

Exodus 32:1-14

A friend from college who now works as a paramedic recently told me about one of his grislier experiences on the job.

He received an anonymous call reporting a heroin addict who was on the verge of death in an abandoned apartment building.

When [my friend] got to the apartment, the man was huddled in a corner, shivering and unresponsive, surrounded by piles of rotten trash, used syringes, lighters, spoons—all the paraphernalia of heroin addiction.

When I asked what that was like, my friend told me that it was terrifying, but that he also thought it was probably the first time he fully understood what worship looks like.

If you've ever spoken, for any length of time, with a drug addict, you will understand what my friend was talking about.

In this case, the object of worship was heroine.

And like all idolatry—which is counterfeit worship—it doesn't lead us to the promised land.

Humans are not created to be godless.

If we don't know the true God, we will make our own deities.

It's a sign of our finitude, and a subconscious awareness that we need direction, purpose, and relationship with something--someone bigger than ourselves.

A wise person once wrote: "the desire for God is the most fundamental appetite of all, and it is an appetite we can never eliminate. We may seek to disown it, but it will not go away. If we deny that it is there, we shall in fact only divert it to some other object or range of objects. And that will mean that we invest some creature or creatures with the full burden of our need for God, a burden which no creature can carry."

The story of the Bible is the story of God and humankind trying to rebuild our broken relationship.

We see this story played out from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

We see this story played out in all of human history.

We see this story played out in our daily lives—on the playground at school, in offices and tall skyscrapers, and at home.

It's the story of a lost people and a loving God.

It's the story of a very weak people, and a very strong God.

It's the story of a God Who seeks us out and a people who, often, don't want to be found.

In our Story from Exodus, we see a people who had really been given a lot.

Never before had a people been so privileged as Israel.

They had just been liberated, set free after 400 years of slavery.

Their nation was being born, the nation of Israel, and they were soon going to be given a homeland and they had been chosen by God to be God's followers, the people of God.

They were to be God's missional people to the other nations of the earth, witnessing to the truth that there is only one true and living God.

Moses had gone up on Mount Sinai to receive the civil and religious laws of God, the laws that were to form them into a nation and govern them as a people.

But abruptly and sadly, a catastrophic tragedy struck—all because they thought Moses had been on the mountain too long.

Instead of trusting God and waiting upon Him, the people chose to take things into their own hands, do their own thing, and go their own way.

And thus, we have the sad and terrible tragedy of the golden calf.

Does it sound familiar?

Can we relate to the people of Israel?

How often do we lose our faith and trust in the God Who has chosen and delivered us, and instead choose to take matters into our own hands, do our own thing, go our own way?

And what happens when we do this?

Not only do we miss out on the good plans God has for our lives, we also fail to love God and our neighbor and experience the abundant life Jesus offers.

“When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, ‘Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.’”

In other words, they were looking for a quick fix.

Something to fill that god-shaped void--anything would do.

So, Aaron makes a golden calf and proclaims it as their god or gods.

And we watch as they move back into the realm of darkness and confusion in no time flat.

It sure can happen fast, can it not?

One moment we are being rescued from slavery to sin and death by following the Risen Christ, the next we find ourselves, once again, in bondage to the very things that caused us so much pain and confusion in the first place.

We live in a society, a world which is rife with self-absorption and materialism.

We try to live our commitments to worship, studying scripture, pray and serve others and we find a real freedom in this.

We find ourselves growing and maturing as human beings.

We find ourselves becoming new creations.

Then the going gets tough, and our faith is tested.

When this happens, do we continue to abide in our true sources of strength, or do we quickly run to our golden calves—shopping, politics, the television, sports (particularly football for me) the internet, the refrigerator, anger, self-pity, self-absorption, money?

The quality of our Christian

journey's, the quality of our lives, and the effectiveness of our witness for Jesus Christ depends upon our choices.

We Christians, today, are just as susceptible to the lure of the golden calf as the Israelites were so long ago.

What is your golden calf?

What is my golden calf?

This time of Covid has been especially difficult for all of us and many people have begun to turn away from God and turn from idols. There have been studies going on that as many as 20% of clergy, some say even as much as 40%

in some areas, are leaving the pastorate due to covid and all of the stresses of this year.

If that is the number for clergy, I can only wonder what the number is for all Christians and all members of the body of Christ. This year has certainly been tough. It's been tough for me and I am sure it has been tough for all of you.

It's been difficult being new to this wonderful, loving community and having plans and goals and vision for the church and then for things to suddenly be halted with this pandemic.

It has been difficult to switch to online only worship and having to preach to a phone camera and not being able to see all the faces and interact with each of you.

It has been difficult switching to online classes and seemingly being unable to separate class time, work time, family time, and rest.

It has been difficult being alone in the hospital with Jessica, not being allowed to have any visitors for the birth of our first child.

It has been difficult not being able to have Sophie and Jessica here and being able to show everyone Sophie so that she can love you all as much as Jessica and I do.

And I must admit, there were some small periods of time where I tried to fill that empty void with food or sports or games.

But also I must tell you that it was during these difficult past few months that I was able to appreciate my faith so much more and rely on God so much more. It was during this time that I was able to truly see that no amount of food or games could ever fill the void inside of me and that the only thing that could save me was the amazing love and grace of God.

It is not difficult to be lured away by the golden calves of this world.

We are surrounded by a plethora of things which cry out for our devotion, and when we allow ourselves to focus on these merciless idols, we quickly find ourselves drifting further and further away from God.

And as we drift away from God we begin to forget what it is that is truly meaningful in this life.

We find it harder, if not impossible to follow the teachings of Christ.

Soon, instead of turning the other cheek we are the ones doing the hitting.

Instead of forgiving others without limit, we hold grudges that build walls between ourselves and our fellow human beings.

Anger and jealousy engulf us, anxiety and insecurity enshroud us and we find that our Christian faith doesn't mean so much to us anymore as we grope around in the

darkness of our world—where our relationship with God has been broken and blurred.

In our Old Testament Lesson for this morning the peoples' actions deserved condemnation.

They had turned away from God, but God, ultimately, does not turn away from them.

The Bible is our story.

We, like so many who have lived before us, are groping for relationship with God.

And oftentimes we get off track, we chase other dreams, other dreams which will soon turn into nightmares until we come to the point where we stop, repent and return to our one true source for strength the kind, compassionate, grace-filled and loving God Who never stops calling us into new life with Him.

It's about grace and judgment isn't it?

The judgment comes as God allows us to live into the consequences of our own decisions to take things into our own hands.

The grace abounds as we accept the free gift of God's unmerited invitation which allow us to live in God's decisions and reap the wonderful benefits of God's plan for our lives.

God is calling every one of us to throw away the golden calf— whatever that may be, for you and for me, and

instead to embrace the salvation and abundant life made available to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In doing so, we will find ourselves walking in the Promised Land.

As we bow our heads in prayer, I want to ask you to think about that golden calf that haunts your life and seeks to steal your joy, along with God's purpose for your life.

Now give that golden calf to God.

And let us all walk free into the Promised Land.

Let us pray.