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A Confusion of g(G)ods.

We are back to our journey with Exodus this morning and today bring us to that familiar story of the golden calf. But before we get to the actual incident, let's review the circumstances that brought the Israelites to this point. You will recall that ever since the people left Egypt, their lives have been rather challenging. They left Egypt in a flurry of preparation to follow a mysterious man who claimed to be God's agent and who could do some pretty miraculous things with his staff. They encountered an uncrossable sea and were able to cross safely over. They cried out for fresh water and food and were granted fresh water and food. They were provided rest and refreshment at the Oasis of Elim, and bread and meat in the Wilderness of Sin. They looked to Moses for leadership and intervention with the Lord, and they got it. That is where our tour through the wilderness has taken us thus far.

Now, a few important things have happened since we read about the manna and the quail a couple of weeks ago. The first is that while the Israelites were camped at Rephidim, becoming strong again with the food God provided, they were attacked by a fierce desert tribe called the Amalekites. Again, miraculously, the Lord delivered them safely, and the Israelites continued on their journey, and by the third month on the road, the Israelites finally reached the Wilderness of Sinai.

It seems fitting that it is at this point in the story that God figures he has proved himself sufficiently to ask for the allegiance and faithful obedience of the people. God reminds them that he rescued them, fed them, gave them sweet water, protected them from harm, and now God offers up to them the invitation to be his 'treasured possession, his priestly kingdom and holy nation' (Ex 19:5-6). And the people, having come to trust this God, promise to obey everything they are told and they got themselves cleaned up and prepared to receive from God the message he would give to Moses in the cloud on the mountain. Moses' experience on the mountain lasts for 12 chapters, in which God explains how the people can respond to his gracious covenant in faithful obedience: the 10 Commandments, various religious and social laws, and laws of restitution. In addition to those laws, God also promises to dwell with the people in a physically substantial way, and he gives intricately detailed instructions for his dwelling place: the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant.

This background is important because it sets the stage for the incident of the golden calf. Up to this point, the Lord has given the Israelites absolutely no reason to doubt God's faithfulness and protection of them. In fact, God has given them every reason to trust him, to follow where he leads, despite the fact that they didn't really know where they were going. They were enslaved, God rescued them. They were in danger, God protected them. They were thirsty, God provided water. They were hungry, God provided food. They didn't know which way to go, God provided a cloud and fire. They were attacked, God defeated their enemy. What more could God have done for this people to ensure them of his steadfast love and faithfulness for them? The people had no reason to do what they did with the golden calf and every reason

to be patient and wait for Moses to come back down the mountain. No reason, except for their own fallen humanity, that is…

And so, we come to Exodus 32 and discover that while Moses is taking him time up on the mountain, the people are growing restless below and are beginning to grumble. What follows is a fascinating account of what happens when we get our gods mixed up.

So, we have had a bit of a summary of what has brought us to this point in the text. Now, it's time for a history lesson. Trust me, it's worth it.

As you are probably aware, the book of Exodus, though attributed to Moses as the author, wasn't actually written until much, much later in Israel's history. The writing of Exodus probably began around 600 BCE and wasn't put into its final form until around 400 BCE. Most scholars agree that Exodus was written to help Israel re-form its identity in the post-exilic period (5th century). Quite a lot of the older testament was written in and around that time including 1 & 2 Kings. This is important because the story of the golden calf is intricately connected to another account found in 1 Kings. So, if you would like to take a brief tour with me, turn to 1 Kings 12.

King Solomon was the last of the Davidic line to rule a unified Israel. After Solomon died, he passed his kingdom onto his son, Rehoboam. Unfortunatley, Rehoboam followed the advice of his courtiers and made life extremely difficult for the people. As a result, 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel revolted. There were some battles that divided the kingdom into two, with the 10 tribes going to the north with Jeroboam as their king, and the other 2 tribes remaining in the south with Rehoboam as their king. The northern kingdom was called Israel (with Samaria as its capital), and the southern one, Judah with Jerusalem as its capital. Here is where it gets really interesting. Jerusalem, were the temple was located, where God actually lived and was present with the people, the central place of worship throughout the kingdoms was in the territory of Judah. Jeroboam was worried that his leadership would be challenged if the people continued to be influenced by Rehoboam and the ways of life in the south, which included fulfilling the temple worship expectations in Jerusalem. So, in order to solidify his leadership, Jeroboam came up with his own version of religion (that closely resembled the Canaanite religions of the day), and set up two bulls/calves at the borders of the Kingdom of Israel. And he said to the people, 'these are your gods who brought you up out of Egypt' (1 Kgs 12:28). In an effort to give the Israelites an identity they could rally around and become unified as a people again, Jeroboam gave them false gods to follow because that was easier and safer than sticking to the covenant that God had made with them. Sound familiar? Remember these two books (Exodus and Kings) were written relatively close to one another, and in the context of an identity crisis wherein Israel needed to reconnect with their identity as a special people with whom God had made a covenant that could not be broken by even the most dire circumstances.

So, back to Exodus. Like Jeroboam, Aaron was caught between a glorious past and an uncertain future, and had to come up with something to keep the people from revolting against him while Moses took his sweet old time communing with God on the mountain. So, after the fashion of the Canaanite religious practices that were much more familiar to him than this new stuff with Yahweh, he fashioned a bull/calf made of gold, held it up before the people and said, 'these are your gods, who brought you up out of Egypt" (Ex 32:4). And the people were satisfied to have a centralized identity to rally around and give them strength in the midst of the uncertainty they faced. At least until Moses came back down the mountain.

What I would like to do at this point is make some observations: some observations about humanity in general and some observations about God.

First, isn't it interesting what we humans will do with the facts when things get difficult. I'm sure we have all heard some 'alternative' facts over the last while in the wake of the US election. Well, Israel was good at alternative facts too. The first thing they did when they got impatient was downplay their connection to Moses. 'Where is '*this*' Moses fellow whom we really don't know all that much about' (34:1). Then they present some alternative facts around who actually led them out of slavery in Egypt – was it Moses, this Canaanite fertility god (the bull), or Yahweh? Even Aaron gets it mixed up as he presents the fertility god to the people and then proclaims a festival to Yahweh, with the golden calf as the guest of honour.

Another observation: there are a number of stories in scripture that speak to our human propensity to avoid responsibility and defer blame to others. We see it first in the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve ate the apple. When questioned, Adam blames it all on Eve – 'she gave it to me'. When Eve is questioned, she blames it on the serpent. Same thing here. Instead of taking responsibility for his significant failure, Aaron deflects responsibility – 'I put in the gold and out popped this calf' (34:24). Gosh, it's hard to own our own failings isn't it? But we know that we can't repent and actually accept forgiveness and grace until we can take ownership for our own stuff and resolve to do better next time.

Third observation. We humans find it remarkably easy to mistake our own creations or our own desires for God and God's will for us. The incident with the golden calf makes that painfully clear, but we can experience this reality in our own lives as well. Idolatry comes so easy to us. And if we ever think, 'no, not with me', then let's think about some difficult things. Do we hold God in higher esteem than our church, the music we sing, or the church building itself? The answer to that question is in the result of comparing how we feel about church things. Do we spend more time thinking about the paint colour or the placement of the communion table or the debate between chairs or pews or how and what we sing than we do in actually worshiping God, in prayer, in study of scripture, in deliberate and intentional growing as followers of Jesus? What would Aaron or Jeroboam hold up in our midst and proclaim, "these are your gods?" Do we have some tables that Jesus would turn over?

The reality is that we all need something/someone to worship. It's built into us. St. Augustine called that the 'God-shaped' hole inside each one of us. We were created for the purpose of worship. We were not created for the purpose of self-determination, of worldly success, or even to find self-fulfillment. We were created for the sole purpose of worshiping and reflecting that which we worship into the world. That doesn't mean we won't experience those other things – but the pursuit of them is not our primary identity or purpose.

And the reality is that when we leave the God of Israel behind, we will create new gods to lead us forward. Those who followed Jeroboam left the God who had brought them up out of Egypt behind, and they created new gods around which to form a different worshiping identity. The Israelites who got tired of waiting around for Moses at the bottom of Mount Sinai, decided that they would be better off with the more immediately accessible pagan gods around them instead of sticking to the promise they had just made to serve and obey the God who had brought them out of slavery and who was leading them to a land flowing with milk and honey. It didn't go well for them.

Final observation – and this one is about God. God's capacity for forgiveness and mercy extends far beyond our capacity to fall short of God's intention for us. The story of the golden calf doesn't end with Moses telling Aaron off in hot anger, or in punishing the people for their sin, or even with God putting a plague on the people – which they do. The story doesn't end there. The story ends with Moses going back up the mountain, getting a new set of tablets, and God renewing the covenant with Moses and the people (Ex 34:10-28). The story ends with God's forgiveness and grace. Sin and rejection and alienation from God don't get the last word in this story, and as long as the story remains ***God's*** story, they never do.

Even later for the people of Israel during the times of exile and war and even now for us in a world of exile and war and a host of other sins, there is always hope. We know that neither our past, nor our present or future rest on our own righteousness, our own ability to keep our end of the covenant. We are a forgiven and restored people even now. We are the recipients of a new covenant, made with and for us in the person of Jesus Christ. He is our mediator who has already negotiated with God on our behalf and has granted us mercy. He is the one who continues to intercede for us as he sits at the right hand of God, presenting us as clean and pure and holy before his most holy Father. And that my friends, is Good News. Sometimes we are just as lost as those impatient and petulant and confused and scared and anxious Israelites. But we are also a people of covenantal hope, who are invited to trust this God who has done, and will continue to do, the impossible in order to keep us in loving communion with him. Thanks be to God for his holy and gracious love!