

NOTHING GOLD CAN STAY

EXODUS 32:1-14

20 SEPTEMBER 2020

FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC

We're continuing our "Challenge and Response" sermon series this week with the story of the Golden Calf, a crisis of Israel's own making. You'll find the story in Exodus 32, verses 1-11a, and 14.

When our text begins Moses is once again up on the mountain. Moses and God are in conference, and Moses has been gone from the Hebrew camp for 40 days. God and Moses are negotiating the future — setting the law in tablets of stone so that the people below might flourish in God's creation.

Despite the awe on the mountain, though, things in the valley are getting dicey.

Listen for the Word of the Lord:

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "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." ²Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." ³So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" ⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord." ⁶They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

⁷The Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt! ⁹The Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation." ¹¹But

Moses implored the Lord his God [...] ¹⁴And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Familiar and strange; friends, this too is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I have a confession: in the year of our Lord 1995, I failed my Confirmation examination before the Session of the Seven Oaks Church in Columbia, South Carolina. In my defense, I did not prepare one whit, and of the eight confirmands only two passed on the first test. But it's only fair that you know that you are listening to a sermon prepared by a woman who had to take the Confirmation test twice. That alongside my — ahem, *unique?* — grade in Peter Hobbie's Introduction to Old Testament class at Presbyterian College and it may behoove you to fast-forward to the prayers. Lord knows I needed them then and now.

But anyway, the problem back in 1995 was the 10 Commandments. I had a handle on the first five and a good-enough guess at six and seven, but always had trouble with the final three. Difficult to imagine, isn't it, an adolescent whose life was made up of light thievery, creative truth-telling, and dreaming of everything everyone else had conveniently struggling to grasp the three commandments about stealing, lying, and coveting.

The first commandment, though, I remembered with ease — *I am the Lord thy God; thou shall have no other gods before me.* It seemed strange to even have to mention it.

Who could be god above God? Of course God is God and God alone! I scoffed when our Sunday School teachers told us the story of the Golden Calf. How silly it seemed that a gold statue could be mistaken for the creator of the universe, that the wandering people would confuse the work of their hands for the worker of wonders in their midst.

Once I got out of Confirmation and Hobbie's Old Testament nightmare, I didn't concern myself too much with Moses' stone tablets. Having moved on from thievery I moved on from the Ten Commandments too. In my time in the philosophy and history departments at PC and later in my masters programs I concerned myself with bigger questions — ontology and phenomenology, the nature of truth and the ephemera of experience. No time for dated prohibitions.

But the commandments kept creeping up, their simple absolutes puncturing the complex web of grey with which I shaded my living. I couldn't help but notice as I continued to study Scripture that time and again the authors of Hebrew and Greek texts center their concerns on the implications of the commandments, particularly the first commandment. *Thou shall have no other gods before me.* Nowhere is Scripture's concern for fidelity to the Lord alone more clear than in Deuteronomy 6:

“Hear, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.
And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart
and with all your being and with all your might.”

The Shema, called after its first word (“shema” means “hear” in Hebrew) is a foundational prayer in the Jewish tradition, so central to Jewish thinking that it is approvingly quoted by Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Shema, like the first commandment, underscores the need for devotion to God above all else. Slap it on the doorpost, Moses told the people, write it on your forehead, teach your children its truth. Drill it into your head until it animates all your living and breathing.

Thou shall have no other God before me. [Which is to say:]
The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

The people knew the commandment. By the time we get to Exodus 32, they were committed to its truth. And in general, things were going well. Not that they universally loved the wandering and the manna, but they were guided by the pillar of God and they trusted Moses to lead them to the Holy Land. They knew God and were known by God.

In those early days faithfulness came easy.

But then Moses went back up the mountain and the people were stalled in the valley. Forty days, forty nights. An interminable delay on an infinite tarmac. Creeping uncertainty propelled God's people to idolatry. In need of concrete hope they cast their trust into molten gold.

I derided the people's short-sightedness when I learned the story of the Golden Calf. It never would have been me! If I had seen the ocean stand on its side! If I had watched the deliverance of the plagues! If I had tasted manna descend from heaven, certainly I would remember! How could anything but God be god? And how could a people so easily forget?

But then in March the world as we knew it changed.

The calm certainty of “before,” the was of faith and sure knowledge of God’s presence, gave way to inertia and doubt. The world cracked open when our brothers and sisters in communities across America rose up to remind us that not everyone could breathe. Fires burned the West Coast, hurricanes hammered Central America and the Gulf, heck even college football was imperiled. One by one the delicate house of cards that constituted a life of privileged faithfulness began to fall.

It seemed easy before.

But as days turned to weeks I became impatient at God’s delay.

I never did understand idolatry as a child. But then again I fixed all my hopes into a teddy bear, into a promised endless summer, to the reward of a McDonald’s ice cream cone. Those childish things may have passed away, but the question of ultimate devotion, the question of the calf, remains.

*Thou shall have no other God before me.
The Lord our God, the Lord is one.*

I knew the words before but only now have I begun to grasp their meaning. It occurs to me when I read this text that the most central question of our faith is not the philosophical mystery of God’s triunity or a debate over Jesus’ atoning work, the most critical question of faith in the 21st century is a question of fidelity, of trust. Who is your god, and whom today do you serve?

Put another way, do we trust in God’s salvific intentions in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in COVID and influenza, in mountains and valleys, bidden and unbidden, seen and unseen.

I did not cast my gold into the image of a calf — I might’ve but I don’t have that kind of gold — but here’s what COVID has taught me: idolatry, turning to other gods, is a subtle thing. It creeps up on us when we begin to believe in myths of self-sufficiency, when we turn to teams for our comfort, to back accounts to assess our worth.

Idolatry, an ever-present temptation, is placing our trust, our devotion, our identity into *stuff*, into the work of our hands or the growth of our portfolios. It’s how we mix up our

nationality with our identity as children of God, our allegiance to a flag with our allegiance to a Kingdom, our net worth with the value and dignity of merely having been made in God's image. It's how we confuse ourselves into believing a political ideology will save us, a party will deliver us, a market will protect us!

And it's how we get stuck. Because that which we create, though it can bind us with its shine, cannot make us free.

Here's what else COVID has taught me: God is rarely where we wish God to be, but that does not mean we are alone. When the world went sideways I looked for God in the familiar places of "before" but I forgot that ours is a God on the loose, out up ahead, moving us forward and preparing us for a Kingdom we could never hope by our own hands to build. In crisis, I sought out God in the walls of the church, not beyond them, I searched for God in the comfort of self-justifying narratives, not the challenge of de-centering narratives that prioritize neighbor over self.

I searched out hope in the Gods I built. And I found them insufficient.

The people cast an impersonal object and named it their god. It was a symbol of everything they wished they had — a potent image of power that could not lead them; a symbol of fertility, but it could not multiply their ranks. It was grand and beautiful, poor Aaron doesn't get enough credit for his artistry. But it was cold and stiff. And when Israel threw their pleas and prayers at the calf it only echoed, never acted.

I scoffed at the Hebrew people. How quickly they forgot. But I too grew impatient.

"So Eden sank to grief," wrote Frost, "So dawn goes down to day. Nothing gold can stay."

Moses melted down the calf. Before him Adam and Eve were banished from Eden. What I didn't realize as a child, what I only now begin to grasp, is that idolatry is not a singular sin of ancient people. It is a constant threat. It is the danger of both comfort and despair — the belief that God is not enough, that we have to make our own gods, secure our own salvation. The story of the Golden Calf is a story repeated over and again in human endeavors.

Which also means that the story of the Golden Calf is a story of God's faithfulness *despite* our wandering eye. With help from a persistent Moses, God remembers. And

God remains. Hurt, angry, still God abides, God sustains. Time and again, from Genesis to Greenville, God wills us to salvation.

What is our response?

”Hear, O Israel” isn’t the end of the prayer. Remember the rest?

“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart
and with all your being and with all your might.”

“Hear” is a command with a corresponding act. Love. And what is love? Love is a command to serve, to serve God, and to serve those whom God loves. Love is a command to look beyond our needs, our idols, our walls and into the heart of God. Love is self-sacrifice for the good of the other. Love is fidelity to the God who reconciles, not the gods of our creating. Love is our response. While we are waiting in the valley, we can look to the mountain. We can trust in the God who alone is God and alone can save. And we can love. And we can move together toward God’s chosen Zion. *Amen.*