

## UNGOLDEN CALVES

Exodus 32:1-14

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time, October 12, 2008, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### Focus Text

*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.' 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.' So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mould, 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!' When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, 'Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD.' 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.*

*The LORD said to Moses, 'Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; 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 worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" ' The LORD said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. 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.'*

*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? 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. Remember 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 for ever." ' And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.*

All over the world today, Protestant and Catholic clergy who preach from the lectionary will have the option of delivering a sermon on the Old Testament Lesson.

- That lesson contains the story in which Israel, having received the Law of God through Moses on Mt. Sinai, fashions a Golden Calf to worship in place of the God who had recently led them out of slavery.
- They fashion this tangible god in response to the delay of their leader Moses, who remains on the mountain receiving the final details of the Law from God.
- So intense is their desire for a god they can see and touch that they successfully enlist Moses' older brother and chief spokesperson, Aaron, in their idolatrous effort, a stellar example of the voice of the people corrupting both religion and leadership.<sup>1</sup>

It is uncanny that this passage appears on a Sunday in which our nation, and much of the world, is in the throes of a heightened economic crisis paralleled perhaps only by the Great Depression. It is eerie that I chose to preach a sermon on this passage with this title – "Ungolden Calves" – nearly a year ago.

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<sup>1</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 579. Childs attributes this particular insight to Karl Barth.

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All week long I have thinking about what to say, and have been hampered in my thoughts by what I do not know. Yesterday's column in *The Washington Post* by Eugene Robinson<sup>2</sup> gave voice to some of my questions:

- When the volatile markets settle down, as they eventually will, is the United States going to be a poorer nation than it was?
- Will the next generation of Americans [of whom we are blessed with so many at Westminster] lead lives of less affluence and comfort...?
- Is this some kind of final reckoning for living so far beyond our means?

I have also been thinking about what preachers all over the country will be saying today.

Some will undoubtedly release a primal scream, a scream they themselves feel, a scream on behalf of their people.

On 9/11, when I was still living in Iowa, I had just left my home when I learned of the planes striking the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon. I spent the day in the office, trying to reach a church member I knew to be traveling in Washington and church families and townspeople who had students or young adults living in Manhattan. Around midday, we made a decision to open our downtown sanctuary and have a worship service that evening for the community.

Before the service, I was able to race home, get a bite to eat, and turn on the TV. The local news station was broadcasting live from a Pentecostal church in town. The camera was focused on the pastor, who, microphone in hand, was speaking loudly, in tongues, while several worshippers waved their hands, knelt, wailed.

I realized that I was witnessing a worship tradition whose best initial response to the events of 9/11 was a primal scream.

Some of us may feel like emitting a Presbyterian version of a primal scream this week. Our scream will be quieter. It will likely occur in the shower rather than the sanctuary. But it will be no less intense.

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Other ministers may use this day as an opportunity to do what so many churches and so many ministers do well: assign blame. Ministers across the country will call attention to what appears to be the most obvious – and what may well turn out to be the most accurate – cause of the current crisis: greed, power, corruption, lack of oversight, lack of accountability, wishful thinking, no thinking at all.

- Sermons along this line will call us to task for the ostentatious display of wealth, the fiscal and financial overreach, the immoderation that has to one degree or another marked nearly all our lifestyles for the past several decades.
- Ministers giving such sermons, and parishioners hearing them, may also feel compelled to return to a simpler, purer life of a former time, whether that be represented by the harsh simplicity some of you knew during the 1930s; the idealized families of the 1950s, best represented by *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, one of the longest-running television shows in American history; even the less materialistic lifestyles offered by the 1960s, despite that decades' excesses of drug use and promiscuity.
- Yet as we call for such a "return," we had best remember that turning back the clock is never possible, that the lens of nostalgia is rarely clear, and that even a diplomatic "I told you so" is rarely the most helpful word to be spoken and hardly ever the final word God speaks.

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Another set of preachers will doubtless display another of our occupational hazards: offering solutions. Many of us will be tempted, as early as today, to put the weight of the pulpit behind specific solutions currently being considered. I am most tempted by this direction, specifically by the hope that if indeed we are faced with rebuilding our economy (and the world's economy), then perhaps we can put on the table all the challenges we face and seek a comprehensive solution.

Wouldn't it be great if three or five years from now, we had a thriving economy plus

- A clean and safe environment

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene Robinson, "Talk About the Meltdown," *The Washington Post*, 10/11/08.

- A solution to global warming
- A policy and attitude toward immigration that restored us to our historic role as “a nation of immigrants”
- A way of spreading the achievements of our health care system to all our citizens more efficiently, more accessibly, and more equitably
- A resolution of our differences around trade and globalization
- A sound footing for Social Security, Medicare, and other entitlements
- Effective responses to international terrorism, nuclear proliferation, worldwide poverty, AIDS, and genocide.

If we are going to start over as a nation, wouldn't this be the time to work across party lines, across national borders, across religious differences, across racial lines, and across class divides to address the world's major challenges at once?

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There is practical truth and theological validity to all three approaches: the primal scream, the assignment of blame, and the desire for a comprehensive solution. We will probably end up with elements of all three. But before we get there, I want us to see what the lectionary-assigned story of the Golden Calf might say to us as we begin our journey toward the future.

Jewish scholar James Kugel points out<sup>3</sup> that when this incident occurred:

- God had only recently delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt<sup>4</sup>
- In doing so, he had afflicted the Egyptians with ten plagues<sup>5</sup>
- He had miraculously divided the Red Sea, saved the Israelites, and drowned their Egyptian pursuers<sup>6</sup>

Once the people of Israel were out of slavery and in the wilderness:

- God had led them with pillars of cloud and fire<sup>7</sup>
- He had provided waters drawn from the rock at Rephidim<sup>8</sup>
- And he had enacted a miraculous military victory over the Amalekites.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, God had revealed himself at Mt. Sinai to every Israelite, providing the Ten Commandments in words they could all hear.<sup>10</sup>

Yet in forty days – about half the length of time between the day we elect a new President and the day that President is sworn in – the Israelites did precisely what the first and second of those commandments had forbidden: they made a molten metal image, a Golden Calf, and bowed before it in worship.<sup>11</sup>

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The late Presbyterian scholar Brevard Childs has written of this incident:<sup>12</sup>

[The Golden Calf] produces a rupture of enormous proportions and stands as a threat to the [relationship between God and his people Israel].

Childs asserts:

The Old Testament understood this episode...not as an accidental straying [on the part of the people], but as representative [of the people's] character.

According to Childs, the molding of the Golden Calf testifies to the shallowness, impatience, and lack of human vision cut off from God, when human grows “restless and bored.”

<sup>3</sup> James L. Kugel, *How To Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 280-283.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 14-15.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 7:14-12:32.

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 14.

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 13:17-22.

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 17:1-7.

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 17:8-16.

<sup>10</sup> Exodus 19:1-21:26.

<sup>11</sup> To reconstruct this time frame, follow Exodus 12:1-2, 40-41; 16:1; 19:1.

<sup>12</sup> Childs, 579-581.

What I take from this is that in fashioning this object of gold, the people of Israel displayed a tendency we still have to construct our own gods that appear to be golden, but are anything but. We still worship the Ungolden Calves we fashion with our own hands and minds.

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If we take this story seriously, as I do, it is a story driven by one three-letter word, the ancient word “sin.” But in this story another word rears its head as well. That word is “forgiveness.”

- The people of Israel do not yet know enough to ask for forgiveness.
- They do not see the error of their ways, repent, and come home like the Prodigal Son.

In addition, God’s initial impulse is anything but forgiving. The LORD says to Moses:

I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone [don’t come to me in prayer<sup>13</sup>], so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.

Despite receiving a compliment from God, and an implied promise of replacing Abraham as the progenitor of faith, Moses comes back at God.

He reminds God of how much work God has already invested in the people of Israel:

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?

Moses reminds God of what a public relations disaster it will be, what aid and comfort it will provide the enemy, if God abandons Israel:

[Do you really want] the Egyptians [to] say, ‘It was with evil intent that [God] brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’?

And Moses reminds God of the promises God has made:

Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendents 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.’

After hearing this speech from Moses, in one of the miracles of the history of God, “The Lord change[s] his mind about the disaster he [had] planned to bring on his people.” Forgiveness occurs because Moses takes it upon himself to confront God about who God is and what God has promised, and because, prompted by Moses, God listens and changes his mind.

We don’t normally think of God in such human terms: angry, vengeful, open to appeals based on what the press will say about him, yet open also to bringing his actions more in keeping with who he is. But in a way this is a wonderful picture of God. In a story so laced in human sin, a story in which humans have not yet come to the point of repentance, God forgives because of who God is. This is forgiveness that creates repentance, rather than merely responds to it.

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My friends, no matter what we decide, in the end, has caused this economic crisis, and no matter what we are able to do about it, the most important word from the pulpit in this crisis is not a primal scream, not an assignment of blame, not even a set of solutions. The most important word is the final word from God: Forgiveness.

That is the word  
We will hear,  
Receive,  
And carry with us into the future,  
As wiser,  
Chastened,  
And more disciplined,  
We rebuild and renew.

Amen.

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<sup>13</sup> See Childs, 556, note on verse 10, for the possibility of this translation.