

Exodus 32 – The Golden Calf

Today we continue the Exodus story. The Israelites have escaped slavery in Egypt; they escaped the pursuing Egyptian army and crossed the Red Sea. The law, the ten commandments, have already been given or thundered by God. Moses is back up on Mount Sinai where God is giving him detailed instructions on worship as well as creating a permanent covenant on stone tablets. Things do not go so well down on the plain while Moses is up in the mountain ...

In times of trial we need to turn to something or someone. The Israelites, living semi-nomadic lives in the wilderness with generations of Egyptian slavery still an all-too-recent memory, were living in a time of great anxiety. Despite all the wonders of God that they witnessed – the plagues, the Passover, the passage through the parted waters of the Red Sea, the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night guiding them, bread and quail from heaven and water from the rock sustaining them, they have been less than happy with Moses' leadership, whining about the food and water, and thinking that maybe they were better off as slaves in Egypt.

Moses has been up on that mountain for quite some time. Their leader, the one who confronted Pharaoh, the one who spoke to God, the one whose staff turned into a snake and commanded waters, this Moses, had led them so far ... but now seemed to have left them alone in the wilderness and they start to wonder. Is he ever coming back?

Uncertain about what comes next, the people grow anxious. Some have decided that Moses is NOT coming back and so it is time for a new plan.

They beg Aaron, “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 as to what has happened to him.”

The traditional interpretation of this story is as follows: the people were misguided, sinned, made a false god, an idol, and began to worship it. Misguided, faithless, unbelieving people trusting in stuff – in gold – rather than in God. This traditional interpretation is oversimplified. The traditional critique is that the people swapped a supposed blind, pure faith in an unseen God for the worship of a false god, an idol, that they could see and hold and touch.

But, that’s factually incorrect. God had already given the people plenty to see – the plagues, the parting of the waters, the pillars of cloud and fire, the gifts of food and water in the barren wilderness, and Moses himself, their intercessor before God who spoke God’s words and worked God’s wonders. It’s not that the people had faith in what was not seen all along. No! They had plenty to see, plenty of sights and sounds to bolster their faith.

So it is perfectly understandable that the people get anxious. It is perfectly understandable that they want something to hold on to. It is perfectly understandable that they want to see and touch something as they wait - in the uncertain limbo of a wilderness somewhere between the land of slavery and the land of milk and honey.

Aaron responds to their demands: “Take the golden earrings from your wives, your sons, your daughters, and bring them to me.” So the people bring

their gold. He then fashions a molten calf. The people say, “These are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” And Aaron builds an altar before the golden calf and proclaims, “Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord.” The next day, people rise early. They offer burnt offerings, peace offerings, and then eat, drink, and play.

Meanwhile, up on the mountain, God saw what was going on, and angrily told Moses “Go down; for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves; They have turned aside quickly from the way which I commanded them; they have made them a molten calf, and have worshipped it, and have sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, which have brought you out of the land of Egypt’...”

It’s hard to blame the people for the golden calf. Sinai is a scary place wrapped in smoke and clouds, and the God up in the mountain is a consuming fire. This God had led them out of Egypt, but they just don’t trust him yet. He’s dark and obscure. They are afraid of him. The calf? Well, it’s a statue of a young bull - but it is not threatening to consume them.

God feels pretty bad when he looks down and sees the people enjoying the calf. God calls them a ‘stiff-necked’ people, implying a sort of rigidity. They are stuck in some old way of seeing and doing and being, like there hasn’t even been an exodus from Egypt - like all they know of god is statues and tyrants. They can’t imagine a living, loving God who can be trusted. Maybe God isn’t quite sure how to proceed with the relationship either. God seems to be a bit like a blundering lover. At moments - gracious and tender, at moments (even Moses points out) he could be perceived as doing evil.

Moses has been reluctant from the beginning to be in this position. But still he climbs through the thick darkness, gets right up next to the consuming fire and he stays there for forty days. Maybe he wasn't completely comfortable with God, but it appears that the two have established some sort of intimacy and relationship. He's not even afraid to talk back and question.

"Why," Moses asks, "are you angry with the people you freed?" Such audacity! It's almost like Moses is trying to coach God (who seems a little tetchy) through the relationship: don't act out of anger. Remember your promise. Remember love - cuz you're on the edge of looking evil, here.

But God is really opening it up, too - this space for a God that is neither tyrant nor statue. God says, "Let me alone that my wrath may burn against them." Maybe he hopes that Moses won't leave him alone or doesn't actually want to be left alone. Maybe God really does love the people deeply and passionately.

Maybe this God is neither a tyrant nor a statue - but a god who is vulnerable, who feels, who invites relationship. The situation is not unlike a parent who has been disobeyed and hurt and shows anger and frustration - "Just wait 'til your father gets home." or "I can't believe he did that - I'm going to kill him." God desires God's people. They desire the calf. God feels it and is deeply affected. But somehow, the covenant between God and God's people endures through the anger, hurt, and passion.

Life of faith can be very challenging as it was for these people who were

trying to figure out this living God. After all they had gone through, their anxiety was understandable - where was this Moses? What does the life of faith look like when we are anxious - about work, or our marriage, or our healthcare, or our politics, or our society ... How does faith guide us in times of uncertainty?

Like the people in the Exodus story, we're going to cry out for something to hold onto when we're anxious. Like Aaron, we'll try to make a quick fix, but we'll likely provide the wrong answer. Like God, we'll get angry and disappointed. Like Moses, we'll plead and work for a better way forward.

None of it will be perfect. The life of faith never is. There is no simple path of faith. No singular right answer. Anxious times stink. And we're going to mess up. But the good news is that we are God's people, chosen in love and grace. We do not earn this love. We do not have to deserve this grace. It's a gift of God. A promise. And God is faithful to his promises - BUT - in God's time.

As we read this story, we see that the people of Israel were not only anxious, but also impatient, and even unfaithful, and in a hurry to turn astray. But there is another way to tell the story. Drawing on sources in the Jewish Talmud and Midrash, the story comes out very differently:

The people saw that Moses was late coming down from the mountain. He said he would be gone 40 days, and people were getting impatient, worried, and anxious. They were sure that the 40 days were up. They were confused because Satan had come and confused them,

displaying an image of darkness and gloom. The people saw this as meaning that Moses must have died up on the mountain, and they were afraid. They felt that only a god could lead them as well as Moses had led them, and they needed a physical representation of that god, just as Moses had been present physically.

The people told Aaron "...Make us gods, which shall go before us; we have no idea what happened to this Moses guy who brought out us out of Egypt." Aaron was desperate to try and delay them, so he told them, "take the golden earrings from your wives, your sons, your daughters, and bring them to me." Aaron figured that women and children would be reluctant to part with their gold, and in the meanwhile maybe Moses would come down from the mountain. But the people did not delay, they rapidly gave Aaron their gold. So Aaron took the gold and threw it into the fire.

Now when the people of Israel left Egypt they were accompanied by an "*erev rav*" - by a large mixed multitude of other people, not Israelites, who were eager to leave Egypt. Amongst this mixed multitude were skilled sorcerers, and when Aaron threw the gold into the fire they used witchcraft to create the Golden Calf. Aaron was startled when the Golden Calf came out of the fire and these foreigners said "These are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt."

When Aaron saw the people were eager to worship the Golden Calf he took it upon himself to build an altar, figuring he could do it slowly, and perhaps Moses would finally get down from the mountain before the

people could actually worship it. He also figured it's better that he should build the altar and take the blame for it than for all of Israel to take the rap. He then told the people, "tomorrow is a feast to the Lord", hoping Moses would return, and the people would forget all about the Golden Calf and would return to the Lord.

God saw what was going on, and angrily told Moses "Go down; for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves." By this God meant "**Your** people, that **mixed multitude** you decided to bring out of Egypt, not **My** people, not the Israelites, not the people with whom I made the covenant."

Same story – but a very different conclusion. In the first version the people of Israel are a bunch of sinners, and Aaron is their ringleader. In the second version, the people of Israel are innocent bystanders and Aaron is a hero trying to prevent the people from falling into idol worship. The Midrash (which is rabbinic commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures, attached to the biblical text) even blames God for letting the people collect so much gold from the Egyptians – God should have known the people would be tempted to sin with so much gold!

Why did the later rabbis put such a "gloss", do such a job of "spinning" the tale told in the Bible? It's probably at least in part because of a natural desire to see one's ancestors as honourable, and a tendency we all have toward scape-goating, to blame others for our own faults.

The root of the problem in this story isn't idolatry. It's the lack of patience and

the anxiety that grows out of impatience. From the moment the Israelites left Egypt and headed down to the sea on their way to the wilderness, they were saturated with anxiety and impatience. Who can blame them?

First they thought Pharaoh's army was going to slaughter them all. Then they thought they would starve - and, oh! Remember those cucumbers they had back in Egypt! Then they were thirsty and thought they'd dehydrate. Then they wanted meat, because the miracle bread and quail started to be a little too much. Then Moses was taking too long up on the mountain talking to God - as the thunder and earthquakes from God's immanent Presence roared overhead."

As for this Moses, the man who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." You gotta love it. "This Moses." Yeah, remember, the guy who engineered your freedom ... the one who spoke one-on-one with the God who sent the plagues. And split the sea. And the pillar of cloud and smoke. Remember him? Good 'ole what's-his-name?

Yeah, we have no idea what happened to him. Maybe he just took off. Maybe he's getting directions. Never can tell. They can't just sit still, and revel in gratitude that they aren't making bricks anymore. Their anxiety overwhelms them and, it doesn't take long for the ants-in-the-pants to be just too much. Time to make an idol.

This is one of those spiritual lessons that we should have no problem identifying with. For, if there's anything that we have a hard time with in our culture, it's waiting. We have no patience. We need results right away. We

expect everything to happen quickly. Immediately. Lack of patience can very easily lead to anxiety.

Just think back to the moments you may have had this week - when your Internet connection started to get a little slow. When your smartphone had a hard time catching a signal. When you sent an email 20 minutes ago, and the other party hasn't yet emailed back. You pray to God and expect an immediate response - not in a month, not in a week, maybe a day? And that driver who can't seem to find the gas pedal. <tick-tock, tick-tock> The anxiety grows.

There is great spiritual treasure to be found in waiting - the practice of cultivating patience and letting anxiety go. It's a practice that raises faith to a profound trust that God is working, and moving even when things seem to be going nowhere. And that God's time is the right time, that glaciers move - even against all appearances to the contrary.

It's a practice which forces us to put our own needs to the side for a bit, and focus on seeing the world and the unfolding of God's plan and revelation as God sees fit to unfold it. It can be frustrating. But, it can also be beautiful.

And...you have to love the divine irony. God's response to the impatient children of Israel? Making them wait FORTY YEARS to get to where they're going. Forty years to travel a few hundred miles. Just breathe. Relax. Take a load off. And have some patience. God will get us there in God's own good time.

Impatience and anxiety may have pushed the Egyptian escapees into the building of the Golden Calf, but impatience is the product of a lack of gratitude - a recurrent theme in the Exodus story. Instead of taking the time to thank God for their safe escape, for freedom from brick production and building pyramids, for the provision of food and water, for the promise of a new homeland flowing with milk and honey - they whined, they became anxious, they were impatient. They wanted more - they wanted it all - now!

Better food, better homes, the promised land, an easier life - and the milk and honey. But this God who had been leading them and taking care of their needs, wanted a relationship with these ungrateful people.

Instead of showing gratitude, humility, love and respect toward this amazing God who chose to save them and provide for them, who had made a covenant with their ancestors, they decided they couldn't wait. If this God didn't respond to them - now - they would make a god who would.

Today we are reminded that we need to be grateful - and patient, and less anxious. If God doesn't appear to respond to us in our expected time, we should not be tempted to turn to other gods or idols. And today we have more than enough idols that compete for our relationship with our God. Our idols may not be golden calves - today's idols are jobs, sports, television, internet, all forms of entertainment that compete for our time with God.

Slow down ... catch your breath ... practise patience ... use your waiting time to remember your blessings and all that you have to be grateful for - freedom, shelter, food, water, a peaceful country, relationships - with God,

family, neighbour, friends, and remember to give thanks to this awesome God. And the best way to express your gratitude is by sharing your blessings with others.

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR OCTOBER 13, 2024

Lord of bounty and blessings, we come to you this day in gratitude for all that we have been given. We thank You for everything we delight in – warm sunlight in autumn days, rich and deep colours in the beauty found in nature and art, the melodic rhythm heard in poetry and music; the creativity inherent in human achievements, the joy of witnessing family members blossom and grow; the pleasure of good humour; the sense of accomplishment for work well done; the preciousness of love and friendship; and all your gifts of health and healing to sustain our bodies and soul. Most of all we delight in the gift of Your salvation, the assurance of Your love, and the promise of eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

We pray for all through whom we receive sustenance and life; for farmers, growers, agricultural workers, for packers, distributors and company boards. As you have so ordered our life that we depend upon one another, enable us by your grace to seek the well-being of others before our own.

We pray for all engaged in research to safeguard crops against disease, and to produce sustainable agricultural practices that support abundant life among those who hunger and whose lives and livelihoods are at risk. Prosper the work of their hands and the searching of their minds, that their labour may result in improving the welfare of all.

We pray for governments and aid agencies, that they would bring quick relief to individuals and communities impacted, especially in those areas of the world where natural disasters have occurred: following the hurricanes in the eastern United States; the droughts leading to crop losses and rising starvation of people living in Somalia and Eastern Africa, the deepening desperate situation in Gaza, West Bank and Lebanon and Iran.

We pray for the feeding of the hungry, the clothing of the destitute, the housing of the homeless, the reformation of prisoners, and the rehabilitation of those who are living with substance abuse of drugs or alcohol. Bless every agency, church or government, which is dedicated to the care of our disadvantaged sisters and brothers.

We pray for the end of bitterness and violence in its many forms; wars, conflicts, and the abuse of power. We pray especially that peace would come to the Middle East and Ukraine. Bless all peacemakers; those who negotiate between nations. Help these war-savaged areas in our world to be committed to seeking ways to de-escalate the political rhetoric and rising retaliatory actions that destroy communities and kill innocent people. In the brokenness of this world

many live with a heightened state of anxiety, uncertainty, fear for their safety and desperation to provide for themselves and their loved ones. We pray that You bring about enduring peace.

We commend to You those who work in harsh conditions, and those who have no work; those whose lives are drab and grey; those whose poor health takes away delight in living; those who are homebound or lonely; those who have no home of their own. Grant them the human help and support that they need, and the spiritual encouragement and comfort to enable them to live with hope and courage.

We pray for the elderly, asking for them enduring faith and to be encircled with lovingkindness and support; for those living in their middle years, asking for them wisdom in their choices, and the recovery of a sense of wonder; for the young, asking for them opportunities to learn and grow, and that their ambitions include the desire to serve. May we all continue to seek the God of every age, made known in Jesus Christ, the greatest friend of all.

We thank you for the gift of parents and children, family and friends. Let the light of your love shine in our homes. Help us to overcome strife and conflict in our relationships with your guidance, wisdom, patience and forgiveness. Help parents and grandparents in the task of raising children.

We pray for the effective, compassionate care of all who are ill, receiving treatments, waiting for test results or surgery dates, including members of this congregation. Bless all who work in health care clinics and hospitals: surgeons, physiotherapists, nurses, physicians, oncologists, psychiatrists, dieticians, social workers, dentists, pharmacists and the staff of hospices caring for the dying.

Loving God, let your blessing be upon those who serve their neighbours without thought of reward, who forgive their enemies seventy times seven, who care for strangers as if they were dear friends, who accompany the bereaved, who care for the ill without consideration of the risk to themselves.

We pray for the church universal, for all denominations large or small, that we may love one another in practice as well as in prayer. We pray for: First Lutheran in Vancouver – Rev. David Lefsrud (Interim), Lutheran campus ministries and campus chaplains in the BC Synod, for our Bishops Susan and Kathy, newly ordained Bishop Ali Tote of the Saskatchewan Synod, Bishop Anna, acting Primate Archbishop Anne Germond of the Anglican church in Canada; for our sister congregation in Peru, San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and Pastor Ana Maria Jara, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land; for all pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and volunteers.

Bless all joint initiatives in worship, fellowship and service to the community.

God of grace, as you are ever at work in your creation, so fulfil your wise and loving purpose in us. We offer ourselves to your service, asking that by the Spirit at work in us others may receive a rich harvest of love and joy and peace. May your glory be revealed and the whole earth give praise to you, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

God in Community, make us all one Body, as we pray,

Our Father ...