

Season after Pentecost - The Golden Calf

October 9, 2016

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Luke 23:34; Exodus 32: 1-14

*Lord, May the words I speak be those You want spoken,
may the words we hear be those You want heard. Amen*

The descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had been slaves in Egypt for 400 years. But now they have been dramatically freed from one of the most powerful nation of their times by the overwhelming power of God. Working through Moses, along with his mouthpiece and brother Aaron, the Hebrew people had seen God produce spectacular plagues, part a sea so they could walk to freedom on dry land and let it crash down on their pursuers. God was present and guiding them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night . . . providing water, daily bread and commandments that would allow the community and all its members to thrive. Was there ever a time when God's power and presence were more obvious?

Just weeks or months away from the Exodus, Moses is up Mt. Sinai for a major meeting with the LORD. There's been quite a light show of clouds, lightening and flame around the mountains peak for forty days.

"When the people saw that Moses was delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'Come make gods for 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.'"

Wait — plagues, delivered from slavery, watered & fed in a desert by Yahweh, amazing stories of God's faithfulness to their ancestors and they want Aaron to make them gods? And Aaron does it? What is happening?

Ever since he was a child, George had a fear of someone under his bed at night. So he went to a psychiatrist. "I have a problem, doctor. Every time I go to bed I think there's somebody under it. I'm scared. I think I'm going crazy." The psychiatrist said, "Just put yourself in my hands for one year. Come talk to me three times a week and we should be able to get rid of those fears." "How much do you charge?" George asked. "Eighty dollars per visit," replied the doctor. "I'll sleep on it and get back to you."

Six months later the psychiatrist met George on the street. "Why didn't you come to see me about those fears you were having?" he asked. "Well, Eighty buck a visit three times a week for a year is an awful lot of money, Doc! A bartender cured me for \$10" With a bit of an attitude, the doctor replied, "Is that so! And how, may I ask, did a bartender cure you?" "He told me to cut the legs off the bed – ain't nobody under there now!"¹

In truth, fear is no joke. It doesn't matter if what you fear is real or imagined. If we perceive a threat, "our body releases hormones that slow or shut down functions not needed for survival (such as our digestive system) and sharpen functions that might help us survive (such as eyesight). Before we know it, our heart's beating like crazy, we're taking quick, shallow breaths, blood flows to our muscles in case we have to defend ourselves or make a quick getaway."² Akin to outright fright is anxiety, that "unpleasant, vague sense of apprehension [in response] to an imprecise or unknown threat. Anxiety comes from your mind's vision of the possible dangers"³ and causes its own physiological effects. Once the fear or anxiety "pathways are ramped up, the brain short-circuits more rational processing paths,"⁴ we don't think clearly and we may react in uncharacteristic ways.

It seems to me that what is pictured in our reading today is fear. The Israelites are in the midst of major changes — from enslaved to free, from known (no matter how unpleasant) to unknowns. Change makes most people fearful and anxious. And perhaps one of the greatest changes for this people is the transition to being dependent on their Almighty God, their Deliverer and now, Provider. There in the desert, going toward a yet to be designated or realized "promised land," they may have felt like sitting ducks, prone to disaster without resources for an effective response. Then Moses --- their leader, the concrete representation of their liberating God — is gone up a mountain for forty days, with no indications of when he will return. When ramped up by fear, "the brain short-circuits more rational processing paths." "We can't see this God of ours. We can't see Moses. Let's get something we can see. "Come make gods for us," the people said.

It's really not clear from the text if the people were asking for a representation of "this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt" or Yahweh the LORD, who really is the One who brought them up out of the land of Egypt or if they were asking for a god to replace one or both of them. There's a sense of mob mentality at work. Fear that is erupting as anger and aggression ---- a scene which we have recently seen played out in cities throughout the U.S. When facing a simmering mob, Aaron, the designated leader in Moses's absence, reacts. Does he go along with their demand for a golden idol out of fear for his own safety or simply to placate or calm the unruly crowd? Leaders, like everyone else, can make poor choices in anxious times. He makes a golden bull-calf — similar to one of the Egyptian gods — and declares "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!" They build an altar,

call a festival, make sacrifices and then party big time. For the time being, they feel in control, unaware of their illusion.

Did you know that the typical visit to the Grand Canyon lasts from five to seven hours, according to [national] park surveys, but the average time spent actually looking at the canyon is 17 minutes. Here is one of the seven natural wonders of the world.

“The 277-mile canyon was carved over the past six million years by the action of the Colorado River. Because many layers of rock were exposed during this process, the walls of the canyon are countless shades of brown, yellow, red and gray. As the sun moves across the sky the light changes making the vista transform dramatically over the course of the day.”⁵

About five million people visit the Grand Canyon in a year and the average time spent looking at this wonder is only 17 minutes, most likely including the time to get your photograph taken to prove you were there.

When faced with the vast, the huge, the unfathomable, we humans like to think we can reduce it to bit-sized. It seems most visitors to the Grand Canyon think they can compact and capture it into 17 minutes and a few photographs. Similarly, the Israelites, with Aaron’s help, try to “reduce the wonder of God — the One who brought them out of slavery in Egypt — to something concrete, to an idol,”⁶ something manageable. “We [humans] are quite good at making golden calves, and worshiping them instead of the real thing.” After all, if you get to mold your own god, you can make it what you want and limit its power and effect to your own desires.

We do not make good decisions when we are frightened. Rational thinking is skewed when we are fearful, overwhelmed by unknowns or anxious about change. It’s one of the reasons this presidential election scares me. We do not make good decisions — individually or collectively — when we are running scared, looking to reduce the complexities of the world and our problems to palatable, easy solutions to suit us. That is the way of the golden calf — it looks like gold but it’s really bull. We have asked you to come to a meeting today after worship to look at next year’s Financial Plan for Ministry that seems a quandary. But if we react in fear alone rather than faith, we will only see the problems, get anxious and take it out on one another. We do not make good decisions when we are frightened or angry — we see that at the foot of Mt. Sinai when neither the Israelites nor Aaron made good and faithful choices.

The God who delivered the Israelites from Egypt . . . The God who created what would become the Grand Canyon, you and I, Haven Lutheran church . . . The LORD,

who came to earth to show us life that would not be overcome by death . . . That one, true God IS greater, more powerful and beyond our comprehension, containment or control. We can't reduce God to a sound-bite or a golden calf or a photograph. Even when provoked to anger, God chooses to keep promises. The world may seem out of control without a clear path to peace. But instead of letting fear rule the day, instead of turning to false gods and empty ways, let us learn from our ancestors who wrote psalms that were songs of lament. When we are fearful, when we face budgets that won't balance and scary, limping political processes, when we have trouble seeing, feeling, sensing God's presence on a mountain or in our mess, let us cry out to God, lay out our complaints, worries and fears . . . let us cry out "How long, Lord?" ... AND then let us remember that God who is bigger, better, wiser, more steadfast and gracious does keep promises even though we might not see how. Whom will we choose — the golden calf of our own shaping or our mysterious, almighty, all-loving God? One is the product of our fear. The other is greater and more trustworthy than our worst nightmare. Whom will you let rule your heart and lead your life? Whom will we let lead us and our church? Let it be the true God who cannot be reduced to an idol and will be victorious over fear. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 10/8/16

ENDNOTES

1. Anonymous

2. <http://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/enhance-your-wellbeing/security/facing-fear/impact-fear>

3. <https://www.verywell.com/fear-and-anxiety-differences-and-similarities-2584399>

4. <http://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/enhance-your-wellbeing/security/facing-fear/impact-fear>

5. http://www.unmuseum.org/7wonders/grand_canyon.htm

6. Doug Melius "What's your Golden Calf" Exodus 32:1-14 First in a series, "The Disenchantment of the World" as posted on <http://mountainwestgroup.com/fpc/sermons/Disenchantment1.pdf>