

Sermon for October 11, 2020
 28th Sunday in ordinary time (Year A)
 Sermon Texts: Exodus 32: 1-14 and Matthew 22: 1-14
 Sermon Title: *God is bigger than a golden calf*

PRAYER OF INVOCATION: Lord, we are in a divine partnership with you. Through the many examples in scripture we know that it is possible to argue with you and you will change your mind. In this time of worship, focus our minds and our hearts on the fullness of the blessings in our lives and in the beauty of this time of worship. Strengthen us as disciples that we might fulfill our call as your partners in ministry. Amen.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION: Holy Spirit, come. Come as Holy Light and illumine us; come as Holy Wind and cleanse us; come as Holy Truth and dispel our ignorance; come as Holy Fire and burn in us; come as Holy Life and dwell in us. Amen.

Gold bangles and gold earrings traditionally have been used by women as portable wealth. You need something to bargain with if your husband turns you out of the tent into the desert. The gold was something tangible that women could use to find their way out of anxiety and uncertainty. Today, it's obvious that not just women but households are feeling anxiety, if you measure that anxiety by the pawn shops and jewelry stores that are busy collecting gold necklaces, earrings, and bangles as well as broken chains and tooth fillings. The global market doesn't like uncertainty either. The stock market rises and falls with the price of a barrel of oil and the health of our President. People have started buying guns and water and stockpiling toilet paper and canned goods. Interest rates are low now, but if you don't have a job to make a car or mortgage payment, those rates don't do you any good. COVID-19 infections are on the rise as we make our way into the Fall flu and cold season, and the President is not yet out of danger. We're living in an anxious time.

So were the Israelites as they waited in the desert for Moses to return from the mountaintop. Last week I made the point that when we forget to whom we belong and whom we worship, we are led into sin. The Israelites are very forgetful; they have just received the Ten Commandments and have already forgotten the first two. Perhaps it's their anxiety about being without Moses that makes them want to see something tangible. Anxiety leads you into temptation. The people are anxious, and the priest Aaron is eager to please and readily grants their requests.

We are all familiar with the line from the Lord's prayer which asks God to *Lead us not into temptation, deliver us from evil*. It's another way of saying *Let us not be anxious*. The father of a university friend of mine, who was an accountant in a very large Canadian corporation, went to prison for embezzling money. When the Royal Canadian Mounted Police interviewed him, they concluded that he wasn't the typical criminal; he was just anxious that he couldn't provide for his family; the stolen money wasn't for vacations, cars, or a new house. It was for his wife, son, and two daughters. Nevertheless, his conviction had profound effects on his family and their status in the community. To add more humiliation, his wife, who was now the sole bread winner, continued her job as secretary in the corporation from which her husband had stolen.

The Israelites aren't such bad people, but their anxiety leads them into sin, just like my friend's father. There have been several instances where the people grumbled and wanted to go back to Egypt as slaves because at least there were flesh pots full of food. Sometimes we hold on to old traditions and circumstances because certainty has some element of comfort in it. Our traditions seem to make sense. Which leads me to this question: in our current circumstances, what might we be holding onto as people, as a church, as a nation because it's comfortable? A male pastor in my lectionary group this week made the point that people are often nostalgic for the 1950's, but unless you were white, male, and a white-collar worker, that decade probably wasn't all that great in spite of the way the TV show *Happy Days* portrays it.

Don't be fooled by the gold. The people want a god that they can see, touch, build an altar for, and dance around. The calf becomes a visible image of an invisible god. The second commandment protects us from making God too small: *You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.* If you make a graven image for your god, you're likely to end up with a calf. Any conversation you have with that calf is likely to be a one-way conversation. On the other hand, God can be quite chatty.

Listen carefully to the conversation that takes place between Moses and God. God is mad, no question about that. God is through with the Israelites; as far as God is concerned, they belong to Moses: *Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely.* And God continues: *I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. 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.* Moses makes his argument.

The second commandment protects us from making God too small. But this enormous God is also personal and relational. You see, God is in a fix here, because God is bound to us by the covenant, the unbreakable bond of *hesed* of love and has to look out for us. That's what Moses reminds God of as he speaks of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Israel (Jacob): *I will make your descendant as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever.*

And God changes God's mind. As Jesus himself did when he healed the Syro-Phoneecian woman's daughter. You CAN have a conversation with God. You CAN argue with God. You CAN change God's mind. This is why we pray prayers of intercession. Sometimes the answer is no, but the covenant we have with God, the promises that have been made to us in our baptism, always take the circumstances of our lives and weave them into God's larger plan for our lives. When God changes God's mind, it is an act of mercy. When we let go of our anger and change our minds about a person or a situation, it can also be an act of mercy.

We live in uncertain times. We sell our gold and hunker down. We stockpile our gold and hunker down. Anxiety makes it easy for us to be led into temptation. Anxiety makes us want to

domesticate God into manageable proportions. The story of the golden calf is the story of anxiety run amuck, of anxiety leading to temptation, which leads to sin. However, the question remains: how do we learn to trust in God's delays?

We remember. We remember by reading the stories of Scripture. We remember by looking into our own histories for the times when God has been faithful to us. We tell our stories to others to witness to God's faithfulness. We listen to others' stories of God's faithfulness. We talk every day to God, even when the conversation is heated. Whether you feel it or not, God is listening. God can take your anger. The God of Moses, our God, is so much bigger than a golden calf, and our God loves conversation. So, begin a conversation. Amen.