



“Surrender”

Exodus 4:10-17, 27-31; 7:1-7; 32:1-6

Surrendering to God is one thing; staying on God’s path is another.

Poor Aaron. Forever overshadowed by his younger brother Moses. Tell the story of the Exodus and, inevitably, it is Moses who gets all the attention. The older brother, Aaron is so easily overlooked. I know that even when preparing this study, I was surprised by the prominence of Aaron in the story. Whose rod is thrown to the ground and turns into a snake in front of Pharaoh? Aaron’s, not Moses’s. (I’m pretty sure it is Charlton Heston who throws his staff to the ground in *The Ten Commandments*, but you can check me on that).

But today, our focus is on Aaron. Like King David, Aaron’s story takes dramatic turns – the highs and lows, surrender and rebellion, obedience and disobedience. Aaron’s story begins with an encounter at a burning bush. Moses’s, not his own.

Surrendering to a new life

When the book of Exodus opens, the Israelites are enslaved. Seeking refuge from famine, they had come to Egypt a few centuries before and had never gone home. God might have promised Abraham a great nation and some land but the only promise that seems to have been fulfilled is the one about lots of descendants. There are now so many Israelites that Pharaoh fears them. We are told of an Israelite baby, Moses, who is saved from Pharaoh’s massacre. We are told how he grows up in Pharaoh’s household only to flee into the wilderness after murdering an Egyptian slave master.

Years later, when God calls Moses over to the burning bush, God wastes no time telling Moses that he is changing careers. Moses may have been a shepherd in the wilds of Midian, but God is going to rescue his people and Moses is just the man to lead the effort.

Moses reacts as most of us probably would. He wants to know exactly who it is that is sending him on this mission. So God reveals his name, YHWH. Moses asks, what if the people don’t believe me? God gives Moses the power to do miraculous signs. But I don’t speak well, Moses reminds God. God assures Moses that God will be his mouth. Finally, Moses admits he just doesn’t want to do this, “O my Lord, please send someone else.” Understandably frustrated with Moses, God gives him Aaron, his brother, to speak for him. This is to be Moses’s, and now Aaron’s, vocation.

So God and the two brothers head to Egypt where they will confront Pharaoh, who imagines himself a god, and demand that Pharaoh set the Israelites free. You know how the story goes. Pharaoh refused and God sent one plague after another, all meant to force Pharaoh to see that YHWH is the one true God. But only after the arrival of the last and most terrible of plagues, the death of the firstborn, does Pharaoh let Aaron, Moses, and the Hebrews flee to freedom.

At God’s mountain

Once the Israelites reached the wilderness on the far side of the Red Sea, God led them directly to Mt. Sinai, where Moses had first met God. There Moses and the people will be given God’s Law, the teachings on what it means to love God and neighbor. Yet while Moses was on the mountaintop receiving the very word of God, a terrible thing happened. Pretty much the worst thing ever; so chilling in its execution that the consequences could only be disastrous.

When Moses had been gone longer than the people expected,¹ they panicked and turned to Aaron, Moses’s brother, and pleaded for gods that could lead them as they thought they ought to be led. That’s bad enough. But it got worse, much worse. Aaron led the people in constructing a golden calf out of their melted down jewelry. And they worshipped this pagan idol, this abomination. They worshipped it and thanked the statue for bringing them out of Egypt. Was this any way to love God? The people had promised to do just that . . . but, gee, that was weeks before!

Wait! . . . Aaron??!! He made the golden calf? . . . Yes, he did (Exodus 32:35). But hadn’t he been with Moses through it all: the confrontations, the plagues, the flight from Egypt?? Yes, he had and, nevertheless, he committed the grievous sin of fashioning a golden calf for the newly freed Israelites to worship. Did he really know better? Yes, for God had already spoken to them of his Law and the prohibition on graven images and idols of any sort. It is hard for us to grasp how

¹ This story begins at 32:1 and continues the narrative 24:14. The truth is that it is very difficult to be confident of the chronological ordering of the events at the mountain.

terribly grievous was the sin of the golden calf. For most rabbis it was the most terrible moment in all the Hebrew Bible. Terence Fretheim on this:

At the heart of the matter, the most important of the commandments has been violated. Israel has been disloyal to its God. The problem is thus fundamentally not one of disobedience to a law code; it is a matter of unfaithfulness to the God who had bound himself to a people. Israel has violated the established relationship (see at Exodus 20:34).

A recurring phrase in this section is “who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” Moses is the subject in the mouth of both people (32:1, 23) and God (32:7; 33:1); God is the subject in Moses’ speech (32:11–12); and the manufactured god is according to the people (32:4, 8). This usage will provide important clues to the flow of the narrative: Who will be responsible for Israel when Israel is being irresponsible?

The issue presented initially in chapter 32 is that of a leadership vacuum. Without proper leadership the people can flounder. Here they complain that their leader Moses has been absent for too long; they are impatient to move on. Consequently, they confront Aaron, who was given the responsibility of leadership in Moses’ absence (see 24:14). The people demand that he make an image of “a god” to “go before” them to lead them to the promised land (their first words after 24:7!). Without hesitation Aaron accedes to their request. He takes the people’s Egyptian gold (the status symbol of their deliverance), shapes it, and makes an image. . . .²

Will God go on with these people?

Back to the story -- in response to the wild goings-on at the base of Mt. Sinai celebrating the golden calf (we’re told specifically that Aaron let them), God hurried Moses down the mountain to see for himself the depth of Israel’s sin. And then God tells Moses that he is done with these people. God is ready to let his fury devour them and start over with Moses alone (no mention of Aaron in this). But Moses pleads with God on behalf of the people and God relents . . . the people will live.

That isn’t the end of it. The people will live, but God tells Moses to go ahead without him. The people are so rebellious they will never complete the trip. At some point, they will be consumed by God’s holy anger, much as you and I would be consumed were we to fly too close to the sun.

And so Moses again comes before God, ready to plead for the Israelites, to persuade God that he must go on with the Israelites to the Promised Land. What courage it must have taken for Moses to again appeal to God, not deferentially, but firmly and directly. Perhaps Moses’ courage in confronting God was born in his understanding of God’s nature.

What about Aaron? He goes on toward Canaan, but he will not see it. At one point, Aaron and Miriam (the sister) grow jealous of Moses and speak against him. God hears them and comes to confront them – never good (Numbers 12). Later, Aaron would die in the wilderness, for another act of disobedience (Numbers 20) – the same would be true of Moses, though he dies at a later date.

In the end, we wonder how . . . how could Aaron make the golden calf, leading the people in idolatry and unfaithfulness? How could David arrange the murder of Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband? Surrender and obedience to God is never a straight path with one obedient day leading neatly to another. Instead, too often, we insist that we know better, that our way is the most sensible, the most realistic. David chose his own path at times. Aaron chose his own path at times. We too chose our own path at times. And, yet, God does not abandon us, but patiently pulls us back so we can go on together. And, indeed, at Mt. Sinai God agrees to go on with the Israelites and Moses and Aaron, leading them to the Promised Land.

² Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 280–281.