

Sermon Preached by The Rev. Robert L. Hart  
Pentecost 22, October 12, 2008, Proper 23  
Exodus 32: 1-14, Psalm 106: 1-6, 19-23, Phillippians 4: 1-9, Matthew 22: 1-14

Earlier this week I read the story of the golden calf – today’s first reading from Exodus. Instead of the scene from Cecil B. DeMille’s movie, *The Ten Commandments*, I kept seeing in my mind’s eye that big bronze statue of a bull that sits outside of the Wall Street Stock Exchange. We may be excused for thinking that Wall Street has been worshipping a golden calf. But after the turmoil of last week, jokes about the situation are not so funny, unless they contain a note of gallows humor. Besides, who among us hasn’t worshipped the golden calf?

If we look more closely at the story, we find the reason the Israelites turned to the golden calf. Moses was on Mount Sinai, face to face with God, receiving from God the Ten Commandments. All the people gathered down below could see were dark, rolling clouds, flashes of fire, thunder and sounds like trumpets. The whole experience was terrifying and awesome. And then, as the story says, “Moses delayed to come down from the mountain...” The people became frightened. They felt threatened and vulnerable. Their leader could be dead for all they knew.

So instead of this frightening, invisible God on a mountain, Aaron the priest encouraged the people to make a golden image. Here was something familiar and understandable. All the other peoples of earth had images of their gods. So they did as the psalmist said, “Israel made a bull-calf at Horeb and worshipped a molten image.”

The people of Israel were out in the wilderness in a hostile environment. They faced an uncertain future. So they grasped for something they knew and understood. They worshipped the golden calf and had themselves a great party. This encounter with a God who freed them from slavery was just too overwhelming. It left them with too many unanswered questions demanded way too much. Plain fact was that they were scarred. So, they went for something safe and easy, the golden calf.

Again it’s the psalmist who said it best, “...they exchanged their Glory for the image of an ox that feeds on grass. They forgot God their savior, who had done great things in Egypt...”

When Aaron suggested making the golden calf, he thought he was providing real leadership. The people were frightened and calling for a solution. Aaron no doubt thought he reached some common ground and managed the dilemma. In fact, all he did was some cheerleading. The scarred mass of Israelites was yelling for “gods” to lead them. Aaron just gave them what they wanted.

A frightening future loomed before them and Aaron let them hide behind a golden idol. He sheltered them from the God of Sinai, the God who promised to go before them and lead them to the land of their ancestors.

One thing we have come to realize over the past month. We face a hostile environment and an uncertain future. We are not unlike the Israelites. And we have the same God they did.

And we as Christians and as the Church cannot set up golden calves and pretend they will lead us to safety. The familiar gods are not god. The familiar solutions won’t be the right ones. The seven words of a dying church, “We’ve always done it this way.” We’re called at this moment in our history to a new way of being and doing. We are summoned by God to be genuine leaders.

Bob Johansen says we lead through leadership that isn't top down but from the bottom up. We need to listen to one another and build solid relationships --- not just here but all across the community. We need common ground on which to stand. Most of all we must think creatively and respond nimbly.

Jesus told the story of the king who threw a wedding feast. The tried and true, the king's old friends and the elite of his realm, blew off the invitation. They were rude and unresponsive. The king didn't sit around and pout or chew his nails. He didn't say "I'll do it the same way next year." He quickly drew up a different plan. He invited everyone else. He connected with a completely new group. And they showed up to taste of the king's generosity. Of such is the Kingdom of God where new wine cannot be put into old wineskins.

We can anesthetize our fears by worshiping the golden calf. Or we can get creative and work our way through the dilemma of this present moment.

I don't always look to solve problems. Sometimes I just figure out how to navigate through rough water; the object being to come out on the other side of the rapids ready and able to paddle on down the river. The Israelites were all too quick to take the old ways of their pagan neighbors. But the invisible god who refused to reside in images made by hands turned them around and lead them right on through the wilderness. Every step of the way they had to work together to figure out how to be effective. They fought wars when had no experience of fighting. They built the portable tabernacle in order to worship. They organized their tribes. And they journeyed on to become the land and nation of Israel. They had little to go on but a relationship with God and one another.

The times are volatile. They are uncertain. For sure, events are complex and ambiguous. In the parish church as in every aspect of our lives we have to respond nimbly and creatively as I've said. We need to connect with others, define the ground we stand on so that we can move together. We cannot retreat and we can't hide. We can't rely on "we've always done it this way."

I'm purposely painting this picture with broad strokes. The details will emerge as we dive into the dilemmas of our time. The lesson is in the parable of the Kingdom of Heaven. When the old way breaks down, find a new way of doing things. "Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." Jesus said that's how it is in the kingdom. God will do the unexpected and we do as God does.