



Sermon, April 2, 2017
Rev. Dr. Craig S. Pesti-Strobel
Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

Sermon Series: Where Do We Go from Here?
"Golden Calves"

Scripture: Exodus 32:1-6

32:1 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.

Discussion:

Quite a story, huh? I'm curious, when you heard this story or read it yourself, what did you make of it? What is going on here? (*Responses*)

The standard interpretation of this story is that it is an entirely negative story about how idolatrous and wanton the Israelites were, and how quickly they abandoned the LORD. However, if we go back and read the story very carefully, we discover some surprising things. Please turn in your Bible with me to these verse that were just read. Find all the places where it says the word, "gods."

Elohim

The Hebrew word translated as "gods" is *elohim*. So, these two places where we find the word "gods," you find *elohim*. However, that word *elohim* also refers to God. The plural -im serves in this case as an "intensive magnifier" because the LORD is a singular God, not several gods. What this means is that it is possible to read this to say that they are seeking some way to remind themselves of the presence of God in

“Golden Calves”

their midst, or even to provide a pedestal upon which God might stand, just like other cultures had in their temples. It is possible that the golden calves were not originally intended to depict God, but rather to be a place for the Unseen God to stand.

Festival of YHWH

The next thing to find is where Aaron talks about a festival to the Lord. Do you find that? Take note of that phrase, “festival to the LORD.” This indicates that they are intending to make this a celebration the God who is known as “I Am Who I Am,” YHWH, not a foreign god.

Images perhaps had a good intention, with the goal of bringing people together, providing a focus of worship, perhaps serving as a carrier of the unseen God. But sometimes good intentions can get out of hand. Can you think of times that has happened in recent or ancient history of the church? (*Responses*)

Scripture: Exodus 32:7-20

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.

¹⁵ Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain, carrying the two tablets of the covenant in his hands, tablets that were written on both sides, written on the front and on the back. ¹⁶ The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets. ¹⁷ When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, “There is a noise of war in the camp.” ¹⁸ But he said,

“It is not the sound made by victors,
or the sound made by losers;
it is the sound of revelers that I hear.”

“Golden Calves”

¹⁹ As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. ²⁰ He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.

This part of the story provides a critique of the worship of the images that resulted, and has been the chief interpretation of the golden calf being idolatrous.

Idolatry is making the vessel ultimate above what the vessel contains, or elevating what is meant to serve as a conduit for the sacred to be delivered to humans. This struggle is currently found in the phenomenon of people proclaiming they are “spiritual but not religious.” Frequently, these persons have come to the realization that religious structures, institutions and even dogmas, which are meant to be channels of spiritual truth and transformation, become all-important, and become objects of preservation and veneration rather than the spiritual presence they are meant to deliver.

Dr. Carol Ochs, the director of Graduate Studies and adjunct professor of Jewish Religious Thought at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York, offers a great insight into what we can learn from this story:

The God we worship is not one we can *look at*; rather, God shapes the way we *look at* everything we see. Since God is God- our ultimate concern-God cannot be an *object* to our subjectivity. Rather, our subjectivity, as well as our consciousness and will, are transformed by our awareness of God. Our subjective senses-sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste-cannot detect God. God is described by adjectives and verbs: "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin-yet not remitting all punishment, but visiting the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations"(Exodus 34:6-7).

Moses, not unlike the Children of Israel, wanted some vision that could provide reassurance-an amulet, a talisman, a "lucky piece."

“Golden Calves”

And the Israelites, not seeing what they felt they needed, created an effigy, an idol, by our definition. Moses waited for God to help him understand where and how to seek God's Presence. Can we, also, learn to wait for what is real?

In this life, where, according to the Torah, no one can see God and live, waiting to see God gets us nowhere. But while we recognize, and accept, that we will not get to God through our sense of sight, we can imagine! Imagination is how we can enter reality and allow it to enter us. Imagination is not wrong-it can fill in all the empty spaces in our world. Jeremiah could imagine a time that, to this day, still fuels our hopes for the future:

“See a time is coming-declares *Adonai* -when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah.... I will put My Teaching into their inmost being and inscribe it upon their hearts. Then will I be their God, and they shall be My people. No longer will they need to teach one another and say to one another, "Heed *Adonai* "; for all of them, from the least of them to the greatest, shall heed Me-declares *Adonai*.” (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

This is the new covenant Jesus came to make with the whole world: that the Unseen God's Spirit will reside within humans, whose laws and ways will be written not on tablets of stone but on the human heart. This is the unfolding realization of our age, that God does not reside in our carefully crafted institutions, nor is God confined to our doctrines and dogmas, but is a Spiritual Reality that blows apart all the façades we construct, and moves to reside in our inmost being, like the breath we breathe, and the wind that blows where it wills. This is our challenge today: not to make our experiences of God into idols, but to keep our hearts ever open to how God will move within us, and change us and change our world in the process.