

“GOLDEN CALVES THAT BITE!”

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Text: Exodus 32:1-14 NLT

God's Word: Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23 NLT

32 When the people saw how long it was taking Moses to come back down the mountain, they gathered around Aaron. “Come on,” they said, “make us some gods who can lead us. We don't know what happened to this fellow Moses, who brought us here from the land of Egypt.” ² So Aaron said, “Take the gold rings from the ears of your wives and sons and daughters, and bring them to me.”

³ All the people took the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ Then Aaron took the gold, melted it down, and molded it into the shape of a calf. When the people saw it, they exclaimed, “O Israel, these are the gods who brought you out of the land of Egypt!”

⁵ Aaron saw how excited the people were, so he built an altar in front of the calf. Then he announced, “Tomorrow will be a festival to the LORD!” ⁶ The people got up early the next morning to sacrifice burnt offerings and peace offerings. After this, they celebrated with feasting and drinking, and they indulged in pagan revelry.

⁷ The LORD told Moses, “Quick! Go down the mountain! Your people whom you brought from the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. ⁸ How quickly they have turned away from the way I commanded them to live! They have melted down gold and made a calf, and they have bowed down and sacrificed to it. They are saying, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.’” ⁹ Then the LORD said, “I have seen how stubborn and rebellious these people are. ¹⁰ Now leave me alone so my fierce anger can blaze against them, and I will destroy them. Then I will make you, Moses, into a great nation.”

¹¹ But Moses tried to pacify the LORD his God. “O LORD!” he said. “Why are you so angry with your own people whom you brought from the land of Egypt with such great power and such a strong hand? ¹² Why let the Egyptians say, ‘Their God rescued them with the evil intention of slaughtering them in the mountains and wiping them from the face of the earth’? Turn away from your fierce anger. Change your mind about this terrible disaster you have threatened against your people! ¹³ Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You bound yourself with an oath to them, saying, ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven. And I will give them all of this land that I have promised to

your descendants, and they will possess it forever.’’¹⁴ So the LORD changed his mind about the terrible disaster he had threatened to bring on his people.

Humans are not created to be godless. If we don't know the true God, we will make our own deities. It's a sign of our finitude, and a subconscious awareness that we need direction, purpose, and relationship with something, someone bigger than ourselves.

God created us for relationship. He created us to be in relationship with Himself and with one another. Tragically, we broke that relationship but we have not lost our genetic makeup which needs that relationship with the Almighty.

The story of the Bible is the story of God and humankind trying to rebuild our broken relationship. We see this story played out from the Old Testament to the New Testament. We see this story played out in all of human history. We see this story played out in our daily lives.

It's the story of a lost people and a loving God. It's the story of a very weak people, and a very strong God. It's the story of a God who seeks us out, and a people who, often, don't want to be found or don't know that we have been found.

If a people were ever to experience a high moment, this was it. Never before had a people been as privileged as Israel. They had just been liberated, set free after 400 years of slavery. Their nation was being born, the nation of Israel, and they were soon going to be given a homeland...and they had been chosen by God to be God's followers, the people of God. They were to be God's witnesses to the other nations of the earth, witnessing to the truth that there is only one true and living God.

And as we read from the Old Testament this morning, Moses had gone up on Mount Sinai to receive the civil and religious laws of God, the laws that were to form them into a nation and govern them as a people. But abruptly and sadly, a catastrophic tragedy struck—all because Moses had been on the mountain too long!

In their impatience and forgetfulness, they turned to Aaron to create other gods, in direct violation of the first two commandments: “You shall have no other gods before me,” and, “You shall not make for yourself an idol.”

The Israelites turned away from God: they lost their faith and trust in Him, denied, rejected, and rebelled against Him. Instead of trusting God and waiting upon Him, the people chose to take things into their own hands, do their own thing, and go their own way. And thus, we have the sad and terrible tragedy of the golden calf.

Does it sound familiar? Can we relate to the people of Israel? How often do we lose our faith and trust in the God who has chosen and delivered us, and instead, choose to take matters into our own hands, do our own thing, and go our own way? And what happens when we do this?

Not only do we break our relationship with God, and miss out on the good plans God has for our lives we also fail to live out our calling which is to witness to the world for Christ who has called us and saved us.

“When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, ‘Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.’”(verse 1)

In other words, they were looking for a quick fix. Something to fill that god-shaped void, anything would do. So, taking their jewelry, Aaron fashions a golden calf and proclaims it as the object of their worship. The next day they have a festival which included making sacrifices before the calf, eating, drinking, and reveling—which means to have a boisterous, wild party!

And we see that this golden calf, this false god, demands nothing from them spiritually or morally. They move back into the realm of darkness and confusion in no time flat. It sure can happen fast, can it not?

One moment we are being rescued from slavery to sin and death by following the Risen Christ, the next we find ourselves, once again, in bondage to the very things that caused us so much pain and confusion in the first place.

We live in a society, a world which is rife with self-absorption and materialism. We try to live our commitments to worship, read the Bible, and pray...and we find a real freedom in this. We find ourselves growing and maturing as human beings. We find ourselves becoming new creations.

Then the going gets tough, and our faith is tested. When this happens, do we continue to abide in our true sources of strength, or do we quickly run to our golden calves—the malls, the bars, the gyms, the television, the internet, the refrigerator, the local drug dealer?

The quality of our Christian journey...the quality of our lives...and the effectiveness of our witness for Jesus Christ depends upon our choices. We Christians, today, are just as susceptible to the lure of the golden calf as the Israelites were so long ago.

What is your golden calf? What is my golden calf?

It is not difficult to be lured away by the golden calves of this world. We are surrounded by a plethora of things which cry out for our devotion, and when we allow ourselves to focus on these merciless idols we quickly find ourselves drifting away from God. And as we drift away from God we begin to forget what it is that is truly meaningful in this life. We find it harder, if not impossible to follow the teachings of Christ.

Soon, instead of turning the other cheek we are the ones doing the hitting. Instead of forgiving others without limit, we hold grudges that build walls between ourselves and our fellow human beings. Anger and jealousy engulf us, anxiety and insecurity enshroud us and we find that our Christian faith doesn't mean so much to us anymore as we grope around in the darkness of our world—where our relationship with God has been broken and blurred. And we return to living life in the carnal, sinful, fleshly sense...which only brings us doom, gloom, defeat, and ultimately—death.

In our Old Testament text for this morning the peoples' actions deserved condemnation. They had turned away from God, but God, ultimately, does not turn away from them.

The Bible is our story. We, like so many who have lived before us, are groping for relationship with God. And oftentimes we get off-track, we chase other dreams...other dreams which are just that—dreams...which will soon turn into nightmares unless we come to the point where we stop, repent, and return to our one true source for strength...the kind, compassionate, grace-filled and loving God who never stops calling us into new life with Him. It's about grace and judgment isn't it?

The judgment comes as God allows us to live into the consequences of our own decisions to take things into our own hands. The grace abounds as we accept the gift of God's unmerited invitation which allows us to live in God's decisions and reap the wonderful benefits of God's decisions for our lives.

God is calling every one of us to throw away the golden calf—whatever that may be, for you and for me, and instead to embrace the salvation made available to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

In doing so, we will—one day—find ourselves walking in the Promised Land!
For the Bible, in the Book of Revelation ends where Genesis begins...in a garden where humankind is in perfect relationship with our Creator and one another.
I'm looking forward to that day, and no golden calf is going to get in my way!

How about you?