

**“No Bull” Exodus 32: 1-6 Rev. Janet Chapman 10/15/2023**

I just completed watching the mini-series called “Inventing Anna” on Netflix based on the real-life story of Anna Delvey, the fake German heiress who takes on New York City’s biggest power players fooling them into the belief she is made of money, when she has none. Using this made-up persona, she received hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash, goods and services while working towards the goal of opening an exclusive art-themed club for the rich and famous. The courts ruled she came dangerously close to succeeding in fraud, a legal term I don’t understand because it seems pretty obvious to me it was both fraud and theft, and she goes to jail for a couple years. Currently, she is on house arrest awaiting deportation back to Germany, something she continues to legally fight despite refusing to pay any of her lawyers. After arresting her, you know what people said? When people see someone wearing expensive and exclusive clothes, walking with arrogance, and demanding attention and praise, they’ll believe just about anything.

When we need a little assurance, when we need something to believe in, we all go looking for a little eye candy, a promise of good stuff to come, don’t we? Like us, the Israelites were lured into the same temptations. This story in Exodus has gotten a lot of press with its golden calf and idol worship. The symbol of the bull found in the heart of Wall Street leans into a similar idea of advancing a stock market on the rise, like the horns of the bull pointed upward. A golden bull gives us something shiny to draw our attention to with all the possibilities of getting rich quick, like that lucky soul in Bakersfield who won the billion and a half-dollar Powerball this week. We all want something to believe in... and when it’s hard to find that one great thing worthy of our trust, we will take any cheap alternative that comes along. In today’s story, the Israelites have been given the great 10 Commandments, and then Moses goes back up the mountain for some more one-on-one teaching from the Lord, leaving Aaron in charge of the 600 thousand Israelites. Moses is gone for 40 days and 40 nights, a

biblical metaphor which means a really long time. Meanwhile, the inmates are running the asylum down at the foot of the mountain. They're getting restless because 40 days is beginning to feel a lot like 40 years; they've been in the desert too long; their feet are blistered and tired; their necks are stiff; they're sick of eating manna three times a day; they want to go home, get to the promised land. They tell Aaron, "We don't know what has happened to Moses but it's time to pack it in and get moving." Without Moses, the Israelites couldn't tell you much about God. Moses was their source, their intermediary, their authority on God. 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 believe in to get us home. How about something in gold – shiny and powerful? Now it's hard to know what Aaron was thinking but for some reason he thought a cow... a bull would have been much more inspiring. Maybe it had something to do with the cow being a familiar cultic symbol of fertility; maybe Aaron was just hungry thus a 7-layer burrito would have sufficed? Whatever it was, all the Israelites brought their gold, and Aaron melted it down and came up with a cow of all things, and said, "Now look at this – Now, this is something to believe in, something to hang your hat on. A cow." And they all cried out, "Holy cow!" and they danced, because they had something they could believe in.

It's funny in a sad sort of way, but I know I'm not that much different when it comes to wanting something to believe in. When you lose touch with God – when you can no longer feel God or hear God or see God, you start to look for something more tangible that might represent God, something that will represent God's goodness, blessings, or promise for your life. It's not so much that the Israelites set out to break commandment #1, You shall have no other gods before me; 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 bondage and promised to take them home. They wanted

something they could see, because seeing is believing. We all do that sometimes. 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, our cultural priorities. And we call it God.

Golden calves come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Prosperity is one such image. Work hard, earn an honest wage, work your way up, and get rewarded for your efforts. Be faithful, follow God's rules, and get wealthy. However, the truth is that the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike; the formula to prosperity is a hoax, it's as fake as Anna Delvey for in this case seeing is not believing. Then there is the megachurch fascination. Church leaders comment, "Just look at all those people they draw... the buildings, the money. They must be doing something right over there." But size isn't something to believe in. Jesus says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Now that's something to believe in. We all have our sacred cows – prejudices, political ideologies, religious dogma, possessions, opinions, lifestyles. We all take what we know about God and melt it down into something more reasonable, more manageable, more tangible. And we put it before us and follow it, thinking we're heading for home, heading for the promised land. Meanwhile, God is still drawing a road map that we can't even read because we're too busy packing our bags in our pursuit of our sacred cows, our cheap imitations. We're like the story of the 3 blind men feeling out the elephant – some of us are touching the trunk, some of us are holding on to the tail, and others of us are touching a leg; and we all start to believe that what we can touch, what we can see, is the whole thing, the real thing. We think we understand how God works and whatever doesn't fit within that framework, we too easily dismiss. Mystery becomes an inconvenience.

When I was in just such a phase, I met Sandra, a woman who had said she had visited a church I served and she was dying from cancer. She had gotten help from the

American Cancer Society but was still short on rent by \$100. We get a lot of calls for financial help, many of which are spawned by half-truths, by addictions not in recovery. It is a sobering responsibility to try to ensure that finances are used appropriately to help people, not enable them. She asked even if I couldn't help with the rent, could I come and pray with her? I agreed a bit reluctantly, as a myriad of things went through my mind I needed to do in the next 48 hours. But finding one of our elders to come along, we went the next evening. I know a dying person when I see one and my skepticism quickly turned to compassion. I realized then that God was up to something— something mysterious, something I couldn't dismiss. Of all the places I could be right now, how did I end up here, in this place, at this time, with this stranger? It wasn't on my calendar, not in my plans. But God had been drawing a road map for the day and in my haste, in my pursuit of a cheap imitation of the real thing, I almost missed it. Almost. It occurred to me as we visited that God was in that place, and in meeting God in this woman, how could I not give God what God asked – my worship, my reverence, my gold? Helping with her rent was minor compared to being in the presence of Divine goodness and grace. She had walked with God all her life and she was ready to take those final steps. I was honored we were invited to be part of the journey. In that moment, I was grateful for God's forgiveness of my dancing around too many golden cows while the real thing hangs on a cross, suffering alongside those who suffer and asking that we do what we can to relieve the suffering of others, whenever we can and however we can. There, dear friends, we find what we have longed for, what we can believe in, and what will lead us home.