

Exodus 32:1-14

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.” 2 Aaron 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.” 3 So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. 4 He 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!” 5 When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD.” 6 They 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.

7 The LORD said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; 8 they 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!’” 9 The LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. 10 Now 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.”

11 But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, “O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’” 14 And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

LOOKING FOR GOD IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

Do you remember that old song, “Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places?” I think we could sing a similar song about God’s people, “Looking for God in All the Wrong Places.”

Throughout the Bible we see that God’s people make this mistake over and over again. They look for God in all the wrong places. They trust in military might. They trust in rules and regulations. They trust in gold.

I would suggest that we often make the same mistake. We too look for God in all the wrong places. We place our ultimate trust in things that do not have ultimate meaning. We seek to satisfy our deepest longings with bread that does not satisfy.

Why can't we ever get it right? Like the Israelites of old we know the mighty power of God. And more than that we have experienced the grace of God's forgiveness in his Son, Jesus. Why do we continue to look for God in all the wrong places?

FEAR AND MISTRUST

Today's Old Testament lesson gives us a clue. We look for God in all the wrong places because we are afraid. We do not trust the grace and goodness of God. We are too quick to assume the worst.

Notice the reason the children of Israel were quick to assume the worst. Moses had been on the Lord's mountain for a long time, and the people assumed that something had happened to him.

And they attribute a power to this absent leader that he did not have or claim for himself. They say that it was Moses (not God) who led them out of Egypt. In essence they worshipped the messenger instead of the message.

(Isn't that still true today? Some people still worship their leaders instead of God. And when there is a leadership vacuum God's people often respond in desperate and unfaithful ways.)

They think that Moses is gone, and they are anxious to move on. Instead of waiting any more for Moses or God in the wilderness, they were determined to do things their own way.

AARON'S COMPROMISE

So, they said to Aaron,

"Moses is gone. We need a new leader. You're elected Aaron. Now lead us by giving us the god we want instead of the God we have. Come make gods for us."

God's people feared the wilderness more than they trusted God. Even though God led them out of slavery, they still did not trust God. In the wilderness there were times of uncertainty. In the wilderness there were times when the people of God felt alone and leaderless.

And in those times of uncertainty in the wilderness the people looked for a new and improved god. They wanted to manufacture their own god.

Don't be too critical of the ancient Israelites. We do the same thing.

When we are in the wilderness, when we are uncertain about where to go and what to do, we have a tendency to make up our own gods. Instead of seeking a leader who would challenge us to go where God leads we seek a leader who tells us what we want to hear and leads us where we want to go.

We forget the way God has saved us in the past, and we rush to grab onto something solid, something that we can see and feel.

That's why gold has always been a popular material for idol making. We think that gold has intrinsic value. We think that no matter what happens we can trust in the power of gold.

TURNING GOLD INTO A GOLDEN CALF

Do you know where these slaves in the wilderness got their gold? It was Egyptian gold given to them as payment for their time of service as slaves. God not only delivered them but also gave them treasure for the journey to the Promised Land. (See Exodus 12:35; Psalm 105:37)

And what did the people do? The people took the treasure that God gave them, and used it to make a glaring symbol of their faithless ways.

And so Aaron led the people in this perversion of God's good gift. Everyone contributed. The Bible tells us that everyone wore gold earrings ... wives, sons, and daughters alike. They all wore gold. They all had been given a precious sign of God's salvation.

And they sacrificed that precious metal out of fear. They gave Aaron their gold so that he could make it into the image of a golden calf.

Some people mistakenly quote the Bible and say that money is the root of all evil. Actually the Bible says that the "love of money is the root of all kinds of evil." (See 1 Timothy 6:10; Hebrews 13:5) Money used properly can be a great blessing from God.

But, when we make money into an idol, then it becomes the root of evil. Instead of becoming a tool for doing God's will it becomes a symbol of our fear and unfaithfulness.

Have you ever turned the TV on late at night? I have. Sometimes I can't sleep, and I turn on the magical world of infomercials. And what are they selling? They are selling happiness.

They say if only you give me your gold, you'll look better, feel better and be more content. Aaron lives on late night TV! Give me your gold, and I'll make you a golden calf.

There is also no shortage of political and religious hucksters who tell us the same thing. Send me your money, and we'll make the god you want.

Don't believe it. You can't make a god out of gold. The golden calf did not deliver God's people from slavery in Egypt, and the golden calf will not deliver us from our slavery either.

But, the people believed the lie. They wanted to believe that they could make a god out of gold. They were willing to sacrifice something precious in order to realize the god of their dreams.

THE RELIGION OF COMPROMISE

Aaron knows that the people have it wrong. The people say that the golden calf represents the gods who brought them out of the land of Egypt. And Aaron tries to redirect their misguided allegiance. Aaron says that tomorrow will be a festival to the Lord that is to Yahweh, the one true God.

But, the people were in no mood for theological fine points. They wanted a new and improved God, a God who would lead them where they wanted to go. They wanted a god that was less mysterious. They wanted a god that they touch and see and control.

Aaron is a people pleaser. He is willing to mix truth with error in order to gain the favor of the people. This has been the great temptation for God's leaders down through the centuries.

Let's try and please the king and God at the same time. Let's tell the people what they want to hear and downplay the more difficult demands of the gospel. Let's make the message of the cross into the perversion of the prosperity gospel.

Salvation does not come through gold or a golden calf. Salvation does not come from a leader who tells us what we want to hear.

Salvation comes only from the God who rules on high. Salvation comes from the God who leads us out of slavery and through the wilderness. Salvation comes from the God who tells us what we need to hear instead of what we want to hear.

Don't be misled. We cannot compromise with a world that worships a golden calf. Those of us who lead in the church must have the courage to speak the truth. And if we do not speak the truth the result will be disaster and judgment for us and for the people we seek to lead.

Aaron's attempt at religious compromise ended in failure. The people did not see the golden calf as a symbol of the one true God. They saw the golden calf for what it was, a god of their own making.

And they worshipped that “god” with gusto. They made sacrifices to their made up god, and they had a party like there was no tomorrow.

GOD’S JUDGMENT

Meanwhile, back on the mountain, God was not pleased with what He saw in the valley. God told Moses, “You need to go down the mountain right now. Your people have messed up big time.”

(Notice that God doesn’t call them his people any more. They are “your people,” that is Moses’ people. It sort of reminds me of when a son or daughter messes up, and your wife says, “Do you know what your son did?” She’s so angry that she doesn’t even want to claim the child as her own.)

Well, that’s how enraged God was at the actions of the people. They were no longer his people. They were Moses’ people, and he would judge their idolatry. He would destroy them utterly just like He did in the days of Noah and start over again with just Moses.

Don’t think that God will let us get away with making our gold into a golden calf. Don’t think that we can take the treasure that God gives us and use it with impunity just to satisfy our needs. Don’t think that we can mix truth with error and think that the sovereign God of the universe will not notice.

Idolatry is a very serious sin. God’s people cannot compromise with the ways of the world. We cannot out of fear and longing make up our own religion and expect to escape judgment. God can and will judge our faithless ways.

God calls the Israelites a “stiff-necked” people. That is they did not want to be guided by the yoke of God’s Word. They wanted to go their own way and do their own thing. And in the end they paid dearly for their waywardness.

I think that today the greatest judgment comes upon us when God just lets us have what we think we want. God gives us our golden calf. God let’s us waste the treasure He has given us on false gods.

But, this does not lead us out of the wilderness into the Promised Land. These false gods made of gold lead us to despair.

GOD CHANGES HIS MIND

In one of Bible studies folks were troubled about how God’s judgment burns hot toward the people for their faithless ways and yet God changes his mind. In our lesson for today God changes his mind because Moses intercedes on behalf of the people.

Changing your mind does not seem like a very Divine thing to do! Who was Moses to tell God what to do? If this were the only place in the Bible that something like this happens, we might be tempted to say that somebody got the story wrong.

But, it is not the only place. Over and over again in the Bible we see human leaders interceding for their sinful people. In essence they are trying to change God's mind.

And these leaders are successful. God listens to humans who pray for mercy. God changes His mind out of grace. God's love overwhelms God's justice.

God is not portrayed in the Bible as a dispassionate Creator who just rules from upon high and has no concern for justice. Nor is God portrayed as an angry despot who punishes His people without hope for salvation.

In the Bible we learn God is just, and that God is also gracious and merciful. And this interplay between God and Moses shows that the human mediator does indeed make a difference.

God's justice is overcome by God's grace and mercy. That's why God changes His mind.

THE DIVINE/HUMAN DRAMA

Now this is not an easy process for God or for us.

The greatest human mediator is Jesus, God's own Son. In the New Testament the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross demonstrates the high cost of forgiveness. This interplay between justice and grace is a painful divine/human drama. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

God as revealed in the Bible is far from the Eastern idea of nirvana. God is not this tranquil, peaceful and detached deity.

God is involved. And God's love is displayed in His Son, Jesus in a way that is scandalous. The Scribes and Pharisees mutter, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

God does not give us what we deserve. God changes His mind about us. God forgives us. God comes to us with a meal of grace and mercy.

God is a passionate God who seeks and saves the lost. God loves us enough to judge us, to throw the book at us for our unfaithful ways. And yet that time of judgment becomes an occasion for mercy as well.

BROKEN DREAMS RESTORED

I know that many of you here today are anxious. You are uncertain about the future. You don't know whom to trust.

Our anxiety makes us vulnerable to those who would lead us astray. There are many who want to take the gold that God has given us and make it into a golden calf. And in that process we are alienated from the one who loves us most.

But, remember this. We serve a God who changes His mind. We serve a God of mercy and grace. God can and will forgive our idolatrous ways. The time of judgment in God's hands can become of salvation.

John Calvin once said that the human mind is a virtual idol factory. I agree. Human beings have an innate propensity to worship someone or something less than God. And if you think that there are no idols in your life, maybe you better think again.

Ask yourself this question; "What takes priority in my life? What do I care about more than anything else?"

Like the Israelites we too can make an idol out of the gold that God gives us. We can make an idol out of our family. We can make an idol out of our money. We can make an idol out of our church. You name it, and it can become an idol.

Like Aaron we can say that our festivals are to the Lord, but sometimes our actions betray our true intent. Don't be afraid to admit the truth. Repent. Change your mind. Go in a different direction, God's direction. And you may find that God has graciously changed His mind as well.

Amen.