

The Golden Calf – Exodus 32:1-14

So where are we in the story right now?

Last week the Israelites were getting ready to flee Egypt. After the trauma of the 10th plague and the death of Egypt's first-born, Pharaoh let the people go. Moses and his brother Aaron would lead the way to freedom and the Promised Land.

Then Pharaoh changed his mind and sent his army after them. Chased to the shore of the Red Sea, the Israelites thought they were doomed.

But of course God wanted them free and would stop at nothing.

God told Moses to strike the water with his staff. The sea parted and the people walked through on dry land. Once they were all through, the waters closed in on the Egyptian army.

Israel was finally and truly free.

In today's story, they are camped by Mt. Sinai. Waiting.

See it's been 40 days since Moses went up the mountain. He disappeared in a cloud of smoke and fire. Thunder and lightning flashed and a loud trumpet blast could be heard.

The people had gotten as close to God as they believed possible and yet live...and there was Moses going right up into that swirling maelstrom!

Now it's been 40 days. For all they know, he's dead.

We as readers are privy to the conversation between God and Moses during those 40 days. It's when Moses received the 10 commandments and other laws. Etched in stone, that law is to govern God's model community.

Remember, God's promise to bless the world through Abraham's family is still alive. It was threatened, first by famine. Then by 400 years of slavery.

Now, Israel is free...they are free to be that model community. Free to show the world what life with God can look like. Free to bless the world through their relationship with God.

But before the ink is even dry on the tablets, the people are stabbing both God and Moses in the back.

Maybe you can't blame them. I mean Moses seems to have disappeared into a threatening cloud.

And God? Well, they can't see God. God is hidden in a cloud that goes with them as they travel by day. God is hidden in a pillar of fire when they camp.

They want a God they can really see...touch...

Slavery was tough, but it was what they knew.

Now, they had no idea how they were going to get wherever it was they were supposed to be going. They had no idea how they would live...what life would be like. They were headed into a frightening unknown.

There was bickering and complaining and now, this Moses had vanished.

So, they decided to take matters into their own hands. They would make for themselves a God they could see and touch.

It seems ludicrous to us that a calf made of gold could possibly have a relationship with them, let alone lead them to the promised land.

Yet we do pretty much the same thing. We have our own golden calves – objects that we've created or bought or built or acquired. People we think will save us from the mess we're in.

Sometimes our idols are in fact false images of the God we say we worship. Those images limit God to our vision of how God works.

We believe we know who God judges and what God will and won't do. We have a limited vision of how and where God works.

Many churches are having to face the unpleasant possibility that their buildings were like the golden calf. The idea that we can only connect with God in a church building is powerful for many.

We in the church are always tempted in much the same way as Israel. God is invisible, and we can't always see what God is doing. When it doesn't look like God is doing anything, we falter...lose faith...and look for salvation elsewhere.

We put faith in a particular leader...a pastor...a CEO...a particular government leader or even a counselor or personal mentor. We come to believe that a person can solve all our problems.

We put faith in money and possessions and 401k's and our own positions of power and privilege.

This is Reformation Sunday. It is a celebration of Martin Luther's challenge to the 16th Century church. He believed that the church hierarchy had become idolatrous – that they were not worshipping the God of the Bible.

He formally challenged the church by nailing his 95 theses to the Wittenberg Castle door...sort of the 16th century equivalent of a viral tweet.

But Reformation is also a reminder that the church never has gotten perfect. We are always in need of reforming. We always need to be pulled back from our idolatrous faith placed in the wrong places.

What does that mean for the church right now?

Honestly, we've already had to do a bunch of reforming. We've had to find new ways to worship and stay connected.

We've had to lose the idea that church and church building are the same thing.

We're still sort of trying to figure out how best to serve when so many of the ways we did previously aren't an option.

Of course we can still help people one on one.

And the pandemic hasn't canceled donating – in kind goods and monetary donations are needed more than ever.

Our October newsletter will come out this coming week – watch for a page that lists all the ways you can still serve and give to the agencies we've worked with in the past.

We are being forced to reform in ways we never imagined. I for one have found that pretty stressful.

But opportunities abound for the church to come out of this in a better position to be a blessing to the world than we have been.

The Israelites at Mt. Sinai show us a couple of things to keep in front of us as we continue through this time of reformation that has been thrust upon us.

First, we need to stay God centered....and by that I mean the real God...the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. In a time when two presidential candidates present two vastly different visions for our nation, and are almost even lifted up as saviors, we need to remember that our hope ultimately comes from God.

The hope God presents lies in a community of blessing...a community in which healing, peace, love for neighbor, and justice for those who have been kicked to the curb rule the day.

We can let that Christ centered worldview shape our voting decisions.

But maybe even more importantly, we can let that shape what comes after the election. Unless something changes drastically, the time after the election promises to continue in ugliness.

Can the church be different? And by that, I mean can you think about how you will be in the aftermath of the election? Can we be that ideal community that reflects God's blessing for the world?

How will you practice love if your candidate loses? How will you practice love if your candidate wins? How will you learn ways to live in some sort of harmony with people who voted differently? If we think the candidate who wins has policies that will hurt certain groups, what will our call be to advocate and work for those groups?

As we in the church try to discern that call, we have to remember that God loves the people with whom we most ardently disagree as much as us.

Finally, this story models something else for us as the church. It models prayer...and the belief that prayer actually does something.

God was ticked about this golden calf thing...really ticked...ready to give up on this stiff-necked people. But Moses interceded for them. And God relented. God's mind was changed by Moses' prayer.

We could do a whole other sermon on why God should need our prayers to act on our behalf. Best thing to say in the little bit of time we have left is that the forces of evil are powerful.

All along God has intended a partnership of creator and created in this work against evil. We are God's partners in the work to defeat evil. Our prayers are a necessary part of that partnership.

Our prayers do have an impact on God. Our prayers create a space for God to work.

In these contentious, stressful days the prayers of the church matter. Your prayers matter.

Perhaps the number one thing the church can do right now is to be a praying church...we can pray for God to act...pray for our hearts to be changed...and pray that the church really can be that ideal community that will bless the world...a community that preaches and practices a

love that transforms...a community that passes on the love we have so generously received.

Amen