

Rabbi Jonathan Blake

Sermon for Greater Centennial AME Zion Church

Mount Vernon, New York

Sunday, July 31, 2022 - 9:30 AM

You've Stayed Too Long on This Mountain

Good morning, Greater Centennial family!

To you, and to all of our Westchester Reform Temple family who join in this shared worship both here in church and online: good morning and *shalom!* What a joy it is for me to be welcomed back so warmly by your congregation, to share these words from the pulpit, to be surrounded by this loving and vibrant congregation and to share this altar with my friend, Rev. Stephen Pogue, and to your new Assistant to the Pastor, Rev. Kellie Wofford who officially begins tomorrow, so enjoy your last day of unemployment. To the pastor, his wife, First Lady Iris, and the entire staff and congregation of Greater Centennial -- Kelly and I are blessed to enjoy this sacred fellowship. Recently (my) Kelly learned of a friend who passed, and she is singing at his funeral this morning in the city, so she sends her regrets and her blessings to all of you.

Now, back in June, the Pastor spoke at our congregation's annual Juneteenth service. Well, I say he spoke "at" the service, but actually he was phoning it in.

I am not trying to dis your Pastor. He put all of his heart and soul and might into his preaching as he always does. He was just literally doing it by telephone because his flight from Atlanta back to New York had been canceled.

A routine flight canceled for no apparent reason is, of course, the definition of "a very 2022 problem." And, with it came a very 2022 solution, one that required a little ingenuity and technology. After two and a half years of worshiping over Zoom, live-streaming services over social media, figuring out how to get the Pastor's voice from a telephone in Atlanta to a synagogue in Scarsdale proved relatively easy.

What seems to be proving much harder, as we all know, is getting our lives and our churches and our synagogues back to what we think of as "normal."

Now, I don't know about how things are with you, Greater Centennial, but it's no secret that at Westchester Reform Temple and, surveys show, in houses of worship of every faith and every

denomination, attendance is down, in some cases way down. People feel depressed, burned out, lethargic. They're apparently having a hard time getting their butts off their couches and into the pews.

And I don't know how things are going in your homes and in your hearts, Greater Centennial, but it's no secret that, fifteen minutes up the road, and for that matter, wherever you go, people may put on a game face in public but many feel stuck, paralyzed, in a kind of limbo. Spirits are down... in some cases, way down.

Fine time, then, for a spiritual kick in the pants, which comes courtesy of the Scripture reading that Jewish people all over the world encounter this week. In the opening chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy, verse six, it is written:

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ דִּבֶּר אֵלֵינוּ בְּהַר הַחֵרֶב לֵאמֹר רַב־לָכֶם שָׁבַת בְּהָר הַזֶּה:

The Lord our God spoke to us at Horeb, saying: You have stayed too long on this mountain.

Time to get up and move. Move on from Sinai (the Bible's other, more familiar, name for "Horeb") and get back to the wilderness. Onward to the Promised Land.

You've stayed too long on this mountain. Time to go forward.

Easier said than done. Getting unstuck in life is usually not as easy as just rebooking a flight from Atlanta.

After all, the Israelites got stuck at Mount Sinai, of all places. And this would be only their first time getting stuck on their way to the Promised Land. Time again, we see the Israelites taking the proverbial two steps forward only to take another one or two or even three steps back. Time and again, they seem moved by their mission to enter a land of milk and honey, promised on oath to their ancestors, only to get off-course, to lose their way, to lose their nerve, to lose their faith. Time and again they seem to remember their destination only to forget their Divine Director, to remember their goal only to forget their God.

God offers the people Ten Commandments; they want a golden calf instead. Time to go back and try again.

God offers the people manna from heaven to sustain them in the desert; they want the taste of Egyptian delicacies (and apparently the slavery that came along with the menu) instead. Time to go back and try again.

God offers the people the wise and inspired leadership of Moses and Aaron and Miriam; the people want the rebel Korach and his followers instead. Time to go back and try again.

And on and on.

And so what should have been a journey of eleven days takes forty years.

And in this way, I think we should find a lot that's relatable about these Israelites, especially now, with all their stops and starts, all their remembering and forgetting, all their progress and all their backsliding.

Because, how very much like we are they, and how very much like life is this. And then throw in a Covid or two or three variants, and throw in a rapidly heating planet, and more deaths to gun violence than any American citizen can count, and a bitterly divided political climate that results in gridlock and nothing getting done *for the good of the people*, and, well, you end up stuck, don't you?

One way of understanding the Israelites staying too long at Mount Sinai is that they simply got stuck there and forgot the way home. For his part, maybe Moses found it a little too easy to stay up at the

top of the mountain just hanging with God. Speaking as a fellow leader of the Jewish people, I can confess that many days, if I could spend my time hanging with God, deep in meditation and private communion, on top of a mountain, instead of leading the Jewish people through a desert, well, you probably can guess where you'd find me.

As for the people at the *bottom* of the mountain, well, it's hard to move forward if our leaders remain stuck, and don't we American citizens know a thing or two about that these days.

But still, the time came for all of them to hear, "You've stayed too long on this mountain." Time to move forward. Time to get unstuck. Time to remember the way home again.

The Sufi poet Rumi once said: "What comes into being gets lost in being and drunkenly forgets its way home."¹ In other words, periodic stuck-ness is a universal feature of life. Psychologist, meditation teacher, and author Tara Brach observes,

As part of the human journey, we each forget the vastness of our awareness and love and become increasingly

¹ As cited in Tara Brach, illustrated by Vicky Alvarez. *Trusting the Gold*. Louisville, CO: Sounds True, 2021.

identified with a limited body and mind. Donning masks to hide the pain of unmet needs and to defend our vulnerability, we further narrow our sense of who we are. We wear the disguise of “busy important person,” “angry victim,” “deficient person,” or “obsessed, addicted person.” Sometimes it’s a depressed person. Or anxious person. Superior person. Loser. Most of us have a closetful of assumed personas. They might help us survive some challenging times, but the problem is we become identified with our masks and we end up believing that these false images are who we really are.²

I think we all can relate to this, can we not? Hiding behind our personas? Or, most aptly these days, becoming “identified with our masks?”

Now, for the sake of public health and safety, I am not advising throwing caution and face coverings to the wind. But I am suggesting that for the past nearly thirty months, we’ve gotten stuck in a Covid-induced *mentality*, and that we’ve “stayed too long on this mountain.” Time to move forward, even if “forward” means back into full engagement with the

² *Ibid.*

messiness, trauma, and chaos of the world. Time to remember the way back home.

As we think back over the last 30 months, recall that the thing that first got many of us unstuck from the first phase of pandemic lockdown was the horrific murder of George Floyd and the public activism around his death that powerfully reminded the world a truth long forgotten, perhaps never understood in the first place: *Black Lives Matter*.

If Covid taught us early on that our faith could in fact thrive in the home and not only in the church or the synagogue--what with our Zoom worship and virtual gatherings for Easter and Passover--then the killings of George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, and Daunte Wright, and so, so many others--reminded us that faith also needs to take to the streets. God does not want us to find and practice our faith only “on the mountain.” God needs us to take our faith *off* the mountain, down among the people, out into the wilderness, out into the world. “You have stayed too long on this mountain.” Time to move forward. Time to remember the way home.

And we have to remember that whenever we get stuck in life, God is the Power that moves us forward.

Three weeks after Vladimir Putin began his brutal assault on Ukraine, in mid-March, I received an invitation to travel to Poland with seventeen other rabbis and thousands of pounds of humanitarian supplies, mostly medical relief, to aid the refugees, mostly women and children and the elderly, who, at this time, were streaming across the border into Poland, often at great personal peril, by train or on foot, at the rate of 150 refugees per minute, every minute of every hour of every day.

I believe that my faith calls me to speak up on behalf of God's most vulnerable children and that the tens of millions of human beings around the world who have no way back home, who have no home to go back to, are chief among these.

It would have been entirely plausible and feasible, and certainly more convenient, to talk about the refugee crisis unfolding in front of our eyes from the comfort of my pulpit, to write an article for the local paper, to post a message on Facebook or a video on YouTube.

But sometimes God reminds us when we've stayed too long on the mountain, when God needs us to take our faith with us out into the world, into the heart of human suffering, where God needs us the most.

If you can come down from the mountain of isolation; if you can do the work of cultivating awareness to hear God calling; if you can pay attention to how much the world needs you and the faith you can bring to change the way things are into the way they ought to be; if you can do all this, you might just feel yourself starting to get unstuck.

Let me suggest a simple action item--just one tiny, tentative step forward--that will allow us to put this into practice. Our two congregations--WRT and Greater Centennial--are engaging together this summer in a Voter Registration Campaign sponsored by two larger organizations with which we proudly collaborate.

The program, which consists of getting together in fellowship to write postcards to get out the vote for the critical upcoming election season, is sponsored by the [Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism's Every Vote, Every Voice](#) initiative in partnership with the [Center for Common Ground's](#) Reclaim

Our Vote Campaign. The Center for Common Ground is a non-partisan voting rights organization led by people of color, that works to engage under-represented voters.

All volunteers are given instructions, a script, key information, voter addresses, and postcards. Having held our first successful event this past Wednesday morning, we will meet again in the social hall of Westchester Reform Temple on Wednesday evening, August 10, from 7:30 to 9:00 pm and again on Wednesday, August 24, from 11 am to 12:30 pm. Masks are encouraged but not required and seating is set up for social distancing. We will also accommodate outdoor seating if requested. We hope you will attend, or, if you can't make it, please consider donating postage stamps or request your own postcard kit for home. This is a family friendly activity and all ages are welcome! Flyers with all of this information can be found outside the sanctuary here at the church.

This is only one way we can start to get unstuck. Each of us must find our own way forward. Listen to what was written by Václav Havel, the poet, playwright, and political dissident who eventually became the first democratically elected president of the Czech Republic. He called this poem, *"It Is I Who Must Begin."*

It is I who must begin.

Once I begin, once I try —
 here and now,
 right where I am,
 not excusing myself
 by saying things
would be easier elsewhere,
without grand speeches and
 ostentatious gestures,
but all the more persistently
 — to live in harmony
with the “voice of Being,” as I
understand it within myself
 — as soon as I begin that,
 I suddenly discover,
 to my surprise, that
I am neither the only one,
 nor the first,

nor the most important one
to have set out
upon that road.

Whether all is really lost
or not depends entirely on
whether or not I am lost.³

So my friends. The moment has arrived. God is calling you. You've stayed too long on this mountain. Time to begin. Time to get unstuck. Time to get up and move. Time to head for the Promised Land. Time to remember the way home.

³ Václav Havel, as quoted in Sam M. Intrator and Megan Scribner, eds., *Teaching with Fire: Poetry that Sustains the Courage to Teach*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2003.