

Exodus|Liberation and the Mission of God

The Synthetic God

Exodus 32.1-19, 30-32

11.22.15

Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."² Aaron said to them, "Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me."³ Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron.⁴ He took this from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt."⁵ Now when Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD."⁶ So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.⁷ Then the LORD spoke to Moses, "Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.⁸ "They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!'"⁹ The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people.¹⁰ "Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation."¹¹ Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, "O LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?¹² "Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, 'With evil intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth'? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people."¹³ "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'"¹⁴ So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people.¹⁵ Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets which were written on both sides; they were written on one side and the other.¹⁶ The tablets were God's work, and the writing was God's writing engraved on the tablets.¹⁷ Now when Joshua heard the sound of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a sound of war in the camp."¹⁸ But he said, "It is not the sound of the cry of triumph, Nor is it the sound of the cry of defeat; But the sound of singing I hear."¹⁹ It came about, as soon as Moses came near the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing; and Moses' anger burned, and he threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain.

³⁰ *On the next day Moses said to the people, "You yourselves have committed a great sin; and now I am going up to the LORD, perhaps I can make atonement for your sin."³¹ Then Moses returned to the LORD, and said, "Alas, this people has committed a great sin, and they have made a god of gold for themselves."³² "But now, if You will, forgive their sin-- and if not, please blot me out from Your book which You have written!"*

We've been looking at The Book of Exodus on Sunday mornings.

Last week we looked at the Law given on Mt. Sinai and particularly, the Decalogue or Ten Commandments.

Today, we look at the famous incident of the Golden Calf. Last week the Law is given and THIS week the Law is broken and...SHATTERED both ethically and physically as Moses smashes the stone tablets or plates or tiles on which God Himself had engraved the Ten Words. No sooner are the Israelites married to YHWH but that they commit spiritual adultery!

The infamous SIN committed at the base of the Holy Mountain deserves to be explored... It's pretty astounding in a number of ways: how brazen it was (right there at the base of Mt Sinai!) and in light of the miracles they'd seen AND so SOON after the Law had been issued...AND what it says about the national character of this people – how “obstinate” (as it says in v.9) the people of Abraham were. There are so many remarkable features and observations we could make... but we want to look at the broken Law.

Why was idolatry such a temptation to this people; why is it so prominent in the Law (the first four Laws have to do with right and wrong worship) and why so central a THEME in the whole Old Testament? This scene sort of pushes our noses in it! What's the deal with idolatry?!

So let's kind of define and explore it...then see if there's any cure/relief for it...and then end by looking at how to live with and relate to the ONE GOD who is NOT synthetic – living with the Untamed God.

The context for this section, of course, is Sinai. Moses is going up and down on the Mountain, a mediator between God and the people... He gets the “Book of the Covenant” , the moral laws, in chapters 20-25 and THEN he gets the detailed specifications for building that Bridal Suite we mentioned last week, the place where the Holy Nation was to meet with their Husband – the Lord of the Covenant. That meeting place is the Tabernacle and starting next week WE hope to look at the Tabernacle and how it's used in John's Gospel – that's this year's Advent series.

So, while Moses is getting these thorough guidelines for building the Tabernacle and exactly HOW the Israelites were to fulfill their PURPOSE by meeting with God, being in union with God and worshipping God...the people are getting antsy.

And while Moses is gone...a long time (and there was at least one period when he was on the Mountain for forty days!) and the people are wondering, “Who is going to take us into this hostile Promised Land that's BTW full of people who don't like us? Where is this Moses, “we don't know what happened to him.” (v.1)

So...nervous...insecure...impatient...tired of waiting... wanting to DO something...sort of “make it happen”, the people approach the Second-in-Charge”, Moses' brother Aaron...and they have an idea...to make a statue, “make us a god who will go before us”.

Now, this IS what we might call “gross idolatry” and it’s very common in the life and history of the Church before Jesus Christ. It comes up again and again in the historical books...Books of Moses, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles...and the Psalms...and the Prophets. The people are POWERFULLY...almost irresistibly attracted to gross idolatry. They want to stand in front of statues and raise their hands and make offerings and sacrifices...incense...fruit...even, as was the custom in many ancient religions, even offer their babies. The phrase, “made their children pass through the fire” was a reference to child sacrifice...and the Israelites participated.

When we come to the world after Jesus Christ’s coming, the Jewish people had sort of had enough of gross idolatry. They’d been conquered and taken captive in places where they could see the effects of this full-blown, gross idolatry...and then they came back to Jerusalem...rebuilt the Temple...and they were done with statues...but...as it turns out...NOT done with IDOLATRY...gross idolatry YES... but the more insidious, interior, subtle forms of idolatry were still a struggle for the Jewish people and for ALL people...

Because ...as I mentioned last week...as beings created in the Image of God and created to know God and created to worship...we ALL every one of us is an incurable worshiper...YES, even your atheist nephew home from college who will sit next to you at Thanksgiving on Thursday – HE IS A WORSHIPER! He may deny it...but whatever we pursue, whatever we ultimately desire, whatever our highest value and deepest commitment – THAT we worship.

And IN the NT letters, as David Powlison reminds us, the core of idolatry is seen to be DESIRE. The Greek word, “epi-thu-mia” (epi- as in epidermis – “over the dermis”) epi-thumia or OVER-desire...that word is shown to be the essence of idolatry. What we want, what we crave, what we can’t live without, what we believe will complete us, make us significant, whole, fulfilled, valuable, secure, glorious people...what we OVER-desire...THAT IS WHAT WE WORSHIP.

In gross idolatry, the silliness/madness of idolatry is more obvious but looking at it HELPS us see how we do it only more sneaky and shrewd (or so we think!) We can laugh at Aaron in v. 24 “I threw their earrings in the fire and OUT jumped this calf!” But can we see it in ourselves and laugh at ourselves when our hyper-desires are exposed.

For instance, they are seeking something they DO actually need. They’re headed for this hostile land and they need a leader... and security/protection ...but Moses is nowhere to be found... it’s a “felt-need” as we’d say. And idols appear to or promise to meet those needs. “Give us a god who will go before us...”

Second, idols are...manageable. This calf is a way to sort of package or harness YHWH, the God of Abraham who rescued them from Egypt. This will make their God...more...“user-friendly.” No delay! Again, idols are convenient ...are portable... accessible... oftentimes the way of least resistance.

Third, the idol...will eventually be seen as requiring something...as requiring a lot...as requiring everything. We never say about someone who is addicted to pain-killers or heroin, "Wow! I wonder how the habit supports him!?" It's always, "Wow! I wonder how she supports her habit" because addictions are idols and idols require support...they don't make good on their promise to carry us – they themselves have to BE carried!

We want to depend on them – but idols really depend on US! (Isa. 63.9 comp with 46) And as the British Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright puts it, "false gods never fail to fail. THAT is the only thing about a false god you can depend on." (The Mission of God)

And again, this is laughable when we see someone lighting incense in front of a statue... but when WE look for the recognition of our peers to somehow bolster us and infuse us with this sense of significance or glory or security...do we see how laughable THAT is?

When we look to fill the hunger in our soul with physical food...when food becomes medicine to numb our pain or give us a sense of well-being and help us forget our problems... OR when physical fitness or nutrition becomes an obsession or a way to get people to admire you ...and that admiration is what you really crave... or safety in the form of financial savings or "security systems" or a life fixated on anticipating every/any contingency so that you're always prepared... averting all danger and safe and secure from all alarm...when that becomes more important than relating to people and just living...maybe you're supporting an idol whose name is safety-lust.

Perfectionism is form of idolatry... hedonism... escapism... I'm convinced that SOME compulsions and phobias that eventually become full-blown psychological pathologies...begin as simple worship disorders.

John Calvin said, "Man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols" (Institutes of the Christian Religion, I.XI.8)... It seems, by hyper-desire we can turn anything into an object of worship. Good things become ultimate things!

And the real contrast in this infamous scene is a synthetic god that we make, we control, we carry and put on our time-table...AND, on the OTHER HAND, the God who comes from above...down to us...is not discovered...definitely not INVENTED; not fabricated or controlled but self-revealed. Notice how the writer makes this contrast in v. 16, "The tablets were God's work, and the writing was God's writing engraved on the tablets."

So how do we trade in our idols for the real God and what will happen when we do?

Well, the cure for idolatry is FIRST exposure and THEN intercession – exposure and intercession.

We have to endure the very painful experience of exposure and self-discovery just like the ancient Israelites. It may be some outburst of anger when your entertainment is interrupted and your spouse says, "Wow! What was that?" and you realize "Hmmm...what am I hoping to get out of this football game or magazine that can really only come from God?"

Again, it's often at moments when the dark emotions come to the surface that our idols are revealed...shame, contempt, fear, anger, envy, jealousy, despair, hatred, fear anxiety...and did I mention fear? When these bubble up...often there's an idol standing nearby!

And when we meet our idols...often in the context of these dark emotions and our misdirected-desires emerge... then we need an intercessor. Moses identifies with this people...and he intercedes for them. He stands in the gap.

He reminds God of His promise – this is the people YOU chose! YOU made promises to Abraham, Isaac and... Israel (you expect "Jacob") but he uses the name that God gave Jacob...as if to say, "This is about YOU! Not a synthetic god and not a synthetic fix...IT'S YOUR PROMISE...YOUR people..."

Then Moses puts his own soul on the line...and says, "I will be willing to take the fall... I know that YOU are holy and for You to just excuse this...would be a lie about Your own nature...THERE has to be justice... so...because someone has to pay...let it be ME."

And God, of course, rejects that offer...why? It's not clear why in Exodus...but it IS clear later when a better Intercessor comes and prays for idolaters like us: "Father...I will lose sight of You in order that THEY may know YOU...be liberated from synthetic gods that enslave them in order to KNOW the True and Living God (1 TH 1.9) Father, forgive them...allow ME to pay their price."

And when we get that intercession by Jesus Christ and we receive it as a gift we could never fabricate or engineer or build...when we accept it as the gift of God...then we can cast down our idol.

"I don't need the applause of people – I have the applause of Heaven; God has adopted me and because of Jesus Christ, He delights in me, cheers!"

I don't NEED the bottle to fill the void in my soul...the super-ripped abs... the most cutting edge technology...or coolest car...or any other status symbol to feel good about myself... FALSE GODS NEVER FAIL TO FAIL... but the Untamed God never fails...to fill!

But KNOW this: the Untamed God never fails AND He will NEVER BE TAMED... He will do what HE does... It says in v.14 that He changed His mind which...according to my theology is impossible...and I know it means something like "relented" not changed... but I can't really

explain it...and that's all a part of it... He IS NOT THE GOD I WOULD MAKE, a synthetic, artificial, hand-made, "Stepford-god"

And He will NOT conform to MY time-table...He will NOT be user-friendly...Is He GOOD? YES!

Is He safe...? Well...He's NOT a tame lion.

But He is the Only True and Living God, the Untamed God who in order to satisfy His own justice AND His own grace became one of US and in the Person of Jesus was blotted out...that I might be forgiven, included, be truly secure and significant and even glorious.

But in order to have Him...you have to throw down your idols (again and again – because WE ALL HAVE THEM!) and wait for Him...through big delays... to trust Him...even when it looks like He's forgotten you!

Listen to Isaiah ch. 40:

"Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God"? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. (Isa 40:27ff ESV)