

Out of Egypt Sermon Series
The Golden Calf
Exodus 32:1-17
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On the recommendation of a pastor friend, I started a book this week about leadership during times of change and uncertainty. When we find ourselves between the end of something and the beginning of something new, this is what the author calls a liminal time, and here is what he says about liminal seasons. “[They are] challenging, disorienting, and unsettling. We strive to move forward with purpose and certainty. Instead, we feel as though we are trudging through mud, moving away from something comfortable and known, toward something that can’t yet be known.” The author explains that, not surprisingly, the natural human response is to resist liminality, and we tend to do one of two things. We either reach back for the comfort and certainty of the past, or we try to barrel ahead too quickly grasping for something to latch on to or trying to define a new identity prematurely so that we can hurry up and feel secure again.

The time that we have been looking at in the life of the Hebrew people was very much one of these liminal times. They had just left their lives in Egypt, and now they were in the early stages of their new life. We have already seen how the discomfort of being in a liminal time led them to romanticize and long for the past. When they were hungry in the desert they said to Moses, “Why did you bring us here? At least back in Egypt we had all the food that we wanted!” This morning, when we find them at the foot of Mt. Sinai, they were still dealing with the discomfort of being in the liminal season but this time, instead of longing for and idealizing the past, they were reacting in the opposite way, grasping for a quick and easy way to feel settled in their new reality.

We heard last week how Moses went up on Mt. Sinai to receive God’s instructions for how the people were to live. Moses came down and relayed the words to the Israelites and in Exodus 24 we’re told how Moses led them in a ceremony that included burnt offerings, and the sprinkling of the bull’s blood on the people, and in this way the covenant between themselves and YHWH was confirmed. Following this event, Moses left the people again to go back up on the mountain to receive further instructions from God, and it says that he stayed on the mountain with God for 40 days and 40 nights. For the next several chapters in Exodus we are up on the mountain with Moses hearing God’s instructions for how to build the Tabernacle, but in chapter 32

we come back to the foot of the mountain and we learn what was going on with the people while Moses was away. What we learn is that nothing good was going on. Let's listen to the Scripture from Exodus 32:1-14.

32 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." ² 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." ³ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, 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!" ⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord." ⁶ 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.

⁷ The Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸ 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!'" ⁹ The Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰ 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."

¹¹ 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? ¹² 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. ¹³ 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.'" ¹⁴ And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

This is just the first part of the story about the Golden Calf. The story goes on for the rest of the chapter, and it's in the second half of that story that Aaron famously says, "They gave me the gold and somehow this calf just popped out of the fire!" The second half of the story deals with the consequences that came as a result of Israel's blatant idolatry and disobedience, but the first part of the story is about what Aaron and the people did, and it's useful to think about what they did and why.

The knee-jerk reaction may be to think that they just weren't very smart or that they suffered from some sort of short-term memory loss. I mean, Moses had *just* given them the Ten Commandments which, you remember, begin like this. You shall have no other gods before me, and 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.

Some scholars and commentators who want to give Aaron the benefit of the doubt suggest that Aaron didn't intend to create an image of YHWH but something more like an icon that did not represent God but would draw the people's focus and worship toward God. I have to laugh at (and agree with) this person's response to that suggestion. "It is difficult to give Aaron the benefit of the doubt...He knows these people and their ways. Calling for a 'Festival to Yahweh' might have been a nice gesture - but it was a little like rolling a half dozen kegs of beer into a rowdy crowd at a rock concert and then announcing that you expect everyone to behave like ladies and gentlemen." Aaron just didn't make a very good leadership decision at this point and maybe his reasons had to do with trying to maintain some sense of order or because he wanted people to like him, but what about the people? Why were they so quick to ask for an idol after all they had seen God do for them and after *just* agreeing to obey the commandments that explicitly prohibited making and worshiping idols?

As I already mentioned, being in a liminal time is disorienting and uncomfortable. They were right between the end of their lives as they'd known it and the beginning of a life that was largely unknown to them. They were probably feeling the insecurity and longing for clarity, and assurance, and a solid identity - and then, in the midst of feeling all of these things already, Moses, the visible, tangible leader and the one who had been their mediator with God, disappears. The unsettledness of their situation, the mysterious nature of God, and the uncertainty about how to proceed in their new covenant with God in the absence of their leader seemed to be too much so they were all too eager to quickly create a version of God that would make them feel better. An idol was a god they could see, and a god of their own

creation could be anything that they wanted that god to be. A created idol could also settle the discomfort that came from being unsettled in and uncertain about their new identity. All the other people around them had their own gods that gave them a sense of identity so now the Israelites could have an identity as the people that worship the Golden Calf god. When we consider that the Israelites may have been motivated by their fears and anxiety in the middle of a disorienting and uncomfortable season in their lives, maybe we begin to see something more here than plain stupidity or short-term memory loss. Maybe we can understand their actions and, we might be led to consider whether we have a tendency to do the same kind of thing ourselves.

I don't know what you thought when I read the author's description of liminal times at the beginning, but if you thought, "that sounds familiar," you were thinking what I was thinking. Let me read it again. "Liminal times are challenging, disorienting, and unsettling. We strive to move forward with purpose and certainty. Instead, we feel as though we are trudging through mud, moving away from something comfortable and known, toward something that can't yet be known." If we are experiencing liminality in no other way, I think we could agree that the pandemic has pushed us into that kind of space. Things are not the way they used to be, and it's still unclear when and how we will arrive at the other side and what life will be like when we get there. It seems to be bigger than just the pandemic, though.

Last week I watched the Netflix documentary about the Challenger, and as I watched all of the television clips from 1986, it got me thinking about how much has changed just within my life time in so many different realms of our life experience whether we're talking about technology, or geo-politics, or the media, or social issues. There is no question that our national culture and society has changed, and is changing, and it feels like it's all moving toward something, but we seem to be in a time when we aren't sure where things will land, and we have fears about certain outcomes.

Similarly, it has been said that the Church is in a liminal time. Several years ago, a woman named Phyllis Tickle wrote a book called *The Great Emergence*. The main premise of her book was that the Church goes through a great upheaval every 500 years. The last time this happened was during the Reformation, and she argues that now we are in the midst of another great upheaval. It makes sense that as the wider culture goes through a time of upheaval that the Church would also as we try to figure out how to be in the midst of all of the changes and how we are supposed to engage the culture and speak to it. One example of the evidence that the

Church is experiencing an upheaval is the huge declines in membership among mainline denominations over the last 40 years or so.

As a congregation, too, we are still in the midst of a liminal time – the liminality imposed by Covid, but also our relationship with each other as pastor and congregation is still relatively new, and we are still in a time of trying to discern who God is calling us to be together in a new season.

At a personal level, too, you may be betwixt and between seasons of life. Significant changes and losses can leave us feeling unsure of who we are, and where we're going, and what to hold onto through that process.

Taken all together, that is a *lot* of unsettledness and uncertainty, and I'm not sure how anyone could be experiencing all of this without feeling at least a little anxious and unsure. In the midst of changing times like these, we might feel a bit like the Israelites felt when Moses left them and went up the mountain. We may not always *feel* God's presence, or we may wonder what in the world God could be doing or where God is hiding out, and we want something visible and tangible that we can hold on to that can give us a sense of certainty, or comfort, or identity. When we are in this state, we may be vulnerable to the same temptation that the Israelites felt. We may be tempted to grasp at or to create "gods" that we can see that make us feel better and help us to cope. For the Israelites that meant creating a golden statue, but we don't have to make a statue out of gold to be guilty of the sin of idolatry. We might make an idol out of a person who promises to deliver the sense of security that we long for. We might make an idol out of an idea that comforts us. We might make an idol out of things that hold the promise of making us feel better or that will enable us to get what we want or what we think we need. John Calvin said the human heart is a perpetual idol factory and we have the natural capacity to create idols out of most anyone or anything.

Finding or creating an idol to latch on to in the midst of trying and transitional times is much easier than living with ambiguity, and doubt, and it's easier to put our trust in a god of our own making because we have some amount of control over the versions of God we create ourselves. The problem, though, is first, that God has told us not to worship idols and, second, our idols are false gods. Even if they bring some temporary sense of peace to us, they pale in comparison to the Truth. The prophet Habakkuk has this to say about the idols we create for ourselves. **"What use is an idol once its maker has shaped it— a cast image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in what has been made, though the product is only an idol that cannot speak!"** Similarly, the Psalmist has these words of warning in Psalm 135. **The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the**

work of human hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; they have eyes, but they do not see; they have ears, but they do not hear, and there is no breath in their mouths. Those who make them and all who trust them shall become like them.

The Truth does not always make us feel better instantly. It doesn't always do what we want, when we want, or how we want, but God as God is firm, and faithful, and God promises to be with us as we struggle through liminal times or any other times. God had not abandoned the Israelites when Moses went up on the mountain. In fact, God was talking to Moses about how to construct the Tabernacle which would be God's dwelling place among the Israelites. Things were being worked out even though they couldn't see or hear what God and Moses were talking about. They simply needed to wait and trust that the God who had led them up to that point would continue to be the same and would continue to lead them and form them.

There is still more to the story that we haven't talked about yet, and that's the part when God sees what Aaron and the people are doing and tells Moses what He thinks of it. God was not happy that the people who had just entered into a covenant with Him were down there breaking the first two instructions they had been given. God was ready to say forget about these stubborn and disobedient people, but Moses appealed to God's merciful nature, and God did not deliver that punishment that the people deserved. God was not unjustified in God's anger over the Golden Calf, and God is not unjustified anytime God is angry at sin, and this is why the grace that God showed to the Israelites and the grace that God shows to us is truly amazing.

We may be vulnerable in the ways that the Israelites were, and we may give in to the same temptation. God knows about the times in which we live. He sees the pandemic and all of the cultural social shifts, and God is aware of the feelings of fear and anxiety and uncertainty that so many of us are carrying through these days. His word to us today is don't go for the low hanging fruit. Don't rush the process, don't thoughtlessly latch on to idols or create idols to ease the anxiety and discomfort. Instead, remember and rely on the Truth that God is present and working with us to shape us and to lead us. Amen.