

Most people would say that dogs are loving and loyal and give you their full attention – unless they see a squirrel, or a rabbit, or something else to chase after. I’m not saying that dogs are ALWAYS easily distracted – but it can seem that way. And it can seem that the Israelites were also easily distracted after Moses had been away for forty days and forty nights on the mountain of God. Without Moses there to be their conduit to God, what were they supposed to do?! Maybe Moses was never going to come back?! So they cried out to Aaron to DO SOMETHING! To make gods that would lead them on from where they were! To make a way for them to move forward with some kind of religious practice that they might be familiar with!

At that point Aaron could have said, “Hold on! Take a breath. Calm down. You’ve already heard the commandments from God. Just be patient and Moses will return from God’s mountain.” But that’s *not* what Aaron said. With all the people begging him to do something, Aaron decided to chase after his own ‘squirrel’ of ‘being large and in charge’ of this situation and he gave the people what they demanded: he made something they could worship. Not only was Aaron willing to substitute a golden calf in place of the one living God, Aaron was also willing to substitute himself in place of Moses as their religious leader. . . . And since the people responded *so well* to the casting of the golden calf, Aaron upped the ante by deciding to build an altar before the calf. And since that was also a hit with the people, Aaron declared a feast day so all the people could bring offerings to the altar, and they could celebrate this worship practice. It seems like Aaron just kept chasing after that ‘squirrel’ of ‘being large and in charge’ as far as he could. . . . But since he seemed to be making things up on the fly, what was he going to do the day *after* the feast day? Personally, I don’t think Aaron had a clue about what to do next.

I mean *where* was Aaron leading the people with this golden calf? Having built an altar – would they stay put where the altar was built? Are they really going to settle here? The Israelites were still in the wilderness by Mount Horeb. God was still providing manna. The cloud was still providing shade during the day and light at night. Would the people suddenly be able to tolerate staying put under these conditions simply because they had the golden calf with them? Or was Aaron going to take that golden calf and use it to lead the Israelites back into the wilderness – without knowing if the cloud and the manna would follow them? Or did Aaron perhaps think the golden calf was somehow going to provide for all their needs? . . . Or did he simply *not* think? That’s the real problem with chasing squirrels, isn’t it? There is no conscious, deliberate thinking involved – it’s all just an automatic response and reaction process. So Aaron never really had to think about

the best way to lead the people, because he was already chasing after whatever would please them and whatever would make himself look better.

You might remember that Aaron was the one who was comfortable with public speaking. That's why Moses had asked God to let Aaron do the talking. But Aaron was not the one that God chose to lead God's people out of Egypt. That was Moses. And from day one Moses understood that leading God's people on this exodus journey was going to be difficult. I think that's why he was glad he had his brother Aaron with him. Moses must have relied on Aaron because he would want someone he could trust to stand with him. I mean, isn't that what any of us would want if we were facing something rough?

And it's because Moses felt so 'sure' of Aaron he talked God down from destroying Aaron and all the Israelites. I always get the impression that Moses thought God was exaggerating how bad things were back in the Israelite camp. Surely Aaron wouldn't have made a molten calf for the people to worship! He wouldn't have let them make sacrifices to an idol! Aaron wouldn't let the people claim any idols as being their gods who brought them up from the land of Egypt! No, no, no, that can't be right! Let's just calm down and cool off, God. Remember your promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel.

God relented and decided not to destroy the Israelites. And when Moses was *sure* that was God's final decision, Moses picked up the stone tablets God had created and started climbing down the mountain with Joshua. It seemed that all was right with the world once again. . . . At least until Moses started to hear the shouting. That must have hit Moses like a ton of bricks. He had stood up to God to defend these people, to save their lives. He had believed that Aaron could handle things while he was gone. But NO! – his trust had been betrayed! While poor Joshua thought they were hearing the sound of war, Moses knew they were hearing something far worse: God's people were celebrating the breaking of their covenant with God. And there was Moses holding onto the two tablets as he realized that they would mean absolutely NOTHING to these people, to his people, to his own brother. . . . Just imagine Moses' shock, pain, and anger. . . .

At that point Moses could have climbed back up the mountain and told God, "OK, you were right, and I was wrong. Let's start over without them." But Moses didn't do that. Moses got started on the hard work of leading his people back into covenant relationship with the one living God. Back to doing the things that he thought they had already learned and received and heard and seen with him. Back to what could only be true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, and worthy of praise before God. And unlike Aaron, Moses *knew* where the people needed to be after their 'feast day' – they needed to be in prayer and supplication before God. So Moses had to melt the golden calf and pulverize it to powder. Moses had to scatter that golden powder on the water that he

made the Israelites drink. Moses had to lead the people to see and take in the error of their ways, to recognize where they went wrong, in order to be able to turn back to God in confession and repentance. Moses had to lead the people to seek God's mercy and forgiveness. . . . It wasn't easy, but it was necessary. And it was the leadership that God required.

This week our Church Council took up the question of whether the time is right to return to in-person worship, or not. Your church leadership took into consideration the New London School District's decision to go to virtual learning for all ages for at least the next two weeks due to the rising number of active COVID-19 cases in our area. Headstart has followed the school district's lead and will not have students on site during this time. This past week the greater Fox Valley area had some of the highest rates of new COVID-19 cases in the nation. The ENTIRE nation.

Our benchmark has remained the same: we will not return to in-person worship services until the number of active COVID-19 cases in Waupaca County has declined for more than two consecutive weeks. We have not reached that benchmark. For the safety of our congregation we will not be holding in-person worship services until we reach that benchmark.

I know that decision is frustrating and disappointing to many of us. I also know that if we ignored the risk and opened the doors to hold worship services that might please some people – but it would break our covenant with one another and with God. I don't believe we want to do that. In order for us to love one another as God has loved us, and to do no harm to one another, we need to continue to worship online. We need to continue to stay home most of the time. We need to wear face masks and stay six feet apart when we are out in public. We need to wash our hands and disinfect frequently touched surfaces. Right now it feels like it is getting harder and harder to keep doing these things that we know we need be doing. But we know how to do these things. And we know it is necessary to do these things. In our current situation, I believe this is what God requires all of us to do.

Amen.