

## Idolatry and Impatience

Exodus 32: 1-14

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There is a connection between idolatry and impatience. At least, that what today's lesson from Exodus 32 reminds us.

Moses is up on the mountain with God receiving the Ten Commandments. He's been up there awhile and the people down below are getting impatient. They expected him back by now. They've got things to do and places to go. "We don't like waiting on Moses much less on this God he has gone to meet. Aaron, we want a god more to our liking. We want a god who will pay more attention to our needs and our wants and who will fit into our busy schedules, so take our jewelry, and make us one."

And that's what they do. They get organized, pool their gold jewelry, and make a golden calf. The next day they begin worshiping this new god with lots of dancing, music, wine and food. They are having the best worship service they've ever had. No dull music, no boring sermons; they want spectacle. This service had people coming from miles around. Even the young people are joining in. "Let's just praise this lord!"

I remember when I was a boy thinking that we had progressed beyond worshiping a golden calf. I remember that I couldn't believe people had actually worshiped golden calves, stone statues, and so on. We had progressed beyond that. But you know, as well as I, that the temptation to fashion gods more to our own liking is ever with us.

Martin Luther said that what we look to for refuge and security is what or who we worship. At another time he said that what we sacrifice our kids to is what we worship; he said show me what you devote your kids to and I'll show you what you worship. We all worship something; we all trust someone or something to give us security and we all offer our kids to something. The question is whether it is the true God or a false god.

Author Ayn Rand, heroine of the Right Wing in this country, famously wore a prominent \$ sign pin on her lapel. At her own funeral she had a large \$ sign placed at the head of her casket. She was specific and went to great lengths explaining her abhorrence of the Christian God. Her gods were herself, the market and money.

Nowadays, the idolatry most of us struggle with is related to the nation and to the dollar. These are the two, from my experience, that people will get angry over criticism faster than most anything else.

Here, at the foot of the mountain, the very One who had led them out of bondage in Egypt, who parted the Red Sea when Pharaoh's army was bearing down upon them and who was feeding them daily with quail and manna, this same One was making them wait – so they decided they needed another god. They want a god who conforms with their busy lives, instead of calling them to be transformed from their busy lives to his Life.

Up on the mountain Moses was being confronted by a God who was saying to him, "You want to worship me. Here is how you do it. Here are the ten ways you are to worship me. Don't worship any other gods. Don't take my name in vain. Remember the Sabbath. Honor your parents. Don't kill. Don't commit adultery. Don't steal. Don't lie. Don't desire the wrong things. This how you

worship me. I'm a jealous God. I suffered when you suffered in Egypt. I brought you out of Egypt. I delivered you from the Egyptians when I led you across the Red Sea on dry ground. I've led you across the desert and I've fed you and given you water. I lead you by day with a pillar of smoke and by night with a pillar of fire. I am your God and you are my people.”

What kind of worship is this, Moses must have asked himself. And who is this God?

This God is a particular God. Not just an amorphous God. Not a “fill-in-the-blank” God. This is the particular God who delivered these people and promises them a new life in a new land. This particular God has a peculiar notion of what praise and worship is. This particular God wants a holy people whose obedience, whose way of living serves as a light of hope to all of the world's peoples.

At that time, there were two primary societal models. The first was the way of Pharaoh and Egypt. The whole Egyptian society functioned much like the Egyptian pyramid – Pharaoh on top and everyone else below him in descending order and power until you reached the slaves on the bottom. It was oppressive where the poor were ground down into nothing; where 99% of the wealth was concentrated in Pharaoh and everyone else lived on what was left.

The other model of society was the Canaanite. Most likely, scholars believe, that their society functioned as a complex web of large, wealthy landowners who exploited small landowners until the small landowners were forced off of their land and lost their land to the big boys. Canaanite society was marked by its festivals and celebrations and fertility rites built around agriculture where the wealthy threw wild, extravagant parties marked by licentiousness and libertinism, while those

who had lost their land starved or became slaves to the wealthy. By the way, the Canaanite fertility rites were very similar to what is going on here in Exodus with the golden calf.

As a contrast, an alternative, to both of those is Israel's. God was giving them completely different model of how to set up a society and the Ten Commandments were the first step. Everyone was to have land and was to work the land and take care of the land. Every seventh year the land rested and every seventh day the people rested. And every 50<sup>th</sup> year, after a cycle of 7 times 7 years, the land reverted to its original owners. This protected the small landowners against the large landowners, protected against concentration of wealth and made sure no one became slaves. All debts were forgiven, thereby giving the poor a chance to start over fresh once a generation. All of this, and more, is because of the particular God they worship and follow and who has set them free from Egypt and is taking them to Canaan so they can embody another way.

Without these particular people living this particular way with this particular God, the wider world had no idea there is any other way to live except the totalitarianism of Pharaoh on one hand or the exploitation of the Canaanites on the other. Israel, God's people, was to embody a new way, and this new way is to be the way of hope and redemption for all people someday.

But when you start worshiping other gods, there is no hope. Without the true God, and for us it is the God we know in Israel and most completely in Jesus Christ, without this particular God you lose sense of who you are and who you are called to be – and the world sees no alternative but exploitation and violence and there is no hope. Without this specific God in Jesus, there is no alternative to power and violence and wealth.

So there is more to debates about the place of the Ten Commandments in the courthouses and schoolhouses that we might first realize. There are folks who want to try to use the Commandments as moral guides separated and isolated from the very God they are about. They want the Commandments but not the God. You can't do that, or at least, you can't do it and have the Commandments make sense.

This is not unrelated to the arguments over the Pledge of Allegiance phrase "one nation under God," and the motto on our money which says, "In God we Trust." Proponents say "Well you can give that god any name you want." But what this Scripture reminds us is that you don't give this particular God any name you want. This God we worship is no abstraction; is no generalized, generic, one-size-fits-all God in a God-blessed America that makes everyone feel good.

We worship a particular God, born as a Jew in a stable in Bethlehem, named Jesus, raised in Nazareth, who taught and healed and preached for three years before the authorities executed him on a cross, and after three days he was vindicated by being resurrected.

Now if you get this specific at the courthouse and schoolhouse, people get uncomfortable. They want the generic god on our money, in the pledge, and to bless America. Generic gods, golden calf gods hold no one accountable, expect nothing and demand nothing. That's why civil religion likes them and that is why, from a Christian perspective, the state should stay out of religion. Republicans and Democrats both want a generic god but do not want the God who critiques free-market capitalism, concentration of wealth, and war-making.

Whether we're always comfortable with it or not, the God we are called to worship here on Sunday mornings and in our lives throughout the week, is this particular God we know in Jesus Christ.

This Exodus story is abrasive to us modern middle-class types. We like our stories of faith, like we prefer our God, a little more toned-down. But this story challenges us and pushes us. We are called to follow this particular God we know in Israel and in Jesus Christ and let the chips fall where they may. In a society with a golden calf god mentality, this particular God and this particular God's people are going to be a burr under the saddle. A society that prefers a golden calf wants a god right now that tells us we are okay, blessed, and does not expect anything in return.

But there is another dimension to this story. This week I was talking to a one of my best friends who is a pastor in Mississippi. He was called by a church member to visit a young woman in the hospital who was, as far as the church member knew, not in a church. My friend visited her. She was a twenty-two year old single mother of an eighteen-month-old child, and the young mother has inoperable cancer. All she knew to say was, "Well, the 'man-upstairs' has a plan." When you are facing cancer with "the man-upstairs" as your hope, that's not much hope. The "man-upstairs" is pretty thin, when the chips are down.

When facing cancer, nothing short of the God of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus will do. When facing cancer only the God in Jesus who suffered and died and was resurrected can give us hope. When facing cancer an amorphous, generalized, generic "man-upstairs" is not enough! Only the particular God who knows me in detail and hurts when I hurt, who calls a people to gather around me, and who gives me hope of resurrection, can help me face cancer.

Not all worship is worship of the true God. Not all praise is praise of Jesus Christ. Not all spirituality is Christian.

I remember back when my dear friend and our former pastor, Roger Paynter, had open heart surgery, a Roman Catholic nun who was a spiritual advisor to him, who helped guide him in prayer and devotion as they met together weekly, came to see him. The nun came out after meeting with Roger and said to Roger's wife, Suzii, "This is when the invisible becomes visible."

This is when the invisible becomes visible. You see, if we trust and worship some golden calf, some generic god, there is no invisible to become visible because there is nothing there. Facing cancer, facing death, going through heart surgery, is when you find out if what you have staked your life on something real or not.

We stake our lives on that the invisible has become visible in Jesus Christ. He is not easy, he is not going to do our bidding, he is not created in our image. But he is real.

Amen and amen.