

“The Day They Made a Golden Calf...”

Text: “Moses said to Aaron, ‘What did you do to cause these people so great a sin?’ Aaron replied, ‘The people said, ‘Make us a god of our own to follow.’ So I said, “Whoever has gold, take it off; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire and out came this Golden Calf...”
Exodus 32 (Selected verses)

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I wish we could teleport ourselves back to 1956, drop a huge movie screen down from the ceiling of the chancel and together watch Cecil B. DeMille's The Ten Commandments, the classic 1956 story of the life story of Moses – said to be one of the greatest movies ever made. What a trip that would be! The film is a little blasé by our standards, even dorky at times, which is what Franklin Graham said about the new movie of his father Billy's early life. Some sermons I have heard are dorky too. The Ten Commandments was a bit overdone by our standards 52 years later; but back then it was a grand and dramatic sensation nonpareil, a sure-fire Academy Award production.

Charlton Heston, who recently died of Alzheimer's, played a dashing young Moses. Bald-headed Yul Brynner played his adopted brother, Ramesses II, the Pharaoh. John Carradine was Aaron. Vincent Price and Edwin G. Robinson were in supporting roles. Anne Baxter played Queen Nefertiti, who though Pharaoh's wife, sizzled all her days pining after Moses, (that particular manifestation is not in the Bible.) Yvonne de Carlo played Zipporah, or Sephora if you prefer, the woman Moses married out in the wilderness before God sent him down to Egypt to have Pharaoh let his people go. (That is in the Bible.) Those actors are largely unknown around movie town today, but they were the rage half a century ago.

True to the Scripture, Moses talked directly with God in the movie, up on top of the Mt. Sinai. They chatted about what the Israelites should do. It came down to some directives, or as Karl Barth would put it, The Command of God. Once in a great while, our Lord has some suggestions, but mostly he deals in commands. He does not ask, "Tell me what you might think about this, but do it!" In the movie, the finger of the Almighty stretched out vigorously and etched the Ten Commandments on two pristine tablets of stone; the pointed finger remarkably like the finger of God in Michelangelo's Creation Scene on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Later, as you know, Moses smashed the original tablets into smithereens in a fiery rage when he found God's recently Chosen People whooping it up at the campfire and dancing around their home-made god, the Golden Calf. (He had a bad temper all his days.)

Well, enough of my nostalgia for the days of yore. Let me turn to the Bible story on which the DeMille movie was based, and which is the background of our sermon this morning: "The Day They Made the Golden Calf." Here is how it happened, according to Exodus, Chapter 32:

The people of God had recently been released from the bondage of Egypt by the intervening power of Jehovah who led them through the Red Sea with Moses in charge. As they crossed through the Wilderness on the other side however, they soon became disgruntled, complaining about their misfortunes, which made the Lord angry by the way. Some of them even suggested that the whole crowd should go back to Egypt and become slaves again – a rather ridiculous thought. Naturally, God was annoyed with their whining, but water was provided for them anyway, which flowed out of the rocks; and manna came from heaven as their bread. For the main course, Jehovah caused a wind to

blow flocks of innumerable quail in from the sea and they all fell down in a huge circle around the camp piled two cubits deep.

They also received social and religious laws to preserve order and to keep them faithful to each other and to The Lord God, called Yahweh back then. They also discovered that Yahweh was quite fussy about how they should build the sacred Ark of the Covenant to take with them on their journey to the Promised Land. It was to be two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high. Now as Bill Cosby used to ask, “Does anybody here know how high or wide a cubit is?”

How the worship center should be furnished was not left to chance either. A multitude of specific details were dictated to Moses. Ephods were to be sewn out of gold, blue, purple and crimson linen, finely woven and trimmed with gold filigree. The lamp stand inside the Ark, just in case you want to know, was to be made of pure gold, hammered delicately for decorative purpose in appropriate places. The calyxes and petals were to be carved according to the exact pattern which God revealed to Moses. Even the lowly candle snuffer was to be fashioned from pure gold. (Does anybody know what a calyx is either?)

Subsequently, Moses was called up the Mountain for a personal audience with the Lord God himself, who appeared to him out of a cloud, surrounded by fire. And, it adds, “Moses stayed on the Mountain for forty days and forty nights.” Forty, as you know, is the perfect number in the Bible, as with Jesus who wandered in the wilderness for forty days following his baptism.

Aaron, the brother of Moses, who had been deputized by God to accompany his brother when they sojourned down to Egypt to confront Pharaoh, was left in command of the people, about 600,000 of them, maybe more, when Moses went away. That would be a large and demanding congregation. (At Sharon Presbyterian Church I have found that something around 900 is more than enough. Touché. I jest.)

Exodus 32 begins: “When Moses was delayed in coming down from the mountain, the people said to Aaron, ‘Come make some gods to lead us. We don’t know what has become of that Moses, he might never come back.’” ... Let me pause for a moment there and look at the actual verses in the Chapter, a kind of exegetical exercise, i.e., taking the Bible text verse by verse, rather than spew a ton of ideas and homiletical speculations.

The people were impatient and would not/could not wait. Moses was up there somewhere biding his time with God - on their behalf, by the way. But they got fidgety, restless and squirmy. You and I often note how transitory and hurried is our fast-food culture in the 21st Century; how people jump around to this and that, with the attention span of three year olds; how they follow whatever instantaneous savior (small “s”) happens by, listening for the particular promises they want to hear. We are an impatient generation, seldom taking the time to sit down quietly and decide what we want or should be doing. We would rather be entertained than challenged to do our best; and we tend to hop up

on whatever bandwagon of change comes rolling down the pike. I exaggerate, to make the point. And the point is that our generation could slip into that ancient company and fit right in with their restlessness. Even though God had worked wonders for them, with miracles untold and blessings untold, they piked. All they had to do was remain faithful. That should have been easy enough.

The words of the first commandment from Exodus 20: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me!” was still ringing in their ears; but when Moses did not run back down the hill in their appointed time-frame, they decided to make themselves a new god to lead them to God-only-knows where. And, it is not coincidental, they selected a favorite deity of the pagan Egyptians: a young bull, made of or covered over with gold. Bull worship was universal in the ancient world. (It still is in vogue I might add.) In Egypt the Apis Bull was especially favored, which included the official belief that the young bull idol was the embodiment of god himself, especially when it was made of gold. It was venerated for its strength and vigor and fertility as the temple goddesses would one day prove. It was something tangible. You could see and touch it. And it gave a charge to your whole system, like the running of the bulls at Pamplona.

The problem, however, with this or any other idol is that he, she or it can't do much to help you. It looks pretty, so long as you keep it all shiny and safe. But when push comes to shove, it wasn't/isn't worth a farthing. Isaiah later chided his people about how ridiculous it was to revere gods that had to be loaded on beasts and cattle to move them around. They were burdensome and demanding and unimaginably heavy, as false gods tend to be. But, they lavished forth their gold anyway and hired themselves a goldsmith who would make them an idol. But, when the smithy was done, they still had to lift the new god up on their shoulders and carry him home. What a God! “If one cries to it, it does not answer.” (Isaiah 46:7f) “You don't need a god to carry,” Isaiah shouted, “you need a God to carry you.” Oh, how we do.

To get back to the Wilderness of Sinai, the people of Israel provoked the Lord with their stupid request. Their sin was trying to substitute an easy home-made god for the One which is not made by hands, but who is the eternal creator of the universe and the source and giver of life and love. They were trying to reduce the Almighty to a manageable size. They asked Aaron to make them a god who could lead them where they wanted to go, not the One who would lead them to the land which He would show them. You need a God who will lead you, not to the land that you choose, but the Land which the Lord God Almighty has chosen. It could be that they still wanted to be led to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, who knows? But what is certain is that they wanted to get there sooner than God wanted them to. “Come on Lord God, turn us loose and let us go!” But you know what happens when he does. Freedom tends to corrupt....and all that.

That is often the problem: trying to get to where we want to go too quickly. And may I gently add, in my opinion, that particular attachment to haste is not unrelated to the current financial crisis in the United States which now stretches all around the world. The Promised Land in this case is the fulfillment of what is called the American Dream. The phrase was coined by James Truslow Adams in his widely known book, The Epic of America, published all the way back in 1931, in the depths of the Great Depression.

Some think we are heading for another one just now. I don't. This present malaise in my opinion is just a severe warning. But there are dangers galore. Adams intended the Dream to mean that this nation should be a land where each and every citizen, regardless of rank or race or national ancestry, could have an equal chance at fulfilling the dream, i.e. attaining the fullest stature for which he or she is capable. After all, Jefferson told us that we are all created equal and endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

At the beginning it meant the dream would be fulfilled if each and every citizen had the right to be free, the right to a good education, the right to worship as they chose, the privilege of voting in a democracy, with one vote equal to every other vote, to choose their leaders. Over the generations we have been manipulated into believing that it should mean something else. Martin Luther King's dream was right on the mark. He dreamed of the day when his four children would live in a land "Where they will be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." That is a dream we all share for everyone man, woman and child.

Part of our problem currently is that the fulfillment of the American Dream has been transferred to mean that each and every person, regardless of skill, ability, and the willingness to work, should have an equal share of everything they want: a chicken in every pot, a house for every person, a garage for every house, a car for every garage, and a tank full of gas in every car. The enduring dream of opportunity and equality became the transitory goals of success, and wealth, and unlimited material possessions, without the responsibility of earning them.

And make no mistake about it; we each and all are part of the problem. Living beyond our means is the deeper root of the credit crisis. Credit cards have been distributed and used without responsibility. The dream came to mean that the government should provide not only the essentials of food and clothing and medicine, which they no doubt should, but anything, everything else. The problem is that some politicians and self-appointed social reformers decided that it all had to be done as soon as possible, preferably, immediately. The storm has been gathering for 50 years that I know of, and now it has caught up with us. The golden calf, the symbol of the young bull who struts around the yard, is a symbol not only of a galloping market, but of a bull in a china shop, who by now is knocking over all the fragile items of note.

The point we were making from Exodus 32 was that the people chose to cherish the golden calf, and not the Lord God Almighty. Later, when the renegade King Jeroboam led the revolt of the Ten Tribes and formed the Northern Kingdom of Israel three centuries later, he established two new centers of worship, one at Bethel, one in the city of Dan. Then he created two young bull idols, fashioned out of gold, of course; and he placed them prominently in his new capital cities, so the people would worship them there rather than go back down to Jerusalem. (I Kings 12:25-33). And (are you listening?) Jeroboam tried to convince them that the Invisible God of all the earth was standing on the backs of the golden calves, even though they could not see Him, a slight of hand which did not go unnoticed in the Scripture which adds ominously, "And thus Jeroboam made the people of Israel to sin." God is still not mocked, whatever we sow, that will we also reap.

Well, to return to Exodus 32, at verse two, watch how stupidly Aaron responded. He was the assigned leader while Moses was away, but he lacked the qualities of leadership needed to govern the nation. When the people demanded that he make them a new god, he should have shouted, “Nonsense! Be patient. Moses will be back in a couple of days!” But the Bible says he told them (listen to this), “Take off the rings of gold which are in the ears of your wives, your sons and your daughters, and bring them to me.” And they did it. Now that’s a mouthful.

Apparently, there was gold aplenty out in the wilderness of Sinai. You would not immediately assume that those who had just escaped through the Red Sea, and having left their slave homes in a dreadful hurry, plodded through the mud and the reeds and the desert, would have had gold rings in their ears, or any where else for that matter. But apparently, even while enslaved and burdened down in Egypt, and crying out to God from the banks of the Nile River, the chosen servants of the Lord still left town with a pile of gold.

Notice that the men were not charged to bring any gold of their own. They were to take the golden earrings out of the ears of their wives and daughters and their sons. That seems strange, even funny. I don’t know what to say next. It is impossible for me to envision how husbands would go about taking the gold earrings out of the ears of their wives, even if their ears were not pierced. The King James translation makes it more difficult and dicey. It reads that Aaron told the men “to break off” the earrings from their wives and children.

If Aaron ever tells you to do that, men, I wish you luck and I promise to pray for your safety. Getting the earrings off the daughters’ ears might be a little easier, although having three grown daughters, I don’t know about that either. Taking the golden earrings out of their sons’ ears sounds like the strangest maneuver of all. You probably did not realize that it was a common practice back then for young men to wear adornments on their ears, and often golden rings in their noses too. (Honest.)

These were not ordinary earrings by the way. Golden earrings were commonly used in idolatrous worship in the ancient Middle East, even with the Israelites themselves. The practice was forbidden by God’s order to Jacob back in the time of the Patriarchs. (Genesis 35:4)

Anyway, when all the gold was removed from the various ears, it was turned over to Aaron, who it says, took an engraving tool and fashioned all the gold into a molten calf. There it stood at the foot of the mountain; and, as depicted in Cecil B DeMille’s film, it was a cute little almost loveable golden calf.

Now you probably noticed that something seems out of synch here. There is exegetical difficulty trying to understand what actually had happened. No one seems to know for sure. If the calf was a molten calf, as it says, then it would have had to be fired in a kiln, or at least in the hottest of fires and one could not carve that hot molten mass with an engraving tool, as the Bible says Aaron did. Scholars

say that it is a trifle confusing, but that most likely he melted it down, formed it into a huge lump, like Michelangelo with his lump of marble, and when it cooled, he carved it into the form of a calf.

It is curious, even amusing, to listen to the way Aaron told Moses about how it happened. When Moses came down from the Mountain and heard the merriment as they danced and sang and frolicked around the fire, worshipping the golden calf, he was as red-hot as whatever fire had melted down the gold. He screamed, "What did you ever do, Aaron, to make this people commit so great a sin?" Poor Aaron. He was/is not the first younger brother who felt the ire of his big brother when things went wrong.

When we were growing up, I hate to admit it, but I always found a way to blame my little brother Bobby. His birthday was last Friday by the way, but he died suddenly twenty-five years ago at age 43. He always felt responsible for whatever happened. I like the story of the little boy whose father accused him of being irresponsible. "You're not responsible!" railed the father, "We never know what you are going to do next." "What do you mean?" the son replied, "I'm responsible. Every time something bad happens up at the school, everybody says I am responsible."

Moses confronted Aaron, having thrown down the two tablets on which the Ten Commandments which had been written by the hand of God, he said, "How could you let this happen?" Aaron replied: "Relax brother. You are getting all fired up over nothing. Here is what really happened: The people got restless, as people are wont to do in the wilderness. They needed a little diversion, something to amuse them. They were worried, inasmuch as you disappeared up that Mountain and never told anyone when you were coming back. So, when they asked me to make them a little God, I consented, or at least I did not object.

I told them that whoever had gold on, should take it off and give it to me. I never thought they would. Everybody wants a good god but so few are willing to give up their gold to get one. But they gave me their gold. Then, I threw it all into the fire, and...and...can you believe it, Mo?... out.... came.... this.... little.... Golden.... calf." You see, I'm not responsible Bro, I just tossed it all in there and presto, out came this calf, all by itself."

Moses would not buy it. Of course not! He was furious. He grabbed the golden calf, crushed it into powdered gold dust; he mixed it with water and made the people drink it as a reminder of their sinful apostasy.

The story ends as Moses stood up in the midst of the camp and cried out: "Who is on the Lord's side? Come to me!" He told the people how faithless they had been, but that he would go back up the mountain and plead their case with the Creator God. He would intercede for them. And perhaps, because of his righteousness and faithfulness, God might be merciful to them.

If you read the whole story, the Lord at first declared that he could not forgive the people for their heinous sin. But afterwards, Moses approached and challenged him to remember his covenant with the chosen people, all the way back to Abraham. He pleaded further with God not to make himself look

like a fool in front of the Egyptians. If you blot out your chosen people now, you will look ridiculous. They will laugh at how preposterous it would be to rescue them from Egypt and the Red Sea, only to wipe them out in the Wilderness of Sinai. “It doesn’t make any sense Lord.” God agreed. You are allowed to talk with, even to seek a bargain with the Lord.

Moses went so far as to volunteer to have the Lord blot him out, but to spare the chosen people. “Imperfect as they are Lord, they are all you have, as it were.” In the end, God refused to terminate Moses, and he relented some regarding the nation. It says he changed his mind about consuming his children. One righteous man interceding for all the people of the land, and it worked. God spared the people because of the one man Moses, and eventually he led them to the Promised Land. Does that sound familiar, too? I hope so.

Well, it is time to close. But, let me ask you a question before we go. Where, what or who is your Golden Calf? What have you erected as your own private refuge and reserve? What impatience has led you to move away from your total dependence on the Lord God Almighty? Who or what other than Jesus Christ is Lord of where you are and where you want to go? What small compromises have you made which now stand between you and the One who gave you life?

You and I came upon the earth, not when we chose, but when the Lord had need of us. And our days on earth will end, not when we choose, but when the Lord has decided that we have done our part or not, and it is our time to turn up at the final gate.

Meanwhile, what idols have you assembled through the days and decades God has given you? Have you allowed anything or anyone to creep into your panoply of treasures which leads you to believe that you can make it on your own? What direction have you chosen to head off in? What little god have you chosen to depend upon, or as with the ancient Israelites, what purpose leads you off in what direction?

Is it your attachment to the way you think things must be done in your home, or at the office or even around this Church? (Some folk sure are bossy.) Is it the incessant need you have to get what you want or to be in control of what you determine is God’s way, when it really is your way? I saw a sign the other day in a restaurant up in New Jersey. It was over the entrance to the kitchen. It read: “You are always entitled to my opinion!” It made me think of some of some church leaders I have known.

My questions are done. The simple message from The Day They Made the Golden Calf is that you must not lose patience: God is not finished with us yet. And as was true with Moses in the ancient wilderness, Christ has not gone away either. He is up on the Mountain Top of Sinai speaking to the Lord on your behalf and mine, trying to explain why we cannot always do it right, and when the time is right, he will come back to get you.

Meanwhile, Christian, St. Paul is speaking: “Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit. Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality. Weep with those who weep, rejoice with those who rejoice. And, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all. Do not overcome evil with evil, but overcome evil with good.” Serve the Lord with gladness. Be in, but not “of” the world. (Romans 12:11-21)

And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you always. For now and forever more. Amen!