

“I threw some gold in the fire, and out popped this calf!”
Sermon Series: “In the beginning...”
Exodus 32:1-14; Acts 7:35-41

One time I had a husband and father, who was about my age admit to me that until now he didn't realize that a woman, in this case his wife, possessed two biological clocks, her own and her daughter's.

Well, I got to thinking about how this process also manifests itself with teenagers. Each of us recalls the angst of our teenage years. Though our children cannot possibly visualize it, all parents remember that period of insecurity and struggle. We can still recall the anxiety about our bodies, when we would start shaving, how our feet could possibly be so much bigger than the rest of us. We remember how everyone else seemed so much cooler and more glib around the opposite sex. We can still see people making fun of us, and us making fun of them. Clothes, haircuts, makeup, shoe styles took on a life of their own. All the elements of physical and mental maturity, of seeking independence from parents, of peers assuming an outsized role in our priorities make the teenage years some of our most difficult.

And then, we have children and are granted the opportunity to relive them. The angst of male/female relationships now takes the form of “Why can't I go to that party? Jenny's mother lets her stay out until midnight. When I have to come home at 11:00 p.m., it's like I'm a baby. Don't you trust me?”

Your taste in clothing becomes compared to Mrs. Doubtfire. “I need the new skinny jeans. Everybody pays \$150 for jeans. It's fine for you to wear jeans from J.C. Penney's, but certainly you don't expect me to be seen there.”

And, of course, as parents, what we remember is that you just can't win. “Ok. Tomorrow night you can stay out until midnight, but only tomorrow night.”

“What?!! That means the next night, for Sally's party, I have to be in at 11:00 p.m. again. This isn't fair. It's just not fair.”

Or, “Alright, I'll buy the skinny jeans. But times are a little tough right now, so why don't you contribute \$10 out of your allowance to help pay for them.”

“What?!! My allowance doesn't cover my essential needs now. What if my younger sister just doesn't get any jeans so you can pay for mine? That sounds fair to me.”

Well, if you have raised teenagers, then you know how Moses felt. Called by God out of a burning bush, with the help of God's plagues and the parting of the Red Sea, Moses has led the children of Israel out of 400 years of Egyptian slavery. On their way to the Promised Land, a place provided by God so they can become a nation, they stop at Mount Sinai. Moses goes up the mountain, where God will give him the Ten Commandments. But Moses is gone forty days and forty nights, which in Old Testament Hebrew means a significant period of time.

However long it is, it is long enough for the Israelites down at the foot of the mountain to become restless. Arguing that they do not know what has become of Moses, they press his brother Aaron to make them a god. Aaron collects their jewelry and fashions a golden calf. The people then proclaim this is the god who brought them out of Egypt.

In the meantime, God sees these actions and tells Moses to go down there. “Your people,” he exclaims, “have acted perversely.” And God relates that because of this he will consume them.

But Moses implores God to reconsider. Arguing that destroying them will make it look like he didn’t know what he was doing when he freed them from Egypt and to annihilate them would break God’s covenant with them to bring them to the Promised Land, Moses asks God to reconsider. God does reconsider and Moses heads down the mountain to deal with the Israelites.

The story is told about the baptism of King Aengus by St. Patrick in the middle of the fifth century that sometime during the rite St. Patrick leaned on his sharp-pointed staff and inadvertently stabbed the king’s foot. After the baptism was over, St. Patrick looked down at all the blood, realized what he had done and begged the king’s forgiveness. “Why did you suffer this pain in silence?” the saint wanted to know. The king replied, “I thought it was part of the ritual.”

Undoubtedly, Moses had come to realize that part of his calling was the constant pain of dealing with the easily distracted Israelites.

Now, I want to make two brief points about this story.
First, we witness a pattern that will display itself throughout the Old Testament.
God calls Moses to release the Israelites from Egyptian bondage.
God sends the plagues to convince Pharaoh to let the people go.
God gives them Passover as the act by which they escape the killing of all the first born in Egypt.
God sends a pillar of fire to lead them.
God parts the Red Sea so they can escape and then drowns the Egyptian soldiers.
God provides manna from heaven to eat and water from a rock to drink.
And yet, after all these miracles God performs in order to preserve and prosper them, when Moses is gone a little longer than they like the Israelites swiftly turn to molding a golden calf. And when we read this story, we think, what was wrong with those people? Were their memories that short, their eyes that blind to God’s working among them and for them?

Well, let me ask you some questions:
Do you live in a warm house?
Do you have a job?
Does your spouse love you?
Are your children healthy?
Did your football team go to a bowl game?
Did any of these make you more faithful at church? More generous? More committed? Then you understand this story.

All of us fall into this trap. How easily we forget what God has done. We tend to look at God like a football coach with the constant question of: What have you done for me lately? All the Israelites could see was that God, and Moses, were not right there, right then, doing what they wanted right now. Do you and I recognize and remember what God has done for us?

A minister was once speaking to a group of children. In opening his talk he asked the question, “What is meant by the word repentance?” A little boy raised his hand. “Well,” the minister said, “what is it, young man?”

“Being sorry for your sin,” was the answer.

A little girl on the back seat raised her hand. “Well, my little girl, what do you think?”

“I think,” said the child, “it’s being sorry enough to quit.”

Everyone of us would say we remember and are grateful for God’s generosity to us. But are we grateful enough to have it change how we live?

The second point I want to make is how quickly and easily the Israelites found a substitute for God. Note this interesting element of the story. Aaron makes the golden calf, builds an altar in front of it and then proclaims, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.”

“A festival to the Lord.” In this phrase, the Hebrew word used means Almighty God. Otherwise, Aaron was not casting aside God, rather he wanted to bring on board another god. Aaron wanted to worship God and the calf. Or just allow the calf to symbolize God.

This element is a powerful illustration of how sin worms its way into our lives. We never say we don’t believe in God, don’t worship God, don’t consider God important to us. We just allow other things to take their seat alongside God. Like the Israelites, we are much more comfortable with a god we can see, feel and touch. We smile at the naiveté of the Israelites thinking a statue made of gold could be god, could provide them with hope, security, salvation, or love.

But where the Old Testament concentrates on the sin of idols, what does Jesus condemn just as vociferously and in the same manner? Money. Over and over and over again Jesus talks about the temptation of money.

Why? Because it is our golden calf. It carries the same temptation and power. The people thought the idol drew them closer to God, was a reminder of God. But instead, it pushed them further from God. There was, and is, nothing inherently evil in gold, whether made into a calf or a 401k. What is sinful and damaging is the power, security, and value we invest in it.

If there is a positive in an economic crisis, it is that it provides the opportunity to examine our priorities, our lives, and say, “Ok, what is really important to me? And by my actions, what priorities does my life illustrate? As I look back, was I, am I, allowing other elements — money, family, leisure, work — to become a golden calf that substitutes for God?”

In the 1960’s, during the heat of the space race, NASA realized that astronauts would have to be able to record certain things while performing their duties and so it needed a writing utensil capable of writing in the zero-gravity confines of its space capsules. Of course, a normal pen would not work since they are all gravity fed, but the design specification called for a pen to be used. After considerable research and development spanning over two years, the working zero-g Astronaut Pen was developed at a cost of approximately \$1 million U.S. (1960 dollars). The initial production run as fifty pens. In the meantime, the Soviet Union, faced with the exact same problem issued pencils.

So often we jump through all kinds of hoops attempting to set the priorities of our lives, convince ourselves how we can get what God wants to line up with what we want. When what we really need to do is simply choose what is available and we know works — the will of God.

“I threw some gold into the fire, and out popped this calf!”

This line from verse twenty-four is what Aaron said to Moses when Moses asked him how all this happened. Most of us are familiar with Aaron’s explanation. So often, it is our excuse of how we chose the priorities of our lives. But, of course, it never really happens that way. We decide what will be important to us, whether we will allow that golden calf to snuggle in beside God.

This morning, as we partake of the Sacrament, let each one of us ask ourselves: what golden calf am I substituting for God?

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February 1, 2009