Title: God Be With Ye (Reformation Sunday and my last at FPC Franklin, TN)
Text: Exodus 32:1-8, 19-20 and 33:7-17
Preacher: Eddie Bellis
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"Then name someone." That was Kitty's answer when I told her our church cared about everybody. You may remember Kitty from a sermon I preached earlier this summer. Kitty sang in the choir of a large Presbyterian church I served years ago in Richmond. One Sunday, as she took off her robe, she told me she was finished. I said, "Finished with what?"

Kitty said, "The choir. I'm hanging it up."

I asked why. She said, "Who cares? Who would even notice whether I was here?"

I assured her that people cared.

Kitty looked me straight in the eye and said, "Then name someone."

I wish I could tell you I had a good answer, but I didn't. I had heard Kitty singing without hearing her loneliness. I had seen her without really seeing her.

Churches are interesting places when it comes to empty chairs. Let the pastor's chair become empty, and somebody will call a meeting. Let the organist's bench become empty, and everyone will notice by the second hymn. But sometimes the emptiest chair in the church still has someone sitting in it. There are two kinds of empty chairs in a church: the one that everyone notices and the one that nobody does.

I have been thinking about empty chairs lately, and about an old story found in Exodus. We remember it well from Bible School. Moses had gone up the mountain. The people waited, and waited, and waited... Nobody knew when he was coming back. Some were wondering "if" he would return.

So, the people gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."

Reading this text again, I noticed this statement, "As for this Moses," and I wonder if it happens in other places and times. Notice how quickly "Moses, God's servant" becomes "this Moses" when people believe he has missed a deadline and his seat was empty.

They knew he was not there, but his chair was. They could not see Moses. So, they began to wonder who would go before them. They confused the absence of their familiar leader with God's absence. And when they could not see where God was taking them, they decided to manufacture something they could see.

Our text says Aaron collected their earrings, the gold they had carried out of Egypt. Gifts of liberation which soon became the raw material for an idol. He put the gold into the fire and formed it into the shape of their fear.

Once Aaron finished shaping the gleaming metal, their calf stood before them: bright, solid, visible, and manageable. It was not going up the mountain and leaving them behind. Nor did it

disappear into a cloud. This idol did not keep anyone waiting, and most certainly did not speak an inconvenient word. That is the advantage of a god we make ourselves. It never surprises us.

We should not look down on these people. They were frightened. They wanted reassurance, direction, and a future they could recognize. Those are human desires. The danger came when they allowed those desires to determine what God must look like. So, they manufactured their golden calf for certainty.

I suspect every church has a small golden-calf workshop somewhere in the building. I have never seen one on an architectural drawing. Perhaps it is behind the Christmas decorations or hidden in the basements. We seldom use gold. We manufacture certainty out of memory: "Find someone who will restore the church we remember." Or out of personality: "Find the right pastor, and everything will be all right."

A pastoral search requires plans, careful work, faithful people, and prayer. But a plan becomes an idol when its deepest purpose is to spare us from trusting God.

Eventually, Moses came down the mountain carrying the tablets of the covenant. He saw the calf and the dancing. He threw the tablets down, and they shattered. But if we are honest with the texts and with ourselves, something more than stone had broken. The people who had promised to belong to God had tried to make God belong to them.

Moses burned the golden calf, ground it into powder, scattered it on the water, and made the people drink it. The Bible can be very earthy. What they had manufactured to save them became something they had to swallow.

By the next chapter, the question is no longer simply whether Moses will return. The deeper question is whether God will still go with them. God has warned that the divine presence among a stubborn people may consume them. The covenant has been broken, and Israel cannot simply assume that nothing has changed.

And then something peculiar happens. Moses pitches a tent outside the camp, away from where the people lived. They watch him walk beyond their familiar boundaries. The pillar of cloud descends, and God meets him there. The tent is both a sign of estrangement and a sign of mercy: the relationship is wounded, yet God has not stopped speaking with Moses.

Later, Christians will recognize something of this surprising mercy in Jesus: at a well with an outsider, at a table with those others avoid, and on a cross outside the city. God is not confined to the places where we expect to find God.

We look toward the pulpit. God may be speaking through someone quietly sitting near the door. We look toward those whose names everyone knows. God may be calling us to notice someone who wonders whether anybody knows her name.

Moses enters the tent and prays, "Show me your ways, so that I may know you."

Listen to the difference between the two prayers. The people ask, "Make us a god," which begins with what we need God to be. Moses says, "Show me your ways," which begins with our willingness to be changed. The first asks for something we can manage. The second asks us to trust God even when the future remains unsettled.

On Reformation Sunday, those prayers stand before the Church. One says, “Let us shape a church, a pastor, and a future according to our desires.” The other says, “Lord, reform us according to your Word.”

We say the Church is reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God. That last part matters. We are not reformed according to the loudest voice, the latest fashion, or pastors' preferences, but by God’s Word through the Holy Spirit.

At Sinai, the people tried to form God according to their needs. But the Church does not form God. Through Word and Spirit, God reforms the Church - including what we notice. Israel saw that Moses was gone. They still had to learn how to seek the God who was calling them forward.

As a congregation, we can become so concerned about the chair everybody notices, the one your pastor will leave, that we overlook the chairs nobody notices and the people already sitting in them. Who has stopped coming? Who is weary? Who is singing the anthem and wondering whether anyone hears? Who needs more than a general assurance that everybody matters?

Kitty said, “Then name someone.” Moses prayed, “Show me your ways.” Moses does not pretend the breach is small. He pleads for the people, and God answers, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” There is the gospel. Israel has failed. The calf has been made. The covenant has been broken. Yet the promise comes not as a reward for their excellent waiting, but as grace.

God does not hand Moses a map or promise that no one will be afraid again. God promises God’s own presence. Moses answers, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here.” The promised land without God would not be the promised land. FPC’s future does not depend upon a pastor or flawless plan. Our future depends upon the God who goes with us.

Christians know that promise has a face. In Jesus, God comes among us, meets people at the edges, and suffers outside the city. The risen Christ promises his disciples, “I am with you always.” He doesn’t promise to spare the Church the wilderness. God promises not to abandon it.

Exodus teaches us that the Church is a people who can face an empty chair without believing that God has abandoned the room. Soon there will be another empty chair: mine. You will see an empty office, a different name in the bulletin as the bridge serves, and eventually another, more permanent voice in this pulpit. Meetings will happen about that chair before it is filled with your new pastor. There should be. Seeking your next pastor is important and holy work.

But do not become so concerned about who will lead the Church that you forget to be the Church. All summer we have seen what that looks like: keep setting the table, keep noticing every part of the body, keep planting and watering, and keep naming the people who might otherwise wonder whether their presence matters.

And perhaps the empty chair is not only a problem God must solve. Perhaps it is a space in which God will reveal something you could not see before. Someone else may discover a voice. A long-hidden gift may become visible. Someone near the edge may be invited toward the center. Perhaps, while you are waiting for God to send a pastor, you will discover that God has already sent you one another as the Body of Jesus Christ.

That does not make my leaving painless, nor does it make the loss unreal. We have shared real life together, and our saying goodbye matters. I am grateful for the ways you have welcomed

Laura and me into your lives, trusted me with your stories, and allowed us to walk beside you for this part of the journey. You have given us more than you know. Yet, emptiness is not beyond the reach of God. The God who creates worlds from a void and brings life from a tomb knows what to do with an open space.

So do not ask the next pastor to carry a weight no human being can bear. The next pastor will not be the head of this Church. Neither was I. Jesus Christ is the head of the Church. This congregation belonged to Christ before I arrived, belongs to Christ now, and will belong to Christ after I leave. An empty chair is not an empty throne.

My friends, I ask us to choose Moses's prayer at Sinai, "Show us your ways. Reform us according to your Word. Teach us to notice the people you have placed beside us."

We use a word at moments like this: goodbye. Over the centuries, an old blessing was shortened and softened. At its root, goodbye began as: "God be with ye."

Goodbye does not mean, "God was with us once," or "The good days are behind us." For Christians, goodbye is an act of trust: placing one another in God's care.

I cannot remain with you. But God can. (Pause) I cannot walk every mile of the road ahead with you. But God will. I cannot name your next pastor. But I can name the One who remains the head of this Church.

God's presence may come from the edges: when an elder listens longer than is convenient, when someone pours a cup of coffee, when a familiar chair is empty for two Sundays, and someone makes the call, when a person whispers, "Does anybody care?" and the Church answers with a name.

So, First Presbyterian Church, goodbye. (Slow pace, let the repeated blessing become a prayer.) God be with those who search and those who wait. God be with those who lead and those who quietly serve. God be with you at the table, in the field, through the wilderness, and beside every empty chair. God be with you as the Word reforms you. God be with you when the next pastor comes. God be with you always.

And God's promise is this: "My presence will go with you." Goodbye, beloved Church. God be with ye.