

Proper 23 A Sermon
Exodus 32:1-14
October 15, 2023

The Cows We Worship
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

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’ . . . He took the gold from them, formed it in a mould, 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!’ . . . 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 worshipped it and sacrificed to it . . . 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 God 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 . . . And the LORD changed their mind about the disaster that they planned to bring on the people.

It's been said that sacred cows make the best hamburgers. I'm not sure if that's true or not, but the golden calf in this morning's reading certainly didn't sit well with Moses.

Moses had been gone for over a month, presumably up the mountain with God, and the people were getting restless. Was Moses really gone? Did God go with him? These might seem like silly questions to us, but the people of the Exodus story hadn't ever really experienced God apart from Moses. They were a package deal. Sure, Moses had told them that it was indeed the god of their ancestors who had freed them, but it was Moses who initiated the great plagues, Moses who raised his arm to part the Red Sea, Moses who struck a rock and water flowed, even Moses who had relayed the message that bread would fall from heaven! Did the God of their ancestors really even exist, apart from Moses?

With Moses gone, the people *needed* a deity that they could see and touch. They needed reassurance that the divine was with truly them. So, Aaron, Moses' brother made them a golden calf. "As a young bull, the calf symbolized strength, leadership, and fertility and was a common symbol for deities in the ancient Near East."¹ "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" Aaron declared. But, let's face it, he knew better. At best, the golden calf *symbolized* the god who brought the people up out of the land of Egypt. It was a stand-in for the god that the people feared was absent, along with their leader. And it was this stand-in deity that would be venerated with celebrations the next day—sacrifices and burnt offerings, feasting and revelry.

Perhaps Aaron's intentions were pure. Perhaps he sought only to reassure the people of their god's presence by creating a symbolic representation of the divine. Perhaps, he sought to stave off the social unrest of a nervous and leaderless people until Moses returned—*if* he returned. Whatever Aaron's reasons were for doing what he did, the God of the Exodus story wasn't happy about it, wasn't eating the beef they threw down, and it took

¹ Thomas B. Dozeman, *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, pg. 131.

a lot of convincing on Moses' part to talk God out of completely wiping out the lot of them!

This is, I think, a cautionary tale. Just last week we heard of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments during our Children's Time. The lection from the Bible begins:

*Then God spoke all these words: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses God's name. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy."*²

Fast forward to this morning's reading and what do we see? The people worshipping an idol that they had made in the form of a calf. The god of the Exodus story was pretty clear about the whole idols thing. Should it come as a surprise then that God wants to punish the people?!

As I said, this is, I believe, a cautionary tale. It cautions us against the worship of idols of our own making. How easy is it for us to be consumed in our pursuit of material wealth or social status. How often do we make offerings at the altars of the venerable stock market or the hallowed security of our nation or sacred freedom? How frequently do we praise the idols of physical beauty, sex, and consumerism? On paper, the story of the golden calf is about the people trading devotion to their god for the worship of an effigy. For us, though, this story is a warning. What will we worship? What will claim our devotion? What will we live for? Will those things really deliver on their promises to make us happy, to keep us safe, to make us whole?

² Exodus 20:1-4

What will we worship? The Invitation to Gather this morning from Chaim Stern reminds us that:

The gods we worship write their names on our faces, be sure of that. And we will worship something — have no doubt of that either. We may think that our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of the heart — but it will out. That which dominates our imagination and our thoughts will determine our life and character. Therefore it behooves us to be careful what we are worshipping, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.

It's true, isn't it, that which dominates our imagination and our thoughts will determine our life and character? It's important to be careful what we are worshipping, honoring, glorifying and devoting our time and energy and resources to. Let's make sure that what we're worshipping we won't mind becoming.

May it be so. Amen.