asked about that moment, he was called to pray. He spoke of the transcendence of God and his purpose. God is providential even in this.

**We also realize something else. Although God never Abandons the Mountain there is always something going on at the Bottom of the Mountain.** The placidity and serenity at the top do not diminish what we know: there are always things wrong at the bottom of the mountain. The Hebrews were impatient. They didn't want to wait at the base of the mountain. What is Moses doing up there, for all of this time? They wanted to go back to Pharaoh, the fleshpots, the leaks and the onions. The bottom of the mountain gave them a sense of nostalgia. They wanted to become great again, even though they had never experienced greatness in slavery. Greatness only lay ahead and not behind.

And they decided to create their own gods like the Egyptian gods at the bottom of the mountain. Unfortunately, the religious leadership at the bottom of the mountain said, give the people what they want. He made their idols for them. The leader became a woeful follower. He was so pitiful when he was called to account by Moses, he said all he did was take their golden earrings and materials, cast them into the oven, and out came this idol. He bunted. He passed the buck. He took no accountability at all for their insurrection, their attempt to overthrow the will of God.

The religious leadership was just as guilty, as complicit, and as involved as anybody else in this act of rebellion. Can we all not see it today: they swapped God's message for some kind of political ideology and helped instigate an insurrection in the seditious language they professed and expressed from their pulpits. There will always be pressure at the bottom of the mountain for a weak leader to supplant God with a substitute. We cannot bow to this pressure; the preacher of the gospel must always remain stalwart in his defense of God's message. But these preachers have succumbed to it, they have become ministers of chaos. Their sermons have bent to the very idolatry that they themselves claimed to tear down through their Christian nationalism. This is not new, of course.

Indeed, we have always seen chaos at the base of the mountain. Some said, it was the worst thing that had ever happened. But wait, what about slavery? What about the Dredd Scott decision? What about Plessy v. Ferguson and the rise of Jim Crow? There was chaos in 1861 with the beginning of the war over American slavery. In 1877, there was chaos at the base of the mountain at the end of Reconstruction. In 1921, there was chaos at the bottom of the mountain when Black Wall Street was burned down and many of God's children were dehumanized and killed. There was chaos at the bottom of the mountain at the Edmund Pettus bridge in 1965. We call it "Bloody Sunday." And there is no less chaos today. We saw it in our homes on our televisions and on our computers.

But as Christians we are not alarmists. We do not pack up and go somewhere else. We know even though there is chaos, God is still at the top. We *know* that the Lord will make a way out of no way.

**And we know God has the last Word from on Top of the Mountain.** Here is the good news, God at the top of the mountain still has a word in spite of what happens at the bottom. Now at the bottom we see rebellion, insurrection, sedition, all in the name of patriotism, going back to a land that had them in bondage with a god who had done nothing for them. And may I say, how is what we saw at the base of the mountain able to condemn what we see in Colin Kaepernick. How are these supposed acts of “patriotism” better than someone taking a knee on the football field? I am trying to call attention to injustice in America. There is injustice in policing. There is injustice in our systems of governance. But these people cannot see it.

We cannot be blind to these injustices. I looked at the video of the arrest of the young woman, Miya Ponsetto, who attacked 14-year-old black teenager over her phone. She accused him of stealing her phone while in New York with no evidence. She went to the manager who seemed to join her in her accusation of the young man, still with no proof. She then tried to forcibly take his cell phone from him. It happens that the hotel had her phone the whole time. She was arrested the other day in California. While being arrested, her mother kept lunging after the arresting officer and he would gently push her away. This must be nice. This would not have been the situation for an African American, not in any case whatsoever.

Equally ridiculous is that you can assault the Congress of the United States and not be killed. One can go into the office of the Speaker of the House, place one’s feet on the desk, and not suffer a violent response. All of this was because of whiteness. This is amazing. What makes it worse is that Aaron will not lift up his voice and declare, we are all made in the Imago Dei. We are all God’s children. Black, white, yellow, brown, in many colors, we are all God’s children.

But we cannot be despondent about what happens at the base of the mountain. Chaos does not ever have the last word. God always has a message and a messenger to bring his word. This is why Aaron must be rebuked because he was supposed to give the right message in response to the behavior of the people. But Moses must now come and give the correct oracle, to declare God’s sentence.

Allow me to return to something. When Moses arrived, he had to get the situation corrected. Aaron blamed the oven and the gold for the idols. People today are blaming Black Lives Matter and Antifa for the chaos at the base of the mountain. We can never move forward until we tell the truth. We know who the culprits were. We have heard their internet conversations. We saw their rallies. In fact, they have been preparing to do this for weeks. Many of them livestreamed themselves doing it, taking full credit for their occupation of the Capitol. We need to tell the truth. Those who professed belief in a revolution, a “1776” event, were the ones who did this. And they used Christian symbols, Bibles, and banners that said, “Jesus Saves,”

while they were doing it. We cannot blame the oven and the gold. Aaron and the people must repent.

God has a message he gives to his people. Moses pleaded with God after God exacted judgment upon the people. Lord, do not completely destroy them. Be merciful. Moses said, Lord, blot me out of your book. Make my name a dash, give them a opportunity to repent. And God relented. Even when we are chaotic and destructive, God leaves a door open for his people.

Can we not see it? Mount Moriah is a good place to for a redemption. Mount Sinai shows us God's revelation. Mount Nebo gives us the future. Mount Carmel shows us the destruction of idolatry. But Jesus, viewing the temptation of all of the power in the world, all of the authority of the governments in that place, he could have bowed down, succumbed to temptation. But he didn't, he did not have to, because he is the Lord of creation. Those are mountains but none compare to another mountain. It is not as high in physical stature but it is certainly loftier than Mount Everest. Everest takes life but Calvary gives life. This mountain on which Jesus lived and died gives life to us. Calvary is what makes the difference. Something happens at Calvary. Sin loses its power at Calvary. At Calvary, God brings that which has been broken and mends it. That which has been divided, he brings it and reconciles it back to himself there. There, he gives life to dead people, light to those in darkness, joy to those who are in sorrow, hope to those in misery.

I'm a Calvary Christian. I could stop there at Sinai and be like Moses calling the Levites to draw their swords to exact vengeance. But when I get to Calvary "My sin, oh the bliss of the glorious thought, my sin, not in part, but the whole, is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more, praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul, it is well, it is well with my soul." God has not abandoned us at the mountain. And just because He has not abandoned us does not mean we won't see chaos. But chaos does not have the last word, that belongs to God. And we can say, it is well because God says it is well. Wherever we are, whatever political party we are in, whatever country from whence we hail, it is well and it will be well.

And because of Calvary, I call all of the Aarons and those who would listen to the voices of calves back to the cross. Yes, I know there were people who were not Christians there. Yes, there are many in our culture who have calves who have nothing to do with what occurred at the Capitol. But this word especially needs to be heard by Christians. Those who have sold their birthright for cheap political gain. All of us must come and bow before the king of Calvary.

He didn't say all authority was given to Caesar. He didn't say all authority was given to Herod. He didn't say all authority was given to Pilate. He didn't say all authority was given to any political party, He never claimed a political party, He never favored any politician, or president. "In the Lord's hand the king's heart is a stream of water that He channels toward all who please Him." All authority has been given to the One who lives and reigns forever, whose hand envelopes the world!

