

Exodus 32.1-14

A Sermon Preached at the Larchmont Avenue Church

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### **The Gold Standard Meltdown**

Perhaps one of the most startling stories in the Bible is that of the golden calf. The people of Israel have just been delivered, freed from slavery and they proceed to do just what God told them not to do.

There was a party going on, down at the bottom of the mountain. Aaron was throwing it, while his brother Moses was away, atop Mt Sinai with God. As we read the account in the Book of Exodus, the people had turned to Aaron, saying: "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us. As for Moses, the man who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what happened to him." So Aaron, of all people, the brother of Moses, no less, took it upon himself to accommodate the expressed concerns of the people . . .

Without missing a beat, it's as if he has had this move on his mind . . . Aaron says: "hand over your gold rings and jewelry, from your wives, sons and daughters." And the people do just that. Aaron fires up the gold. Melts it down. And, behold, there is a golden calf. And he says: "These are your gods, O Israel." He proceeded to build an altar for the golden calf, and the party ensued. The Bible says: ". . . the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel."

Aaron was the original "repo man." He was quick to grab and grasp the prized possessions of the people to convert and fabricate them in to an idol. They are ripe for the picking. While Moses has yet to come down from the mountain, Aaron is certainly inclined to stay low in the valley . . . the valley of his own grab and grasp for power.

There may be sibling rivalry here. Or something else: One rabbi has noted that Aaron asked for the gold because he really did not think that the people would be so quick to give it away. Up ahead in the story (32. 24), when Moses confronts Aaron, it's Aaron who blurts out, defending himself, saying: "So I said to them, 'whoever has gold, take it off'; so they gave it to me and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf."

John Calvin, that parent of the Presbyterian Church, said the "The human heart is a perpetual factory for idols."

There are idols in the making. The second commandment reads plainly: "You shall not make for yourself an idol." It's preceded only by the first commandment: "I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me." But even before Moses returns down from Mt. Sinai, with the ten commandments, the people have made their own covenant promises . . . elsewhere.

They say, "Come, make gods for us who shall go before us." And Aaron happily obliges. He gathers up all their gold. He manages to fashion a calf that they acknowledge as an image of the god of their deliverance.

And though Aaron proclaims the following day as a "festival to the Lord," it is clear that the revelry was in honor of the graven image. The impatient children of Israel host a party that almost leads to their destruction.

It is a wild scene, an outrageous frenzy – of people blinded by their own impatience laced with their own desire to take control, and seeking to create what God is already providing.

The fabrication of the idols is a going concern. We can idolize almost anything: Idols lure us with powerful illusions and misplaced hopes, becoming false gods . . . commanding people's reverence and awe.

Idolatry is the practice of ascribing absolute value to things of relative worth. It may be fine to have those things around -- career, might, wealth, intellectual preminence, celebrity, patriotism – but to make them then the standard by which all else is measured, to make them your master, to look to them to justify your life, as a standard, is folly.

And folly is what the people of Israel have slipped into, as their revelry shows . . . with the meltdown of their precious metal, into a revered object of their own doing, there is the disintegration of their community.

God is enraged. But Moses implores God, to remember the promise to bring life, not destruction, to the people. And God does bring life.

Backing up to the beginning of this episode, along with the people's impatience and desire for control, and their own terms, they have harbored a distinct sense of fear for what will become of them. Beneath their impatience, fear is there as they clamor for direction. Fearful . . . and beset with the lack of leadership – or the feeling that the leader has failed them (“Make gods for us,” they say, “for we don't know what has become of Moses.”) The people flail, giving up, handing over their treasure, reaching out and responding to the one who says what they want to hear . . .

Fear is part of the story . . . It takes hold, when the people forget God's promise, and the commitment together.

That is not to say that we don't harbor fear – there is that fear about us, among us these days, here in America . . . Where are clear solutions to this financial crisis? What will happen in the days ahead? To my retirement funds? College for the kids? The value of my home?

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” FDR said it, but it sounds like it could have come from Moses here. Seriously, we can recognize our fears, but we cannot afford to give into to them. That is what was happening with the people of Israel, as they went their way, [giving up the gold] fear took hold. And the people proceed to party, like Wall Street – as the president said – getting drunk on itself, by way of what it was able to bring about, by it's own doing.

But remembering . . . is what turns the story around. Remembrance. Moses talks to God . . . Moses, that special envoy. God is all about relationship; the covenant/promose calls us to love God and one another. Moses calls upon God to remember the promise. God does. God is . . . present with us. “Remember” is what we are called to do. To remember and realize, God's promise and presence with us . . .

It is no idol matter, or matter for idols – in spite of the tendencies of our human nature to make those sorts of things – and to fall into fear. But to remember the promise, and to promise to remember . . .

It is what we do in a precious way each time we baptize a child (we rejoice in the presence of Cameron Elizabeth) – we promise to nurture a holy memory bank also in this little one. Each time we come to the Lord's Table, we not only jog our memories, but we vow to re-commit ourselves to an ongoing sacred remembrance of all that has gone into our deliverance with Moses and salvation hope through Jesus Christ.

The remembrance and promise is what restores the people, it restores us. The only destruction in the story is what comes down upon the idols. They cannot stand. But we can.

When the idols are taken away – we are forced to focus on what matters most, our relationship with God and each other. Therein is the promise for a lifetime: loving God, and one another. Amen.