

Exodus 31:1-14  
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“Idolatry”

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There seems to be a natural inclination in human beings to desire a tangible god. A god we can see, hear, smell, taste, touch and... we hope... manipulate to choose sides with us!

In today's reading Israel's jaunt from slavery to the promised land has stalled. Moses has left the people to climb a mountain and hold a Board meeting with God. Here he hopes to receive the 10 Commandments so the nation can continue its trek to the promised land. But that isn't what happened. As Moses becomes delayed longer and longer, the people decide to fashion a god out of the gold they have brought with them; looking down from the meeting with Moses God sees this and is filled with rage.

It reminds me of a fable I read years ago. Abe and his friend Sol are out for a walk together. They pass a church with a sign in front which reads, “\$1000 to anyone who converts.” Sol decides to go inside and see what this is all about. Abe waits outside. Hours go by and finally Sol emerges. “Sol,” says Abe, “What happened?”

“I Converted” said Sol. “No Kidding?” says Abe, “did you get the \$1000?”

Sol replies, “Is that all you people ever thing about?”

The Israelites have become a nation of Abe's, waiting at the base of the mountain, waiting for Moses and God to finish their Board meeting. And with each passing moment they grow more impatient.

Impatience can be a breeding ground for Sin. It takes people who are generally kind, good hearted, and loving; and transforms us in Incredible Hulk-like fashion into monsters who are unforgiving, intolerant, and short fused.

So, what, we wonder? Why would the God of gods be angry over a golden calf? YHWH has revealed far greater power than a calf; delivering this people from Slavery, parting the Red Sea, providing manna and water in the wilderness, YHWH has carried this nation through every struggle they encountered on this liberation march, now YHWH sees a lesser god, so what?

Well when God looked down from the Summit with Moses, the people are making offerings to this calf, praising it, singing songs, praying to it. Back then the world was a place of competing gods, the calf was a symbol of Apis, the Egyptian bull-god. Apis symbolized strength, leadership and fertility to the Egyptians. To embrace Apis was a direct rebellion against YHWH.

To make matters worse, the people were not simply choosing another god... they were bringing Egypt with them. The god they met while they were slaves. They were bringing the Egyptian politics of oppression and economics of greed and exploitation which were sanctioned

by their gods. So, looking down from the mountain YHWH's anger is roused because God had gotten the people out of Egypt, but not gotten Egypt out of people.

The people with compliant leader Aaron build an altar, proclaim religious feasts, and the next day many sacrifice to the golden calf; when they know they should be De-Calf-inating. We can imagine the festival, people eating and drinking which sets the mood for dancing and... you can imagine what came next, I mean, Apis was a fertility god.

The impatient people with Aaron had done all the wrong things, for all the wrong reasons. So we say... Thank You for Moses, though if we read his part in this story closer we find he is not very obedient to God either. Moses does all the wrong things, but he does them for the right reasons.

As God's patience is running out, it is cool hand Mo to the rescue. In anger God calls the people, "Moses' people," as if YHWH is disowning them, and Moses reminds God they are God's people. God tells Moses to leave him alone so the divine wrath can be unleashed upon the defiant nation, but Moses will not leave. God says the people must be destroyed for making this false god, and Moses reminds God, You have not brought this nation this far to destroy them now.

Moses appealed to God's sense of reason, and to God's reputation. Then he reminds God of the divine promises. God becomes so human in this story; right, like us the moment we forget to be reasonable, we forget we are children of God and allow confusion and impatience to ensue. It is eye opening the way the Author writes this story, as if God allows Moses to take on God's nature while God takes on human nature.

Yet, as Christians this is the language we use to talk about Jesus. In Jesus, God meets us in human form. God experiences suffering and joy as a human does. God comes to us, as one of us to exemplify divine ways of living. In Jesus, God is made human so human beings can recognize, claim and live out of the divinity within us.

I read this week where Saint Augustine defined idolatry as worshipping what should be used or using what should be worshipped. There are plenty of idols around today. The golden idol of irresponsible pleasure, the golden idol of prestige or star status, the golden idol of looking out only for #1, the golden idol of might makes right, the golden idol of fast and easy financial security.

The board meeting with God finally ends and Moses comes down the mountain, grinds the golden calf into dust and makes the people drink it down with water. The point Moses is making to the people is those idols we believe to be so strong, so strong they can actually save us, are actually extremely fragile.

As the story unfolds Moses puts down the revolt and then he asks the nation of people with him, "Who is on the Lord's side? Come and stand with me."

We gather this morning as Christians seeking to navigate our modern wilderness of idols, powers and principalities all around us. We seek guidance as we zig zag through forests of temptation, violation, and exploitation. To the ancient people and to us today... Moses calls us to respond... to come over... and take up our stance with God.”

Amen