083020 Exodus 32:1-10 “Are You Drifting?”

When I was living in New York, I went shark fishing a number of times with a friend of mine. He’d take us 20-30 miles offshore, and then, when he found the right spot, he would shut down the boat’s motors. We’d drift purposely for hours, putting out a chum slick, setting out our bait hooks, waiting for the sharks to swim across our drift line. That moment when my friend turned off the motors, though, was always unsettling for me. Suddenly, there we were, way out in the ocean, adrift. “Lord, please let those engines start again when they’re supposed to,” I prayed.

Have you ever been adrift like that? Are you adrift right now? Adrift on the ocean, or on a lake, or a river, is one thing. Adrift on the spiritual seas is something else entirely. The Bible is filled with promises that anchor our faith, keeping us safe and secure, when it comes to our relationship with God. But sometimes we drift. Sometimes we let go of those anchor promises. Let’s look at a Bible story today about some people who were definitely adrift, dangerously adrift.

Today’s Old Testament lesson, from Exodus chapter 32, tells about the people of Israel. These were people who should have known better. These people had just witnessed with their own eyes a series of God’s powerful miracles. And God had given them some incredible promises of rescue, protection, and blessing. But they drifted, nonetheless; and we have to be careful not to drift ourselves.

Maybe you remember the context for this story. Their Israelite ancestors had been enslaved by the Egyptians. In their misery, they cried out to God, and he delivered them. He sent Moses, who proclaimed God’s words, and delivered God’s plagues upon the Egyptians. Thanks to God the Israelites were set free from slavery. God led them toward the Promised Land by miraculous pillars of cloud and fire. He parted the Red Sea waters to save them from the Egyptians. He made water gush out of a rock, and he sent bread from heaven every morning, so they could eat and drink in the wilderness.. The Israelites saw all these miracles of God first-hand.

They were traveling through a wilderness; but they were this close to God. He was helping them directly, blessing them daily, rescuing them over and over. They had every reason to trust, to listen, to obey, didn’t they?

But then they started drifting. God called Moses up on Mt. Sinai, to give him the laws he wanted his people to live by. Moses was gone a long time, and the people became restless. Their fears took over. “Here we are in the wilderness. What’s going to happen to us? Will God really protect us? Can we trust his promises?” Doubt crept in. Despair wiggled in. Defiance took over.

They stormed up to Aaron, Moses’ brother, the second-in-command, and demanded that he make a god they can see. They wanted an idol, their own version of a god. These people were drifting away from God’s promises, drifting towards infidelity and rebellion and sin. And Aaron drifted right along with them. He agreed to their scheme, gathered up their gold jewelry, melted it down, and made a statue of a calf. And they all worshipped their calf god, their golden statue, instead of remaining true to their Maker, their Savior, their Provider. They sinned, in a horrible way; and God’s horrible wrath was visited upon them in return.

Now, you and I have never melted down our rings and earrings to make a golden calf. We’ve never screwed up that badly. But this good old Sunday School story should be a serious wake-up call for you and me, for all Christians. Are you adrift? Ask yourself that question today, honestly and forthrightly. Are you drifting at all, when it comes to following God, obeying God, listening to God, trusting God?

Sometimes it happens when Christians like us start taking God and his amazing Gospel promises for granted. God loves me unconditionally? God will always have my back? God forgives all my sins? Jesus did everything needed for my salvation? All those things are true. God says so, in his Word. But sometimes we think that means we can do whatever we want, and never have to face the consequences. As if believing in Jesus Christ gives us an awesome “get out of jail free” card. As if God’s obligated now to forgive us no matter what, no matter how many times we mess up, no matter how badly we behave. Whenever you or I take God’s Gospel promises for granted, without humble repentance, without deep gratitude and devotion, we’re starting to drift.

Sometimes it happens when Christians like us go through difficulties and struggles. The Israelites weren’t having a picnic out there in the wilderness; and life for modern-day Christians is no picnic, either. In our modern lives -- besieged as we are by natural disasters, a global pandemic, racial injustice, political uncertainty, rampant atheism, and personal tragedies – it’s easy for us to drift. It’s easy to start questioning God, and end up doubting his Word. When the world around us is fearful, dangerous, and confusing, sometimes even people of faith wonder, just like they did in the wilderness. “What’s going to happen to us? Will God really protect me? Can I trust his promises?” It’s OK to wrestle with those questions; but our Bible story reminds us that there’s a danger in letting those doubts, worries, and fears start controlling us, start pulling us away from God, start setting us adrift. So do a little self-check today. Are you drifting?

I spoke to a faithful Christian recently who’s nearing the end of his life. He told me, “When I was a kid in Confirmation class, I was sure that I was going to end up becoming a pastor. But then I got into my wild teenage years, and I drifted pretty far away from God.” That’s a pretty familiar story, isn’t it? But God brought that man back. He married a Christian woman, they recognized the importance of raising their children in the Christian faith, he was turned back to the Lord. Now he’s clinging to those promises of God. He’s anchored in the Word of God. And he knows that he’s a forgiven, saved sinner thanks to his Savior and Rescuer, Jesus Christ. Drifting no more.

How about you? Are you drifting? I don’t care who you are. Take a good hard, honest look at your life, at your relationship with God. Are you standing on the solid ground of God’s Word and his eternal promises? Are you grounded, day by day, in your connection with Christ Jesus and his people? Or are you drifting?

Today God calls us to come back, in humble repentance. Remember his promises. Rejoice in his love for you in Christ, your Savior. Look to the cross. Receive his forgiveness. Listen to his words. Trust in his ways. Believe in your heart that you are loved by God, and know that God will never let go of you. Amen.