

October 11th, 2020

Exodus 32:1-14 “A Case for Good Intentions”

This week’s passage is titled “The Golden Calf” in my Bible. I suppose it could also be called, “Golden Calves Make Lousy Burgers,” but you know, some folks might think that’s sort of a flippant way to look at a serious story. After all, this story is about Israel simultaneously breaking the second and third commandments! And God was not happy to say the least. But every now and then, you’ve got to find humor in an otherwise uncomfortable story.

This story in particular has all the elements of a scene from a TV family sitcom or one of those “teenage coming of age” movies that we’ve watched in Faith and Films like, *Easy A* or *The Edge of Seventeen* or *Saved!* One where the parents go out of town for the weekend and leave the oldest kid in charge. One of the oldest kid’s friend says, “Hey, let’s have a party!” Instead of saying, “Absolutely not!” the oldest kid says, “Okay, but we’ve got to keep it small and we can’t let it get out of hand!” Next thing you know, a bunch of kids show up at the house with weed and booze and then things start getting knocked over and broken, people are spilling things all over the carpet, the smoke detector is going off, and the neighbors are threatening to call the cops. That’s when the parents come home a day early and walk in right as the party is completely out of control. Needless to say, the parents are furious, so they decide to kill everyone at the party and start over with new kids.

I know how twisted that sounds. Somehow we went from a teenage coming of age movie to a horror story revenge flick. But again, sometimes you’ve got to deal with the absurdity of the situation before you deal with the gravity of the consequences. In the case of this story, the amusing part is why this incident even happened in the first place. What started this whole debacle? Well ... Moses went up to the mountain to talk with God, but the people got impatient with him because they felt he was taking too much time. He was up there forty days and forty nights for crying out loud. Is he ever coming down? Did

he forget about us? So the people decided to celebrate by melting down all the remaining gold that was supposed to be used to make the Ark of the Covenant and the tabernacle, and decided to make a golden calf instead! And it's easy for us to roll our eyes and say, "What's wrong with these people? Don't they know any better?" But how many times do we find ourselves in a situation where it seems like the rest of the world is looking at us and saying, "What's wrong with these people, don't they know any better?" Because, let's face it, sometimes we *really don't* know better. Some of the most foolish situations we get into seem to make perfect sense at the time! And even when we come to the realization that what we've done is foolish, we double down and dig our heels in even deeper just to try to save face!

So what I'm *not* going to do this week is try to paint a picture of the Israelites as a bunch of clueless chumps who don't know any better. That's not going to help them any, and it sure won't help us. In fact, I want to give them the benefit of the doubt and make a case for good intentions. And before you say it, I *know* what they say about the road that's paved with good intentions and where it leads. But I'm not trying to make excuses for them, I'm just trying to get you to see what may have led these folks to do what they did. Maybe it will help us avoid situations like this too.

Let's remember who these folks were and what they came out of. They were Israelites. They were the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who God promised would receive a blessing and in turn become a blessing among the nations. But along the way, they were invited to Egypt to escape a famine in Canaan, but eventually wound up as slaves for generations. During their time as slaves in Egypt, they experienced trauma. Instead of becoming the great nation that God promised them through the Abraham covenant, they ended up being slaves to the most powerful Empire in the ancient Middle East. So when God sent Moses to rescue them, they didn't know any other way of life other than to serve Pharaoh and the Egyptian empire. When they were finally set free they were so lost that they started experiencing Stockholm Syndrome.

That's when a person who has been held captive starts to defend their captor because they're so traumatized. How many times did the Israelites complain to Moses about how much better Egypt was than wandering around in the desert? The Israelites at that time were more familiar with their captors than with their God. They were more familiar with the ways of the Empires of the Earth than the King of Heaven. They, for all intents and purposes, didn't really know their God. At least not in the same way that their ancestors knew God back in the pre-trauma days.

So let's look at it from this perspective - All of us have an image of God in our minds, right? But it can be really difficult to see God in a different way than how you picture God. It's part of the reason why some people have issues with referring to God as Mother or even Father for that matter. We have this image of who God is and it's difficult to switch gears and see that there might be another way of looking at God. For the people of Israel, God was kind of a mystery. Sure, they'd seen what God can do when God parted the Red Sea or when God provided manna and quail. But God seemed very distant to the Israelites. God was always "somewhere else" even when you could see the results of God's work. This was especially the case when Moses left the Israelites to commune with God on the mountain for 40 days. People were like, "Well, where's Moses?" They thought they needed him because Moses was at least a flesh and blood person that they could relate to. Moses was sort of this intermediary between the people and God. So not having Moses around caused the people to be ... restless. Yeah, they could look up on the mountain and see it all covered in smoke and fire, but they wondered, "Is this God?" But there was no one around to tell them if this *was* God because the guy who talked to God was ... well ... up on the mountain talking to God!

So Aaron ... the guy who has been at Moses' right hand since the power-encounter with Pharaoh ... decides to collect all the gold among the people so that he could make a golden calf. And it's not that he was saying, "Hey, I'm going to make a pagan fertility idol because I don't

believe in God!” No, he’s doing this because he wants to make an altar for the Lord! He wants the people to see this as a representation of the one who brought them out of Egypt! In their minds, this golden calf wasn’t an “alternate god.” In fact, the Hebrew text uses the same word they used for God, YHWH. But remember, these Israelites had spent generations with the Egyptians and mingled with other cultures that would use physical representations of their gods. So why not do it here? What could go wrong? Maybe God will see this and say, “Awww! Thank you! That’s a great looking golden calf you made there!” They made this because this is the only image of God that they knew. The problem is that they contained God in this form. They couldn’t get their heads wrapped around God as an almighty being enveloped in mystery. So they made a cow because that’s what they *could* get their heads wrapped around. That’s what’s wrong here. It’s not that they worshipped an idol so much as it was that they fell in love with a false version of God. They wanted a god that would live among them, and they felt that this golden calf was a way for God to be with them. Still want to shake your heads and say, “What’s wrong with these people, don’t they know any better?” Well, maybe. Because it’s hard to imagine somebody not understanding the words, “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” But remember, *we* are quite guilty of making decisions that cause others to look at us and say, “What is wrong with these people? Don’t they know any better? Can’t you all understand something as simple as, ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you?’ Or, ‘love your neighbor as yourself?’” Yeah. We don’t get to judge. Which of course requires us to understand, “Don’t judge lest you be judged” but that’s a sermon for another day. The point is, we are as clueless as these wandering Hebrews in the wilderness.

Here’s where Israel went wrong with the golden calf incident - First it was initiated by humans and not God. Second the humans decided to describe God instead of letting God describe God. Third, and this is where God became frustrated: God was in the middle of working on a

place called a “tabernacle” to show that God wanted to dwell among the Israelites. God was making plans to be closer to the people if they’d just had the patience to wait. Back in chapter 25, God told Moses, “Let them construct a Sanctuary for me so that I can live among them.” And so from Exodus 25 until chapter 31 we have God giving Moses instructions and working out the details on what this tabernacle would look like. But these are traumatized people. They started getting nervous and worried and so they created an “avatar” ... a representation of God. But all the while God was at work finding a way to live among the people. If they had only been patient and waited.

See? We aren’t that different from the people of Israel. Too often we want to define God instead of being okay with the mystery of God. We want to be able to define God, to make God palatable to our own tastes. Dr. Charles Tabor, a professor of mine in seminary constantly talked about how modern Christians in America try so hard to make our faith fit our ideology. This is why Christians on both the political and theological right *and* left tend to fashion a god that is acceptable to them instead of encountering a God who transcends all of our human understanding. We need to start getting used to the idea that we just can’t understand everything there is to know about God. We like to say we believe that, “God works in mysterious ways.” That is until God works in mysterious ways. That’s the beauty of being a follower of Jesus though. We are reminded that through him ... through the one who is both human and divine ... we can have a better understanding of the God who seeks to dwell among us.