When I am stressed out, I (sadly) tend to look for comfort … in my fridge …. or binge-watch British crime shows. When my daughters are scared, they typically come to their parents…provided we are not the ones who scare them. I am sure you can relate to my family’s stress relief strategies. Other places or things people turn to when they are stressed or afraid might include retail therapy, cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, guns, movies, gambling, in extreme cases also religious extremism, or political terrorism.

The story that we just heard is a story about people who were getting afraid. The ancient Israelites began to get afraid that their leader, and mediator before God, would be gone forever. Ever since Moses first emerged as leader of the Hebrew slaves, the people had relied upon him as their connection with God. He told them about God speaking from within a burning bush. He reminded them of the promises God had made to their ancestors. Moses’ faith in God was strong. On ten separate occasions, Moses challenged the powerful, ruthless Pharaoh on behalf of his people. Ten times, God struck the Egyptians with a plague, and ten times Moses went to Pharaoh, calling on him to “let my people go.” Moses’ faith in God did not waver, even when Pharaoh’s troops caught up with the Israelites by the shore of the Red Sea. Moses lifted his
staff…. the sea parted… the Hebrew people escaped….and the Egyptian military drowned. The Israelites drew strength from Moses’ unwavering faith in God. When they were hungry, Moses prayed to God…and God provided quails and manna. When they were thirsty, Moses prayed to God…and God provided water from a rock. Moses provided capable leadership during a challenging time. Now, after travelling for over two months, the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai, and Moses hiked up to commune with God on the mountaintop on more than one occasion.

This last time, though, Moses had been gone a very long time, forty days and forty nights, and the Israelites began to get afraid. As the days and weeks passed, the people became more and more afraid. How could they even know that their leader—and main connection to God—was still alive? What if Moses never returned? Without Moses, would God still be with them and protect them? What if their God were to leave them, too?

What did the people to do with those fears? How did they try to resolve them? A God who is invisible and omnipresent is something hard to grasp. God had been clearly present in either a manifestation (a burning bush, a column of fire and smoke) or in an intermediary (Moses). And that human intermediary, Moses, had disappeared. So, they fell back on what they had learned in Egypt: create a physical representation of a god that they could see and touch.
We can safely assume that the people were not the only one who were afraid. Moses had left his brother, Aaron, in charge in his absence. I think Aaron must have been scared, too. In the past, it was his brother who was able to hear God’s voice, while Aaron did some of the public speaking. It had been Moses who bravely stood up to Pharaoh. And it had been Moses who always seemed to know the right thing to do – listen to God, pray, raise his arms, point his staff – and God did all the action. What was he, Aaron, supposed to do? He did not hear God’s voice. God did not grant him the power to perform miracles. The people did not consider him their leader. And yet, Moses was gone. How should he, Aaron, know what to do? He could see that his people were worried. He could hear them complain. He could feel that they – in the absence of Moses - wanted a direct way to commune with their God.

So he made them collect all their jewelry and craft a calf, similar to the sculptures and paintings they had seen in Egypt. In Egypt, a number of gods and goddesses were portrayed as sacred cows or bulls – especially Hathor, Isis, and Nut, shown with cows’ horns or ears. To salvage his leadership and the religion of his ancestors, Aaron took the lead and had a golden sculpture crafted from the people’s jewelry. He also had an altar built and was planning to worship God below the golden idol. Why did Aaron not object? I suspect that he did not object, in order to prevent worse. Maybe, if I just meet them part-way, we can have this golden calf and worship our God, too. This is just a vehicle, it does not mean much, right?
From up high on the mountain top, both Moses and God seem to see what was going on far below. At this point, God was done with them. “They’re hopeless! Let’s start over.” Moses stood between God and the people with two interesting arguments. “What will the Egyptians think? How will this affect your reputation?” and “Don’t forget your promises to our ancestor to make Abrahams descendants as numerous as the stars!” Surprisingly, this worked … mostly.

Just in the nick of time, Moses returned to his people. In his rage, Moses smashed the tablets that God had given him. He then put an end to the idol worship and ordered a slaughter. He then returned to the mountain and received a new set of tablets from God. The story ends with God sending a plague. But the people as a whole survived to complain another day…

What does this story have to do with us? A common way to preach about this story is to generalize the idol. “Sure, we don’t make statues and claim they are divine, but we put many priorities ahead of God.” This is a great and valuable application of the story. Today, though, I invite you to explore with me the question of, “What do we do when we are afraid?”

I do not need to give you examples of what we might be afraid of. This is 2020, folks! This is the year of the pandemic, hurricanes, unemployment, wildfires, unhealthy air, remote working and learning, and US elections. The year of no hugs, no handshakes;
instead social isolation, masks, PPE, and ventilators. This is the year everyone wants to be over as soon as possible. So – no need to explain worries and fear.

Let me ask again, “What do we do when we are afraid?” What do we do, if someone near us is afraid and has lost trust in God and hope in a better future? What do we do if we are the ones filled with doubts and fears?

Based on my years of pastoral experience, it does not help to casually throw around responses like “God will provide” and “God will answer your prayers.” Why? Because people of faith still die of lack of resources, while others have more than they can ever need. People of faith still suffer and die no matter how many prayers for healing they receive, possibly at the same rates as people without faith.

Instead, we are invited to follow the example of Jesus who was present with people who were afraid and had lost all hope. Through Jesus, God invites us to be present to each other. God invites us to listen to each other and to listen to the stories of God in Scripture and in each other’s lives. For me, at least, God is most present with me in the presence of those who love and care for me.

This is the one thing that the Aaron and the rest of the ancient Israelites did not do when they were afraid that Moses might not ever return to them. They simply could have listened to one another, comforted one another, and strengthened one another.
Had Aaron been a great leader, he could have given voice to fear of his community and brought their fear and doubt to God in prayer. Instead, he helped them build a statue.

This is where, we, the church, come in. In times of fear, uncertainty, and doubt, we are called to sit with those who are suffering, not just *telling* people about Jesus, but *being* Jesus to them. The simple act of listening, holding hands, praying may be all that is needed for people to feel better. As we have been learning over the past seven months, such acts of community and presence can happen anywhere.

We used to think that Holy Communion can only happen when we gather around an altar inside a church building. Now, we gather in many homes around many altars, yet we trust that God is present with us wherever we go. We used to think that being “The Welcome Place” meant that we welcome visitors into the physical space at 5901 San Juan Avenue. Now, we welcome people into our worship services who may be thousands of miles away from us. We used to pray with people while we hear of their problems and stand next to them. Now, we know that we can pray with people in need on Zoom, Facebook, the phone even through text messages. In all that, God is stretching us and our comfort zone. God’s Holy Spirit is expanding how we worship, pray, and praise God. God is present whenever and wherever we are present - in love and in grace – to each other. God is present whenever and wherever we build each other up in the name of God’s love. Amen.