

It Wasn't Just the Mold That Was Full of Bull...

Exodus 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.

⁷The 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.

¹³Remember 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.

¹⁵Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain, carrying the two tablets of the covenant in his hands, tablets that were written on both sides, written on the front and on the back.¹⁶ The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets.¹⁷ When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, “There is a noise of war in the camp.”¹⁸ But he said, “It is not the sound made by victors, or the sound made by losers; it is the sound of revelers that I hear.”¹⁹ As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses’ anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.²⁰ He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.

²¹Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?”

²²And Aaron said, “Do not let the anger of my lord burn hot; you know the people, that they are bent on evil.²³ They said to me, ‘Make us gods, 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.’”²⁴ So I said to them, ‘Whoever has gold, take it off’; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!”

Of all the low moments in the Hebrew Bible- the story of the Golden Calf is just rock bottom. I mean really. God rescues the people from slavery in Egypt. God parts the waters. God leads them by pillar of flame and tower of smoke. When the water is bitter God tells Moses to throw in some cedar chips. When the people are getting hungry God provides manna and quail. And THEN. And THEN. When they're camped out around Sinai and the cell coverage is spotty and they can't get a hold of Moses to find out what's going on- then they just forget about everything that's happened and ask for new gods?

It became a kind of symbol for whenever the people went off the rails. In First Kings after David and Solomon created their incredible united kingdom, Solomon's son Rehoboam blew it. When the people complained to him that all of the building projects were turning them into slaves Rehoboam said, "Oh yeah- you think this is bad? My father disciplined you with whips. I will discipline you with scorpions." Nice. So Jeroboam yells out: "Israel to your tents!" And he leads a rebellion. And the writers of First Kings, not pleased about this rebellion said Jeroboam's first act was to make two golden calves recording him saying: "These are your gods, O Israel."

This moment with the golden calves, it's definitely not the best moment for the people of God. Everyone agrees on that. But what's interesting is how much discussion there is amongst scholars regarding what, exactly, went wrong here.

Now some folks put the blame squarely on the people. The problem is the people. Walter Brueggemann for instance, hyper famous Biblical scholar at Columbia Seminary forever

and ever- he says the root problem here has to do with the people and their unwillingness to tolerate uncertainty. It's the people's unwillingness to tolerate uncertainty. There they are, camped out. And Moses is gone. God's presence is nowhere to be seen. And rather than cope with this free God, who comes and goes as God will- the people want something more concrete. They want a god they can count on a little more- they want a god they can see and touch and understand.

This, Brueggemann says, this is the real problem here. And it's the problem with us still. Whether it's the church wanting to make the words of one man, like the pope, infallible. Or whether it's us wanting to make the words of the Bible inerrant- what Karl Barth called our Protestant desire for a paper pope. We crave answers and certainty when the only thing God asks of us is faith- the willingness to follow and risk and step out into the unknown.

Now ol' Calvin agrees with Brueggemann that the problem is the people. And Calvin wouldn't disagree with Brueggemann about the seriousness of idolatry and worshipping as God that which is not God. But Calvin says the real problem here is a little different. The real problem, according to Calvin, is the people's lack of patience. He writes, "They confess they had their deliverer in Moses, yet they cannot tolerate his absence for even a little time." (Calvin p. 329) Calvin picks up on the fact that one of God's chief complaints to Moses is that God has just saved the people, and given them manna and quail- and now Moses is off on the mountain with God for just a few days and yet so quickly they forget and turn aside. The real problem, according to Calvin, is the people- but it's not that we crave answers and certainty; it's that we're

impatient and can't sit still. We're anxious and restless, and we do dumb things when we're like this.

Now, in case you're beginning to feel a little defensive- after all we are the people of God, we are the ones we're talking about here. If you're feeling a little defensive and want to say, now hey, wait a minute. It isn't all OUR fault. What about Aaron? What about what he did? And if you feel this way you are on solid, solid ground. A lot of folks are concerned about Aaron as well.

Brevard Childs, one of the finest Biblical interpreters ever sees Aaron as being more of the problem. Aaron was the one in charge after Moses left for the mountain. And Aaron clearly knows what he's doing- he knows better. When the people come and ask him to make gods, he agrees with them, but then he says to them- "Hey, yeah, we'll do this today. But then TOMORROW- we'll worship Yahweh. Right?" So, Aaron knows exactly that what he's doing is wrong- but he does it anyway. Childs says Aaron is an awkward and compromised leader. He's a coward- following after the people rather than showing them a more excellent way. Aaron finally gets called off the bench and has this golden opportunity to lead- but all he does with it as ask for the people's gold and leads them badly astray.

Terence Fretheim also lays the blame on Aaron, but he says the problem isn't that Aaron fails to lead and gives in to the demand to make those golden calves. The real problem isn't even so much with the golden calves- Fretheim argues the calves weren't really a substitute for God

for a kind of stand in for God's presence. No, the real problem wasn't the calves he made, but the altar he built and set up in front of the calves. Fretheim said the real problem with Aaron is that he defiled worship. And hey, he's a priest. He's got one job to do, which is to worship God. I mean the guy works one day a week- and he can't even get that right.

Now, I think all of these ideas have merit. It's hard to argue against people like Calvin and Brueggemann, absolute giants. But in spite of their great points- I found myself thinking this week that they all missed something in this story. What they all missed is that the golden calf isn't the only mistake being made in this story. There are two mistakes in the story. One is the golden calf; the other is God getting so angry God wants to wipe the people off the face of the earth. Moses has two crucial conversations about these mistakes- and to miss this is to miss what's really going on here.

So, there are two mistakes made in this story- and two crucial conversations. The first conversation is between Moses and God. Moses is up with God on the mountain when God senses a disturbance in the force or something and tells Moses that HIS people, Moses' people, not God's people any more, Moses' people have screwed up royally. God says the people have screwed up so badly God just wants to be left alone and is going to wipe them out and just start over with Moses.

And in possibly the most phenomenal moment in Moses life- Moses doesn't do what asks. He doesn't leave God alone. Moses doesn't walk away. Moses gets in God's face and

starts arguing on behalf of the people. Moses' arguments are great. Uh, Hey, God, don't destroy your people- you worked hard to bring them out. Moses appeals to God's work ethic, maybe. Then he tries another approach. Uh, hey, don't destroy the people- the Egyptians'll just think you're crazy. I love it. Don't do it God- what will the Egyptians think? Moses appeals to God's vanity. But then finally Moses hits God right smack between the eyes. Uh, hey God, don't destroy your people- remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Jacob? Uh, you promised them to make of them a great nation. You promised them. Remember that, God?

This is absolutely one of the most amazing moments in scripture. God gets real angry, and Moses gets in God's face and says, "You know you're making a mistake, here? Don't do this. Remember who you are. Remember the promises you've made."

Moses tells God he's making a mistake- and the miracle is God doesn't zap him into a thousand pieces. No, not at all. The text couldn't be more clear. The text says, "And the Lord changed his mind." Literally, the Hebrew reads "And the Lord turned from the evil things he was going to bring upon his people." *Niham* here means to change one's mind, in Greek this is *metanoia*, or the word for repentance. Moses says God, GOD, is about to make a mistake- and God agrees with Moses, and changes God's mind. God isn't beyond conversation. God isn't beyond reason. God sees this mistake, literally in Hebrew the "evil things" God was planning, and agrees with Moses that that's not the way to go.

Now, let's compare this with the other crucial conversation Moses has. Moses after arguing God out of the planned destruction of all the people comes high tailing it down the

mountain. And Moses just can't believe what he's seeing. He gets so angry the two tablets of the law he's carrying, the ten commandments- he smashes them in disgust. And then, like a parent making a kid wash their mouth out with soap, he destroys the calves and makes the people drink this nasty powered golden calf drink.

And then, who does he see, but his dear, older brother, the man he left in charge- Aaron. And he confronts Aaron saying what in the heck? What happened here? And it's just tragic. Aaron tells Moses the story, and he does pretty well at the start. Hey, baby brother don't get so mad. You know how these people are, right? You know how evil they are? Well, when you left, and you were gone a LONG time, they came to me and said to make them gods. So, what was I supposed to do? So I told them to take off whatever gold they had, and, here's the poetry: I threw it into the fire...and I don't know what happened...out of the fire popped this calf!"

When Moses brings up Aaron's terrible mistake, rather than face it, rather than own it- Aaron finds a way to blame EVERYONE else except himself. He blames Moses for being gone. He blames the people for being horrible. And when it comes to his own act of making the calf- he just says they just magically popped out, ready made.

My favorite thing about this is Moses' response. What does Moses say? Absolutely nothing. I imagine him just looking at Aaron in total disgust.

What if the real problem in this story isn't the mistake itself- but the reaction to the mistake? When God was about to make a mistake, Moses gets in God's face- and God changes God's mind. God faces what Moses is saying and, in effect, says, "You're right. That would be

a mistake.” But Aaron, when confronted with his mistake- he doesn’t face it. He doesn’t acknowledge it. He deceives himself and tries to put the blame on everyone but himself. And the problem with this- when we never face the mistakes we make, if we never see them- we’ll never be able to choose any differently. As long as we think it’s always someone else’s fault- we’ll just keep doing the same things and experiencing the same problems.

Admiral Jim Stockdale is one of the most amazing men who ever lived. One of the highest ranking officers ever in the history of the Navy, Admiral Stockdale was the highest ranking officer in the infamous Hanoi Hilton Prisoner of War camp during the worst of the Vietnam War. For eight years Stockdale was held. He was tortured over 20 times. He was held without rights, without knowing whether he’d ever be released. He did whatever he could to resist. He once beat himself with a stool and cut himself with a razor on purpose so his captors couldn’t record him on video as an example of a “well-treated prisoner”. He created a secret code for his men to use to combat the sense of isolation the Vietnamese were trying to create. It was a series of taps and pauses similar to Morse code. On the third anniversary of his being shot down the prisoners were kept in an imposed silence, but men who were mopping swished out “We love you, Stockdale” to show their appreciation for his leadership.

Once when he was interviewed he was asked what was the single most important thing that kept him alive. What he said has come to be known as the Stockdale paradox. He said that you must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be. (Collins, p. 85) He said he believe the reason he survived is that he never lost his faith in the end of the story- he always

believed he would get out. BUT. Equally, he never entertained fantasies about when it would happen. The interviewer asked him about the people who suffered the most- the ones who didn't make it? "Oh, that's easy," he said. "The optimists." The ones who kept saying we're going to be out by Christmas. And when that didn't happen, they said, "Oh we'll be out by Easter." And so on. They kept refusing to face the brutal fact that none of them knew when they'd be released. They just kept trying to pull the wool over their own eyes. "They died", he said, "of a broken heart." (Collins, p. 85) They believed they would prevail, but they never faced up to the reality around them- they never looked it square in the face.

Beloved, the scripture this morning confronts us with a choice. It offers us the choice of living into the image of God, who, when confronted with a mistaken path, faced up to it and changed course. And on the other hand we can live into the image of Aaron- who when confronted with his mistake refused to see it, refused to accept responsibility, and instead pointed the finger at everyone else.

The question before us this morning is in whose image do you want to live? In the image of Aaron, or in the image of God, in whose image we are fashioned. In whose image will you choose to live this week? **Amen.**