

<sup>1</sup> Praise the LORD! O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever.

<sup>2</sup> **Who can utter the mighty doings of the LORD, or declare all his praise?**

<sup>3</sup> Happy are those who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times.

<sup>4</sup> **Remember me, O LORD, when you show favour to your people; help me when you deliver them;**

<sup>5</sup> that I may see the prosperity of your chosen ones,  
that I may rejoice in the gladness of your nation,  
that I may glory in your heritage.

<sup>6</sup> **Both we and our ancestors have sinned; we have committed iniquity, have done wickedly.** <sup>19</sup> **They made a calf at Horeb and worshipped a cast image.**

<sup>20</sup> They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass.

<sup>21</sup> **They forgot God, their Saviour, who had done great things in Egypt,**

<sup>22</sup> **wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.**

<sup>23</sup> Therefore he said he would destroy them— had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them.

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### Exodus 32:1-14

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.' So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. 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!' When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and 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, and said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”

The LORD said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. 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 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. 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 for ever.”’ And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

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Exodus 32

When God’s People Err

Oct 15, 2023

I come from a long line of stiff necked people. At 93 Otto Preheim could barely swivel his neck and yet he was driving to town from the ancestral acreage once a week for the customary loaf of bread and hunk of cheese. He also had golden calves in the house. His polled Herefords did very well at the local fairs, and with a bit of pride he kept the trophies. He loved his cattle to the point of refusing to eat their beef. A sacrilege, in my thinking, but sacrilege is something to which our Exodus texts have been pointing. This is all what came to mind in my first reading of the text. Interspersed with the observations about today’s text, I will include reflections on happenings within our world and the spiritual life.

The Old Testament lectionary readings for this Fall have focused on the Exodus story touching upon high points in the Hebrews journey from Egypt to the Wilderness. Let me reiterate the major movements upon which the Revised Common Lectionary has focused.

August 27: Exodus 1 – A new sheriff came to town, a king appears in Egypt who does not remember Joseph and the gift he was to the Egyptians and entire region. This Pharaoh implements a harsh form of forced labour. God responds by guiding midwives and mothers who preserved the life of Moses—Moses who would eventually become an advocate for the Hebrews. Grace happens even amidst the violence of slavery; at least in Exodus chapter 1.

September 3: By the time we get to Exodus 3, Moses has killed an Egyptian and fled the country. While tending sheep he encounters God in a burning bush who commissions him for confronting Pharaoh back in his old stomping grounds of Egypt. Moses doesn't want to go, but he relents. Rededication and Recommissioning happen even while in foreign lands.

September 10: In Exodus 12 God gives Moses and Aaron instructions on the celebration of a Passover meal. The decisive act of God, plague number 10 on the Egyptian country side, leads to Pharaoh granting release of the Hebrew slaves. Good news for the Hebrews and sorrow for the Egyptians.

September 17: By chapter 14 the Hebrews are on the move, but not out of danger. A pillar of fire and cloud with lightning protect the Hebrew ramblers as the Egyptian army gives chase. The horse and chariots of the Egyptians are overwhelmed by the mud and waters of the Red Sea. Miriam and Moses sing songs extolling God's grace. A way sometimes appears where there is no way.

September 24: Two scant chapters later and the Hebrews have made it into the Wilderness. In chapter 16 they are now complaining bitterly against God, Moses, and Aaron. They are hungry. So God provides manna and quail. Good on God-- people hunger and manna appears.

On October 1<sup>st</sup>, the narrative has advanced and the dissident drum beat of complaints continues. This time the Hebrew rabble is thirsty. Moses is instructed to strike a rock with his staff, and just like that water begins flowing from the rock. Sometimes we are nourished in miraculous ways with bread from heaven and water from a rock.

Last week was Thanksgiving and the Exodus reading was that of God offering the Ten Commandments on top of Mt. Horeb. Contemporary Christians might view the Ten Commandments as unhelpful to the spiritual life, but this was not the case for people of ancient times. At last, they have guidelines to assist them in authentic worship of Yahweh (these would be the first five commandments) along with guidelines to assist the people in community relations (the last five commandments). Through the centuries, the law (the Torah) has been understood as a mechanism of God's grace.<sup>1</sup> And that brings us to October 15 and the Golden Calf episode. Oh dear.

In summery, God has heard the suffering of the Hebrews and raised up one called Moses to guide them out of bondage. While Moses was in exile, God recommissioned him to confront Pharaoh. God protected the people on the night of Passover. Again, God shielded the people as Pharaoh's army gave chase to them. God provided bread of heaven to ease their hunger and water from a rock to

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<sup>1</sup> Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus* in The Believers Church Bible Commentary series (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2000) pp, 250ff.

slake their thirst. In the commandments of Mt. Horeb, God outlined guidelines for worship and community life. For their part, the Hebrews have pined for a return to Egypt, doubted their chances against Pharaoh's army, complained about hunger, groused about thirst, and now created an idol out of gold and begun worshipping it.

In chapter 33 there will be renewal of the covenant, but for today we must reckon with the reality that, at times, God's people botch the life of discipleship. We are generally a stiff necked people be it individually or collectively. We complain a great deal, and sometimes with justification. Other times not. According to the story in Exodus 32, the errors of judgment and perspective happen to peoples and individuals. I have thoughts what we might learn from Exodus 32. First, though, I feel emotionally inundated with news out of Israel / Palestine. It made me think about a quote from Martin Niemoeller

“When the Nazis came to the Communists, I was silent, because I was not a Communist. When they came to get the Socialists, I was silent. When they came to get the Catholics, I was silent. When they came to get the Jews, I was silent. And when they came to get me, there was no one left to speak”.<sup>2</sup>

In 1930s Europe we collectively failed the Jewish people; we failed the Roma; we failed the non-binary Europeans; ultimately the Treaty of Versailles which ended the 1<sup>st</sup> World War failed the German people. We failed collectively fostering a society in which nationalism and genocide flourished. Priorities other than a just peace carried the day. We were worshipping golden images in those days. We wanted payment. We wanted a pound of flesh. We got it, but the price of that flesh was horrendous. I wasn't there, but the effects of it resound.

I have found it most challenging to read or hear the news this past week. The middle east is in accelerated turmoil again. It feels like leftovers from our guilt laden sub-divisions and allotment of Palestine. Rockets fired into Israel from Gaza grieve me. Disproportionate retaliation dropped from fighter jets grieve me. Palestinians in the occupied territories are under duress and have been for decades; the settlements in the occupied territories do not make things easier. If the affluent countries would simply stop selling or giving ammunition to people of the middle east, maybe they would find a way to collaborate and work together for a better future. They did, after all, live together in relative peace until after the Second World War. I do not doubt my pacifist leanings and simplistic wishes are a serious reduction of the geo-political realities, but restricting the flow of weapons in God's Holy Land and across the globe seems a sensible approach. But the sale of munitions is lucrative business for Russians, Americans and Canadians. I simply

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Niemoeller quoted in Robert Ellsberg's *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses For Our Time* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co, 2011 edition), p. 29.

want our congregation, Christian minded people, and followers of God to abide by the fruits of the spirit. If our actions produce things like: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—we are on a good path. If not, we have questions to consider.

Golden calves rear their heads when it comes to financial and political bottom lines across ideological lines in each of our countries. We failed as a people in the 1930s when we did not more strongly advocate for and be willing to sacrifice for groups of people far away. Let us not make a golden calf of corporate profits or national budgets. And when we have acquiesced, God give us the humility to acknowledge our errors and seek to live better. Back to the text.

The episode of the golden calf shocks and disturbs us, coming as it does so quickly on the heels of Yahweh's giving of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai. This moment of great importance in the drama of Israel's (and humankind's) salvation by God is followed by a shameful denial by the people of the very love and power that has saved them. Having been compassionately embraced and delivered from their peril, the people restlessly turn away from Yahweh to gods of gold.<sup>3</sup>

The immediate cause of their apostasy is Moses' delay in coming down the mountain. In the sequence of the narrative as we have received it, Moses, sometimes accompanied by Aaron and other leaders of the people (Ex. 24.9), has made a number of trips up the mountain to receive further words of the Torah on a wide range of topics, many of them having to do with liturgy. It adds insult to injury that their chosen form of disobedience takes a liturgical form. It is ironic, textual salt in the wound. It is the utmost disrespectful slap to God almighty.

Yahweh becomes aware of the proceedings down from the mountain, and God is livid. The people are no longer God's people, with the reference of them being the people of Moses "your people" in the text. The form of the speech God uses in this section fits a court room setting-- in form and text God is putting the people on trial. The charge will result an indictment on a capital offence resulting in execution.

Moses does what might seem unthinkable for most of us. He engages God in debate for the survival of the people. Moses reminds God that the people are not actually property of Moses, but of God's-- they are "your people". Moses tells God to "turn" from the fierce anger-- this Hebrew term is elsewhere and usually translated as "repent" (נָשָׁוּ). That is correct, Moses makes the case that God needs to repent of that fierce anger. In another point of the debate Moses raises the

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts For Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year A* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), pp 516-519.

reality that if God destroys the Hebrews, the Egyptians will see it and feel as if they really won the contest between the god Pharaoh and Yahweh God.

Surprisingly, or maybe not surprisingly, Yahweh does relent. This has been the case, after all, throughout the biblical narrative. One of the first stories of the bible involves Adam and Eve who eat of the tree which God says will lead to death. At that point, God commutes their death sentence and the theological journey of God and humanity is off. As Exodus displays so well, time and time again God sees past the failures of people and nations to the potential we carry.

A wrinkle in this episode of that Divine grace is that Moses advocates on behalf of the people. If you have ever had someone advocate on your behalf, especially when it isn't warranted, you will know how humbling and how comforting it is. I thought of that as I was catching up on some reading this week. One of the periodicals I try to keep pace with is *The Christian Science Monitor Weekly*. The goal of the magazine is to “injure [no person], but to bless all [humankind]. I will read a few paragraphs of an article which recently appeared.

Delilah Neff knows Nixa, the southwestern Missouri city where she is growing up, has some cultural limitations. Located in Christian Country, the city has roughly 24,000 residents, who are overwhelmingly white. So the 17 year old has turned to literature to fill in those gaps. But a book she is currently reading—“All Boys Aren't Blue,” a series of personal essays about race and LGBTQ+ issues by Georg M. Johnson—is no longer found in her high school library. She received it as a Christmas gift. “Hearing about these stories from authors of color, it's really important for me, especially because when I go to college, I want to leave Nixa and venture out,” she says. Delilah and others of her school want the school board to hear some of their hopes and concerns. They want to be heard.<sup>4</sup>

What struck me in relation to today's text is the manner in which the magazine tries to create a platform by which voices not typically acknowledged are heard. The *Monitor* often reports on environmental issues-- who, after all, listens to the oceans and forests? Who listens to the children in our schools? In this case, the youth of Nixa high school desired some say in the choice of the books in their high school library. The *Monitor* chose to listen. They were an advocate—not to harm anyone, but to bless all humankind. It is comforting to receive advocacy and enriching to be an advocate.

Another dimension of the advocate role takes further shape as the story of God and God's people enters the New Testament. In previous sermons I have noted the manner in which Jesus, particularly in Matthew's Gospel, has strong links to the Moses figure. There are five primary sections to that Gospel reflecting the five books of Moses. Jesus offers a lengthy sermon on a high mountain

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<sup>4</sup> Jackie Valley, ‘We weren't being heard’ in *The Christian Science Monitor Weekly* (week of October 2, 2023), p. 38.

reflecting Moses receiving the Torah on Mt. Horeb. And Jesus does act as an advocate for persons and whole peoples who have gone awry. John's gospel extends that role of Jesus to all times when Jesus tells his disciples that they will never be left alone—that an Advocate will be given to them and the church of succeeding generations.

We are promised one who will intercede for us with sighs and groans to deep for word. In this respect, the Hebrew word for God's reaction in Exodus 32 is (רַחֵם), which has compassion / pity/ and consolation as its derivatives. We are promised a presence which will remind us that we are not orphaned or abandoned. We are promised one who will help convict us when we have erred and encourage us to get up and try again. We are promised an essence to inspire us when others around us are in need of an advocate.

I will close today's sermon with two spiritual practices that intersect with today's scripture text. It strikes me that the presence of such a story in our biblical text should help us normalize the reality of golden calves in our world and lives. The question isn't if they will be there, but rather in what ways are they already present. The story is an invitation to humility and take, in the words of the Alcoholic Anonymous Big Book, a "searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves".<sup>5</sup>

In the words of a prayer more often spoken in our Christian liturgical traditions... We do well do consider those things which we have done that caused harm, those things we have left undone that caused harm, and those things which are done in our name that continue to cause harm. In the midst of all this, is a God who continues with us to help us wean ourselves from the golden calves.

A second practice of spiritual reflection is that of the Examen, a prayer exercise which Jesuit founder St. Ignatus of Loyola developed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. A modern version of it is as follows:<sup>6</sup>

1. Give thanks to God for the goodness in your life—however much or little that might be
2. Consider the day... are their places we might have been more compassionate to others or ourselves?
3. Recognizing our limitations to ourselves and others, ask God for forgiveness for what we have done, left undone, or endured
4. Invite God to help us make right those things which are broken
5. Recite the Our Father

We could do worse than recite the Lord's Prayer. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous* (4<sup>th</sup> edition), (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, INC, 2001), p. 59.

<sup>6</sup> Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), p. 91.