

October 11, 2026

Rev. Lisa Schrott

Philippians 4:1-7 & Exodus 32:1-14

The Perils of Impatience

Our second scripture passage comes from the book of Exodus. A bit of context is needed to appreciate the thrust of the story. A few weeks ago we heard scriptures from Exodus telling of the dramatic birth story of Moses followed by his meeting God in a burning bush and his calling to serve this God whose name is “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be.” This morning we have advanced a number of months - months that were full of drama and promise and more drama and even more promise. After God provided Moses three signs of his divine call and appointed his brother Aaron to assist him, Moses and Aaron set to work. This work including being the vehicle by which God freed the people from slavery in Egypt, guiding and prodding the people to freedom across the Red Sea and into the wilderness, Three months after leaving Egypt, Israel camps at the foot of Mount Sinai. God descends on the mountain in thunder, smoke, and fire and gives them a promise – a covenant – a document we call the Ten Commandments. As if this was not enough, God tells Moses to create a place where God can dwell with the people - a tabernacle. Our text this morning takes place while Moses is up on the mountain, Mt. Sinai, receiving the detailed blueprints for this tabernacle. Here what happens next from Exodus chapter 32, from the CEB.

The people saw that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, “Come on! Make us gods who can lead us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don’t have a clue what has happened to him.”

Aaron said to them, “All right, take out the gold rings from the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” So all the people took out the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. He collected them and tied them up in a cloth. Then he made a metal image of a bull calf, and the people declared, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”

When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf. Then Aaron announced, “Tomorrow will be a festival to the Lord!” They got up early the next day and offered up entirely burned offerings and brought well-being sacrifices. The people sat down to eat and drink and then got up to celebrate.

The Lord spoke to Moses: “Hurry up and go down! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, are ruining everything! They’ve already abandoned the path that I commanded. They have made a metal bull calf for themselves. They’ve bowed down to it and offered sacrifices to it and declared, ‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” The Lord said to Moses, “I’ve been watching

these people, and I've seen how stubborn they are. Now leave me alone! Let my fury burn and devour them. Then I'll make a great nation out of you."

But Moses pleaded with the Lord his God, "Lord, why does your fury burn against your own people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and amazing force? Why should the Egyptians say, 'He had an evil plan to take the people out and kill them in the mountains and so wipe them off the earth'? Calm down your fierce anger. Change your mind about doing terrible things to your own people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, whom you yourself promised, 'I'll make your descendants as many as the stars in the sky. And I've promised to give your descendants this whole land to possess for all time.'" Then the Lord changed his mind about the terrible things he said he would do to his people. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

I have been reading a lot lately about diminishing attention spans. Maybe you have seen some of these reports as well. Our inability to focus for sustained periods of times is affecting everything from classroom learning to social media to the church. Yes – even the church has been affected by changes in attentional processing. But there is some good news. Recent data from Lifeway Research of 1003 pastors indicates that pastors are preaching longer sermons than they did a few years ago. Or more accurately there is an increasing number of pastors preaching longer sermons and fewer pastors preaching shorter sermons.

According to an article published last week in the journal *Church Leaders*: "Most Protestant sermons in the U.S. run between 20 and 40 minutes. the most common length was 30 to 40 minutes. Now for those of you who are little skeptical of these data based on your personal experience (as I was), it is important to note that there were significant denominational variations. If you are looking for the churches with the shortest sermons, Lutherans lead the under-15-minute group. And Presbyterians are not far behind at 15 to 20 minutes.¹ So get your stopwatch started! A tantalizing tidbit in the article was that listeners generally thought the sermons were longer than the pastors reported.

Now as I mentioned, I have been reading a lot about attention spans lately as part of the work I am doing as a member of the Synod of Covenant's task force on AI and the Church. As a former professor I do find distressing that studies are showing that heavy reliance on artificial intelligence causes a phenomenon known as "cognitive offloading", where the brain skips deep processing and reflective problem-solving. As a consequence there is decreased willingness to stick with hard tasks, especially as our brains begin to expect quick rewards.²

¹ David Mercer. Pastors Are Preaching Longer, and Most Churchgoers Are Fine With It. *Church Leaders*. October 7, 2026. Online at churchleaders.com/pastors/2223696-pastors-are-preaching-longer-and-most-churchgoers-are-fine-with-it.html

² For a few examples, see: Thomas Chatterton Williams. The Other Way AI Impairs Our Thinking. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/2026/09/ai-apocalypse-despair-focus/688689/>; Binny Jose et al. The cognitive paradox of AI in education: between enhancement and erosion. *Front Psychol*. 2025 Apr 14;16:1550621. doi:

The people saw that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, “Come on! Make us gods who can lead us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don’t have a clue what has happened to him.”

Quick rewards...the expectation of quick rewards... while the definition of “quick” may have sped up across the millennia, as our scripture from Exodus this morning shares, we have not been a patient people for a long time. Yes, Moses has been on the mountain for almost 40 days and nights at this point. It started off well. We hear in Exodus 24: “Then Moses went up the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The Lord’s glorious presence settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days. On the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from the cloud. To the Israelites, the Lord’s glorious presence looked like a blazing fire on top of the mountain. Moses entered the cloud and went up the mountain.”

So what happened in between the Israelites seeing glorious presence of the Lord on the mountain to the people melting all of their jewelry to make an idol to worship, an object they were explicitly warned against when they received the commandments from God a short time ago? Commandments that began with “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You must have no other gods before me. Do not make an idol for yourself—no form whatsoever—of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. Do not bow down to them or worship them.” (Exodus 20:1-4)

The people saw that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, “Come on! Make us gods who can lead us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don’t have a clue what has happened to him.”

“We don’t have a clue what happened to Moses.” Did Moses ghost the Hebrew people? Did he leave the party without saying goodbye? Or did he pick up and take his toys and find another group of people to lead when the going got tough. That’s what it sounds like from the comments from the people – ok let’s be real – the whining from the people – the people who have been repeatedly whining and complaining about how hard their new life is.³

“We don’t have a clue what happened to Moses.” Well scripture tells us that Moses was plenty busy, receiving instructions on collecting offerings to God and instructions on making a sanctuary, a dwelling place for God. These instructions for the tabernacle were incredibly detailed, spanning chapters 25-30 in Exodus, including blueprints for the dwelling itself and the courtyard surrounding it and all of the interior fixings. God also gives very detailed

10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1550621; <https://theconversation.com/eroding-a-virtue-ai-trains-people-to-expect-instant-answers-and-thats-bad-news-for-patience-280759>

³ You can read a great summary of this text at <https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-exodus/>

instructions on how the priests are to dress. The amount of detail in these instructions is daunting. We Presbyterians like to think we do things “decently and in order.” Well we have our ancestors in the faith to thank for a paradigm of process.

The people saw that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, “Come on! Make us gods who can lead us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don’t have a clue what has happened to him.”

The people’s patience was wearing thin and their anxiety was rising. All too frequently when feelings of insecurity and anxiety rise to the surface, the lens of nostalgia sharpens the memories of the “good old days.” The Hebrew people were facing an unknown future. They had left behind a life for which they knew the rules – however difficult – for an unknown journey. A promise of better life in a land of milk and honey. And here they were wandering for months in the wilderness when their leader takes a sojourn up the mountain to commune with God. And the people are left rudderless in the meantime. The Hebrew people seem to be living out the quote that often attributed to psychotherapist Virginia Satir: “People prefer the certainty of misery to the misery of uncertainty.”⁴

Anxiety and uncertainty don’t bring out the best in people who are looking to have some semblance of control in their lives. The impatience that we feel as we long to have the last piece of the puzzle in place – or maybe even just the edges of the puzzle connected – can lead us to forget just how many times in scripture we hear: “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you; I will help you; I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.” (Isaiah 41:10) And as we heard Aaron read from Philippians “The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

“Do not fear, for I am with you”. “Do not be anxious about anything.” The band of Hebrews following Moses into the wilderness struggled with this command as much as we do today, a people living in a different kind of wilderness, yet still facing an unknown future. We look around and see the magnitude of injustice being perpetrated by our leaders against our immigrant neighbors; ugly language directed against our siblings in the LGBTQ+ community; warfare and terrorist acts and gun violence around the corner and across the globe. And we are anxious. Anxious about the economy, about the upcoming elections, about what will happen after the elections; anxious about artificial intelligence and what kind of future we will have – if we have one at all. As we stew in our anxieties, we become impatient with each other, impatient with our leaders, even impatient with God. And our impatience becomes our peril, because in our impatience we elevate other idols above our devotion to loving God and loving neighbor. As long as the stock market is going up, it is ok. As long my kids are in good

⁴ <https://www.toolshero.com/toolsheroes/virginia-satir/>

schools, it is ok. As long as I have health insurance, it is ok. As long as the festival is to the Lord, it is ok.

All the people took out the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. He collected them and tied them up in a cloth. Then he made a metal image of a bull calf, and the people declared, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf. Then Aaron announced, “Tomorrow will be a festival to the Lord!” They got up early the next day and offered up entirely burned offerings and brought well-being sacrifices.

A festival to the Lord. A festival to the Lord where we worship a golden bull calf. As one commentator has noted, “An idol is always incognito. On the surface, it looks like a good and respectable and righteous thing: like the everyday demands of work (“farm” or “business”), for example. Or it looks like religious piety, an impressive festival to God.”⁵

The story of the Israelites inability to holdfast to God’s commands while waiting for guidance from Moses rings true for many of us in our world today. The Rev. Dr. Kit Carlson, former rector at All Saints Episcopal Church (and preacher here at PCO last June) had an insightful commentary in *Christian Century* this week. Using the framework of family system theory, she notes that “systems without healthy ways of managing that anxiety find themselves caught in a downward spiral of emotional regression.” Carlson contends when we get caught in these type of freakouts, we want to somebody to do something – anything to fix the situation and to alleviate the anxiety. She walks through characteristics of an “anxious system” that the Israelites display, one of which is a quick-fix mentality: “The group can’t tolerate discomfort and turns to symptom relief, rather than attempting any significant change. Why wait for Moses to return? Why wait for the Lord to provide further guidance? A golden calf will fix everything, they claim.”⁶

And what are we turning to in our world to fix our anxieties? In our impatience and discomfort are we seeking “system relief?” Looking for anything to release dopamine in our brains to give us a hit of positive reward rather than recognizing that quick fixes won’t be there in the long run. Sometimes we need to wait on the Lord to provide further guidance. We need to be patient. And we can look to nature for an example.

In the words of preparation in the bulletin, I share a bit of commentary about the process of ripening. “We assume that if something important is happening, it should be visible. ... The farm teaches otherwise. For weeks, the tomato looks the same. Then one morning, it starts to

⁵ Salt Project. Playing with Fire. Salt’s Commentary for the Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost. October 3, 2026. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/10/5/playing-with-fire-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-nineteenth-week-after-pentecost>

⁶ Kit Carlson. Anxiety in the Israelites’ family system (Exodus 32:1-14) Reading the golden calf story through family systems theory. *Christian Century*. October 9, 2026 <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/sunday-s-coming/ordinary-28a-carlson>

turn red, showing that change was happening the whole time.” We don’t always get that. And thank God for the grace we receive when we forget that God is working in our lives even when we can’t see it yet and expect a quick fix.⁷

I think it is telling how the Lord responds to the Hebrew people’s quick-fix mentality. The Lord is angry and threatens to destroy the people. Then Moses reminds the Lord about the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Israel to be as a people as numerous as the stars in the skies who would inhabit the land of plenty. And the Lord God changes his mind about the terrible things that would happen. The scripture doesn’t tell us explicitly why God’s mind was changed, although it hints that Moses words have had something to do with it. Regardless of why God’s mind was changed, I’d like to think that the sheer number of times that we are told “do not fear” is a recognition by God that we are too often an impatient and anxious people. An impatient and anxious people living in an impatient and anxious world, where finding a quick-fix idol seems like it will solve our problems. The apostle Paul reminds us of the antidote “...in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” May it be so. Amen.

⁷ Cameron Trimble. *The Wisdom of Ripening*. Piloting Faith: An (Almost) Daily Meditation June 24, 2026. <https://www.pilotingfaith.org/p/the-wisdom-of-ripening>