

Exodus 32: 1-14 "Golden Calves" Rev. Janet Chapman 10/1/17

A rabbi's child was playing hide and seek with some children. She went away and hid herself. But the other children were mean and while she was hiding, they ran away and left her behind. When the little girl realized she had been abandoned by her friends, she went running home in tears and threw herself into her father's arms crying, "Daddy, I was hiding and nobody tried to find me!" The father hugged his daughter and said, "God understands, honey, God understands more than you realize."

In our story today, the Israelites have stopped looking and waiting for Yahweh, that hidden God whom they can't see and certainly can't touch. It has been 40 days, that Biblical term to mean a very long time, since Moses climbed Mt. Sinai and disappeared into its clouds. God promised the people they would at least hear God's voice so they could trust in God's presence and in Moses. What they heard from the mountain was not words of assurance, but the forbidding sound of thunder. The people were permitted to offer holy sacrifices from a distance, but only a handful were allowed to go up the mountain or even touch its edges, lest they experience the pain of death. Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and 70 elders were permitted to go up, we are not told how far, and there they indeed see God. The chiefs of the people also see God when they feasted, so surely someone is going to offer some proof that God was with the people, not just today, but always. Instead, in their mind, God ghosted and who knows, maybe Moses is dead, so better turn to the one they can see who is right in front of them to lead the way. After all, for most of us, seeing is believing. If you can see it, it's real. If you can't see it, it isn't.

You may remember a story about 10 years ago about George Barnes who fooled the medical world into believing he was a doctor for over 25 years. He came from Chicago, after losing his pharmacist's license for defrauding the Medicaid system, and, without any training in the medical profession, took up a clinical practice near Hollywood, where his acting abilities made him a star in his own right. Using copies of a medical license and degree belonging to a real physician by the same name, Barnes was later recruited by an Irvine clinic and, for 25 years, treated 30-40 patients a day; suturing wounds, reading x-rays, interpreting lab results, diagnosing and misdiagnosing major illnesses. He even contracted with the US government to perform physicals on, of all people, FBI agents. You know what the response was when they finally caught on to "Dr." Barnes? "When people see someone wearing a white medical jacket and see the credentials hanging on the wall, they'll believe just about anything." When we need a little assurance, when we need something to believe in, we will believe just about anything. If there ever was a time in our history that this was proven to be true, I believe it is now.

When we are disgruntled by something, we go looking for an easier way, we go searching for a little eye candy, we hitch our horses to the one promising what we want to hear. The Israelites did the same thing. They say to Aaron, it's time to pack it in and get moving, we've waited long enough for Moses to come back. Without Moses, these folks couldn't tell you much about God. Moses was their source, their authority on God. They had never encountered God personally as far as they could tell; they had never heard from God, touched God, or talked to God. That whole parting of the waters thing happened because Moses was along and now that Moses was gone, they needed someone else. So they tell

Aaron, “Throw something together for us that will stand for God, something that can go before us to lead the way, something we can see, so that we can believe in something to get us home. It doesn’t matter what it looks like – how about something shiny and gold?” I am not sure what made Aaron think a cow was inspiring; maybe it had something to do with the cow being a familiar cultic symbol of fertility; maybe Aaron was just hungry, just like today he might have chosen a 7-layer burrito. I don’t know, but Aaron had all the people turn in their gold earrings, the men and the women, and they melted the gold down and came up with this cow. He said to the people, “Now here is something you can believe in, something to hang your hat on, a cow!” And the people responded, “Holy cow!” And they danced and celebrated because they had something – a cow – they could believe in.

Truthfully, I know I’m not that different when it comes to wanting something to believe in. As Mark Feldmeier notes, when you lose touch with God, when you can no longer see God, feel God, or hear God, you start looking for something more tangible that might represent God; something that represents God’s goodness, God’s blessing in your life, God’s promise. It’s not so much that they wanted another god; they weren’t looking to worship an idol any more than you and I set out to worship the idols of our day. They just wanted something to symbolize the one God they thought they knew, the God who led them out of Egypt and promised to take them home. They just wanted something they could see, because seeing is believing. We do that as well. We take our experience of God and melt it down into something that will get us where we want to go, something that fits our lifestyle, our needs and cultural priorities. And we call it God. We all have our sacred cows – prejudices, political ideologies, religious dogmas, possessions, opinions, and so on. We take what we know of God and melt it down into

something more reasonable, something more manageable, something more tangible. We set it before us and follow it, thinking we are heading for home, for the promised land.

While we are busy packing our bags in pursuit of sacred cows, God is still working on the various scenarios, looking at the broader picture, dreaming of a creation that will one day become as it was intended to be. God knows the way to the promised land but is in no hurry for the Israelites to arrive there for they are not the people they could be. The story depicts God getting a glimpse of the party being thrown at the base of Mt. Sinai and tells Moses to hurry up and get down there. The Common English Bible has God saying to Moses, “Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, are ruining everything!” The language is pivotal here because with every stroke of the pen, the authors want us to understand that it is supposed to be God who brought the people out of Egypt, not these gods referred to a few verses earlier and not Moses. But because the people have abandoned God’s path, God insinuates they are not God’s people any longer. I so understand God at this point – my favorite phrase when my daughters were growing up was to walk into their father’s office and say to him, “Do you know what your daughter did today?” Of course, he caught on quickly that they were his kids when they were bad but our kids when they weren’t. In verse 7, God uses the very same word that is used of the people just before the flooding of the earth, calling them corrupted. The offer God makes to Noah is similar to the one God makes to Moses – a proposal to start over with the one person God approves of, after destroying everyone else. It looks as though things are about to fall apart completely, until Moses breaks from the script. Rather than scaring up gopherwood and rounding up animals, Moses implores God to change God’s mind and not bring disaster on the people. Moses appeals to God’s sense of justice and original

desire to save God's people, essentially proving Moses is no yes-man, but one with the guts to try and persuade even the Almighty God. And God relents and gives in to Moses' pleas. We discover here that God's mind can be changed and that, in fact, we are a part of a relationship where plans are not set in stone but are very much an active work in progress between God and humanity.

It is true that the Hebrew people described their relationship with God in respect to what God has done and is doing in their lives versus the essence of God. If you asked them about the nature of God, they would have said, "Our God is the One who delivered us from the hands of the Egyptians and brought us into the Promised Land. Our God is the One who defended us against our enemies, has guided us, and has made us the chosen people." The Jews would have talked about what God has done and is doing, and would have contended that all we can know about God is what we can deduce from God's actions. And those actions are worthy of celebration, worthy of praises and feasting, which has been carried forward into the Christian tradition. Each and every time we gather for communion, we are invited to remember what God has done in our lives, to recall those moments when we believed God had vanished, but in fact was present and actively working on behalf of our well-being. Each and every time we come around the Lord's table, we are invited to remember those times when our sacred cows have led us astray and then allow ourselves to experience that ultimate forgiveness and grace of our God. Each and every time we eat and drink, we celebrate we are not alone in this journey, and on this particular Sunday, we are joined by millions of others who eat and drink, remembering God's activities of the past and present, and looking forward to the future where all humanity will feast together as one people, the chosen people of God.