

## "We Are What We Worship"

When we are children, we learn that Moses is the one that God chose to rescue his people from slavery in Egypt. We hit the highlights of his journey. Being rescued by the Pharaoh's daughter from a basket in the river and learning that she names him Moses, which means to "draw out of the water". We learn about the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea and the giving of the Ten Commandments. These are the mountaintop experiences of Moses.

Throughout the Old Testament and even parts of the New, Moses is considered the Savior of God's people. Today, modern Jews consider him the most important prophet in their history.

When we become adults we learn that there is a lot more to the Moses story. We learn that the children of Israel were whiny and ungrateful. We learn that they are disobedient and willful. We learn that they have no patience. And in the words that are our text for this morning, we learn that they do not even realize WHO their God is. So hear the word of God from the reading of Exodus 32:1-14.

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." 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." So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold,<sup>[a]</sup> 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!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD." 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.

The LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; 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!'" The LORD said to Moses, "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."

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? 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. 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.’” And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

It was really a struggle for me to relate this text in a congregation that clearly has such wonderful priorities. Truth be told, I almost gave up on it. How do you address idolatry to a group of people who extend their love and compassion so freely? Who give so generously to victims of the storms of life that they don't even know and most likely never will. I wonder if you even realize how remarkable it is that a congregation of this size collected almost \$9,000 for the Hurricane victims. Most likely you do not, because giving seems to be the norm in this body of Christ.

But since this text was the suggested text for today and I had never preached from it before, I felt called to the challenge. And I had to dig very deeply to understand what God is saying to Nazareth Presbyterian Church in 2017. But the Holy Spirit never fails and God's timetable is not the same as mine. Which is part of the problem that the Israelites faced.

When Moses went up the mountain to receive what we now call The Law, with a capital L, which also includes the Ten Commandments, he had no idea how long it would take. He was simply being obedient. Knowing that God's people act like four year olds on a trip when they experience hunger, discomfort or fatigue, he told the people that his brother Aaron would handle any problems until he got back. And that was his first mistake!

You see, Moses and God had a rather lengthy conversation. It lasted 40 days! And during that time, the people began to experience all of their old fears and worries and their anxiety became so high that they were sure that Moses was never coming back.

And one of the first things that we learn about them is that, even after all that they had been through, they STILL did not know who their God was? This becomes evident when they

say to Aaron, "The man who brought us up from Egypt has been gone too long". At this point in the story, we realize that, even though Moses was always explicit about WHO had delivered them from slavery and WHOSE land they were going to, the people of God gave all the credit to Moses.

This fact helped me understand that, while our culture tends to ridicule those who set up an idol and worship it, we all still have idols today. Because an idol is not simply a statue of wood, stone, or metal. Anything we love and pursue in place of the one true God is an idol and can also be referred to as a 'false god.' The Israelites seem to worship security and safety and having a clear cut plan.

Now being a true Type A personality, these things are very important to me as well. Sometimes, even to a fault. And because I can personally relate to their anxiety, I know that when we worship the earthly plans that WE think are right to such an extent, it usually means that we have lost our trust in God. Our plan has BECOME our god and we have no need for Yahweh.

How many of us ask God for help and then give God a timeframe in our minds? How many of us pray and then tell God how to do his job? See if any of this sounds familiar. "Lord, Mary is in real trouble. She does not know where to turn or how to get out of the mess she is in. She needs to understand the situation before this weekend, so please send her clear direction today! I am not sure she will make it another minute without immediate help!"

Do you see the fault in this prayer? The pray-er did not simply turn Mary over to the care of God and ask God to do what is best, according to God's grace. The pray-er is like the preacher who prays, "Open my heart and mind to the truth of this passage. Tell me what your word is for your people and please do it before Thursday at 5:00 because Friday is my day off."

Friends, trusting in God means knowing that God has your back and will give you what you need when God knows that you need it. When the plan becomes our god, sometimes THE God does not come to your rescue until Friday at 6:00 in the morning, which is when this sermon was written. Wanting to be organized and thoughtful is a good thing – but not when it becomes your god.

Another way to look at it is this: When we are seeking what we think is perfection, we are probably not open to God's perfection. And then pride has become our god. We think that we are so smart and so hardworking that surely we can work things out if we just try harder. But does this leave any room for God to work things out for us? No! Our idea of being perfect has become our god.

Then there is Aaron. The brother whom God had chosen to be the mouthpiece for Moses when he pointed out to God that public speaking was not his best gift. Aaron was great at what God called him to do. But when Moses left Aaron in charge, he left the people in a leadership vacuum. And they whined and complained that they did not have someone to lead them that they could see and hear and touch. So Aaron instructed the people to bring all of their gold to him and he made them a golden calf and when they said, "These are your gods, O Israel", he suggested that have a fest to honor the calf!

Now I cannot be sure if Aaron really felt in his heart that this calf would serve as a god. But knowing how God had used him in the past, it seems unlikely, although idol worship was standard operating procedure in that culture. Instead, I can't help but wonder if Aaron was worshiping the god of popularity and being a people pleaser, of doing what was expected of him.

And when we look at it this way, some of us might recognize a few of our own gods.

After all, it is so much easier to do what everyone else is doing. Taking a stand, speaking out against those with authority, well friends, that can make you very disliked.

Here is a modern day example. The many actresses who have spoken out this week about a powerful Hollywood producer and director put their careers on the line. Some folks are questioning their stories, wondering what took them so long if their accusations are true. But if you have ever taken a public stand that rocks the status quo, you will know why they were silent for so long. People like to think our leaders, those with high powered jobs, even our ministers are infallible and it is easier to go along with the crowd than to speak out against injustice when someone who is in a position of authority has done wrong. So Aaron simply does what people expect.

And poor Aaron, he cannot win for losing. Though he was trying to be a leader in Moses' stead, trying to keep peace and order, unknowingly he just broke the first two Commandments that God had given Moses. "You shall have no other gods before me" and "You shall not make for yourself an idol." To make matters worse, when questioned about it, he breaks another commandment. Because when God becomes irate with the behavior of his people and Moses rushes down the mountain to be confronted by the chaos that Aaron helped create he asks Aaron what in the world is going on. And Aaron lies, basically saying, "I threw some gold into the fire and a calf popped out!"

So it is possible that, by exploring the story this way, we understand that we all have idols, whether we call them that or not. They may be good things like wanting to be organized or to preach a decent sermon. They may be things like wanting to have friends or to have more disciples hear about God through our church. But when we focus too much on these things, they have become the idols in our lives.

But the really hard thing to understand in this story is God. Oh we understand his anger, his wrath, his wanting the misguided, unfaithful people to perish. What we don't understand is that he TOO seems to have forgotten that He is their God when he says, "YOUR people, whom YOU have brought out of the land of Egypt, have turned aside from me." I mean, what's up with God?

It is possible that God is mimicking his people because they are so ridiculous – their lack of trust in that unbelievable. It is also possible that God is so fed up that he decides just to give the people what they want. A god that they can trust because they can see and touch and hear it. But I believe God is testing Moses to see what kind of leader he can be.

Moses passes the test. He is pushed to the limit and makes it clear that God is not the only one who has something to say about this matter. He shows God that he can be the intercessor that God's people needs. He does this by appealing to God's reason. YOU are the one who just brought them out of the land of Egypt. But it hasn't been that long. Give them time Lord, to know you like I do. To let their trust grow. They are only able to eat manna now – but give them a chance and one day they will be able to feast on milk and honey.

He also appeals to God's reputation. YOU are the God of promises. You TOLD Abraham that you would be our God and make of us a great nation. And then Moses goes for the jugular. "What will the neighbors think if we worship a God who does not do what he promises?" That Moses – such a good Jew!

But the real problem lies in this one verse. "And the LORD changed his mind." Really? God? Some translations actually say that the Lord repented. The original Hebrew can be translated as both ways. But it can also mean that God sighed and that God pitied. I don't know why the translators of the Scriptures chose the words that they did but the meaning is clear. Our

God, the God who made us and redeemed us with the blood of his Son, is a God who hears and responds to human prayers. Our God is a God of steadfast love and faithfulness. Our God is a God whose will is for the salvation of humankind.

And so our God sends his prophet down the mountain. And as he did with Eve and Noah and Abraham and you and me, God said, "I love you too much to give up on you now. Come, follow me."

So let us leave behind our idols of calendars and watches and plans and controlling and people pleasing and needing approval and accepting bad behavior. Let us believe in our hearts that our God, the God of grace, the God who sent his Son to die so that we could live in eternity, is the only God that we need. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

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