

My friends dog-sat Otto last month for the couple days I was at Bishop's Convocation. Their beagle died last year, but between a new baby, new jobs, and a new house, they have not yet been able to adopt another dog; they had offered to watch Otto because they miss having a dog around. By all accounts, Otto had a great time at their house: he had ice cream; he played with their older children, he sat under the baby's high chair and got to eat all the food that fell on the floor. Last week Otto and I visited with them for a couple hours. He recognized where we were going as soon as we turned into their neighborhood, and he was excited. He went right into the house, napped soundly on their couch, and, again, enjoyed lots of crumbs that the baby dropped from lunch. But he also followed me closely from room to room, stood guard at the bathroom until I came out, and stood between me and the door when I got ready to leave. As much as he had enjoyed his doggie vacation with them, he was afraid I was going to leave him there again, and he didn't want to be left. Even if I had been leaving him for a time—which I wasn't—I still have always come back, 100% of the time; so either way, there was really nothing for him to worry about. Yet he was still anxious.

If I approach today's Exodus reading giving the Israelites the most benefit of the doubt I can muster, I wonder if their unfaithful behavior might have been the result of the same kind of anxiety about being left behind. God had freed them from slavery in Egypt, with miraculous signs and plagues, led them through the Red Sea, provided manna from heaven and water from a rock. But here in the wilderness they at least *feel* as though they have been left on their own, because Moses has been up on the mountain for 40 days. They say, *this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him...* and we can't do this on our own. Now, we might have expected Aaron to have had more sense, as he had been deputized by God to help Moses and had experienced even more personally the great acts of the Lord. But Aaron reminds us that leaders also struggle with following God faithfully, as he doesn't even argue before granting the crowd's request to break one of the fundamental commandments and make an idol, a golden calf made from all their gold earrings.

In what they perceived to be the absence of God, the people panicked and made for themselves a statue that they knew was not God; they just wanted *something, anything*, even something they knew was not real, but something they could turn to in their fear and need. Throughout their history, the ancient Israelites repeat this pattern over, and over—not always by making literal idols or worshipping other literal gods—but by losing hope and trust in God, I

AM, the one who made a covenant with them and their ancestors, the one who remained steadfast and faithful to them no matter how many times they failed to hold up their end of the bargain. Because that, after all, is what they—what we—are doing when we know what God has commanded, yet we do something else; we are claiming, by our actions that deviate from God's way, that we don't trust God enough to do what God has told us to do; that we think we have to do something more or something different to take care of ourselves, because we don't believe God will take care of us as God has promised. Our disobedience is not always the willfulness of a naughty toddler, who does the thing one. more. time. because they haven't yet mastered self-control. Sometimes our disobedience is born out of fear, out of anxiety, out of despair and lost hope, because when we're in our own wilderness, it can be hard for us to experience the presence of God. That does not mean, however, that God is not there.

It may help us to remember that even those whom we think of as pillars of faith—from Martin Luther to Mother Teresa—struggled, sometimes through long seasons, to feel like God was with them. Or it may help us just to remember that God's presence doesn't depend on our feelings. While the Israelites may have *thought* Moses and the Lord had abandoned them, God was in fact hard at work explaining plans to Moses for the future of the people. God is near enough to see what the people have done, making the golden calf and worshipping it; God is near enough to be very angry about what they have done. But as angry as God is, God also remembers the covenant with Israel's ancestors, promising Abraham descendants as numerous as the stars and the land that waited on the other side of the wilderness. Exodus tells us that God remembered that promise and *changed God's mind* about punishing the people, choosing instead to continue patiently, faithfully providing and caring for them, in spite of their disobedience. As we are made in the image of God, we have the capacity within ourselves to change *our* minds when we just can't seem to trust the way of life that God has called us to live. Even if that change is slow, and difficult, and painstakingly incremental, and even if we don't feel like it, God hasn't given up on us—and never will. Just as God's presence doesn't depend on us feeling like God is there, God's faithfulness to us doesn't depend on how obedient we are, thank God! May we trust God enough to go where we're called, and may we give thanks that even when our fears and doubts slow us down or keep us stuck, God is with us there, too.