

**The Golden Calf**  
**Psalm 51:1-12 and Exodus 32:1-15, 19-20**  
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When we left the Hebrews last week, Moses was on the mountain enveloped in a cloud with God, with God giving Moses the specifications for the building of the tabernacle. As readers, we're on something of a spiritual high because we know something the people at the base of Mt. Sinai don't yet know—that God has promised to come and dwell with them, right in their midst as they journey to the Promised Land, rather than remain at a distance on the mountain. But, the people do know that they have just received the gifts of covenant and law, and they have pledged to live in faithful communion with God which is why chapter 32 comes as such a shock, a sharp blast of cold air.

While the conversation between God and Moses is reminiscent of the creation story in Genesis 1, what's happening on the ground is Genesis 3 all over again. The garden scene becomes a tangled mess. Harmony turns to dissonance, rest to disturbance, preparedness to confusion, and the future with God becomes a highly uncertain matter. The reason for this return to chaos is stated unambiguously: the people of Israel have taken the future into their own hands and comprised their loyalty to Yahweh by making an idol. The golden calf debacle functions as a "fall story" for Israel. Israel's own history is a parallel for the experience of all humankind.

As chapter 32 opens, the people are perplexed about Moses' lengthy absence—we remember from last week that he stays with God for 40 days and nights. They begin to wonder, "Is he coming back at all? Has Moses permanently abandoned us and left us to find our own way to God knows where?" His absence leaves them with a lot of unanswered questions and eventually, impatient for his return, they go to Aaron who has been left in charge and demand that he makes an idol for them. Here, we see the negative use of the bounty the Israelites took out of Egypt. They gather their gold jewelry and give it to Aaron who melts it down and casts it into the image of a calf. Aaron then builds an altar where the people make offerings and sacrifices to this golden god.

At every key point the people's building project contrasts with the tabernacle that God has just announced which overlays the story with a heavy irony. The

people seek to create what God has already provided—a tangible symbol of divine presence. The people, rather than God, take the initiative. Offerings are demanded rather than willingly given. The elaborate preparations of the tabernacle are missing altogether. The painstaking length of time for building becomes an overnight rush job. The careful provision for guarding the presence of the Holy turns into an open-air object of immediate accessibility. The invisible, intangible God becomes a visible, tangible image, and the personal, active God becomes an impersonal object that cannot see, speak or act. The ironic effect is that the Hebrews forfeit the very divine presence they had hoped to bind more closely to themselves.

As we said a couple of weeks ago when we looked at the Ten Commandments, the first command, “You shall have no other gods before me,” is the central command of the entire Decalogue, the commandment from which all the others come. God’s people, with their promise of fidelity to God’s law and covenant still ringing in their ears, have violated this most important of all commands. But, the crux of the problem is not fundamentally that they have been disobedient to a law code; it is that they have been unfaithful to the God who has bound himself to this people. This is an egregious sin. One Old Testament scholar has likened it to “committing adultery on one’s wedding night.” That’s the devastating seriousness with which we should understand this event.

God, of course, takes notice of what his people are doing and is understandably outraged. God informs Moses of what is happening on the ground and of God’s intent to leave this rebellious people to their own devices and let them reap the consequences of what they have sown. What happens next is one of the most fascinating exchanges in scripture. God tells Moses to leave him alone, presumably so that God can execute judgment against Israel—or perhaps so that God can suffer the grief of a spurned lover alone. Remarkably, Moses does not acquiesce to God’s request. Moses does *not* leave God alone. In fact, he speaks up on behalf of the people, though he has not yet seen for himself what has happened. The boldness of Moses’ reply tells us something significant about the nature of the relationship between God and Moses. God has entered into this relationship in such a way that dialogue with his human partner is invited, even welcomed. *God is not the only one with something important to say*, and far from dismissing Moses, God listens to what Moses has to say.

Moses’ argument is stunning in its directness while not excusing Israel in the least. Moses makes three points: First, he appeals to **God’s reasonableness**. God

has only just delivered this people from Pharaoh, so what sense does it make for God to reverse course so quickly? The assumption on Moses' part seems to be that God is the kind of God who takes into account such factors of reason and logic in considering options and making decisions.

Second, Moses appeals to **God's reputation**. "What will the neighbors say?" he asks God. A recurrent theme throughout this story has been that God acts on Israel's behalf in order that the Egyptians and others might know that Yahweh is Lord. And, the commandments also demonstrate God's concern for the divine name and reputation. What will people think now, Moses argues, if God destroys the Hebrews? Wouldn't that put God's name and reputation in jeopardy?

Third, Moses reminds God of **God's own promise**. God has made a commitment to Israel, that their descendants would be multiplied and that they would inherit the land. Wouldn't God be following the same course as the people by going back on such a promise? This is a matter of God being true to his own divine nature and character.

None of this is new information to God. The point of Moses' engagement with God is not to supply data; it is to bring Moses' own energy, insight and desire into the conversation, and God receives Moses' input with utmost seriousness. God's response to Moses is immediate and direct. God changes course, deciding not to follow through with his intended judgment. All of this has much to say about our understanding of prayer. God treats his relationship with his people with an integrity that is responsive to what we do and say. Our intercession is honored by God as a contribution to a conversation that has the capacity to change future directions for God, for people, and the world. This doesn't mean that the answer in prayer is always, "yes." Often, we simply cannot see or know the plans and purposes, and especially the timing, of God. But, this does speak profoundly to the impact of prayer.

To this point, we have heard only God's point of view of Israel's apostasy. Now Moses descends the mountain and sees for himself what has happened, and his reaction is more severe than God's. Moses' anger "burns hot". Aaron does not succeed with Moses as Moses did with God. Moses slams the tablets, written by God's own hand, to the ground, shattering them and in so doing, indicating that the covenant is shattered as well. Moses then moves quickly on various fronts in an effort to turn the situation around, confronting both people and leaders.

First, Moses reduces the golden calf to powder and forces the people to drink water polluted with the remains. Not only is the calf destroyed, it suffers the indignation of being dispersed more and more until it is reduced to human waste. Moses then calls Aaron on the carpet, making it clear in no uncertain terms that, whatever the people have done and said, he is responsible for what has happened. Moses has a high view of the accountability of leaders, and Aaron has failed to measure up. The decision that God reluctantly made back in chapter 4—agreeing to Aaron’s partnership with Moses because of Moses’ own reluctance—proves to be momentous.

Finally, Moses invites the entire community to make a public stand: do you belong to Yahweh or not? It is important to note that the subsequent killing of 3000 Israelites could have been avoided at this point if everyone had answered in the affirmative. The issue is no longer whether they participated in the idolatry but whether they are now willing to declare themselves for Yahweh. However, some remain unmoved which intensifies their apostasy. Their silence to Moses’ invitation reveals deep levels of disloyalty.

For this juncture in Israel’s life, its entire future is at stake, and thus, radical sin is believed to call for radical measures. If the community is to survive, those who oppose God within their midst must die. Without condoning such a practice for modern audiences, it is important that we see the gravity with which Israel takes unfaithfulness to God and allow it to prompt critical reflection by those of us who live in an age where virtually anything that goes by the name of religion is tolerated.

Moses’ actions thus far are not deemed sufficient to restore the relationship between God and people. Moses now returns to God’s presence on the mountain to plead for the people’s forgiveness. Whatever else you might say about Moses’ zeal, here he assumes the ultimate responsibility of a leader. Moses first of all seeks to obtain mercy for the people’s sin, but if that is not acceptable, Moses offers up his place among God’s elect for the sake of the people’s future. This time Moses’ intercession is not successful. God will not allow the people off the hook. In response to Moses’ first intercession, the people will survive, but not without consequences. God allows a plague to come upon them, but that is a far cry from what was contemplated initially.

As chapter 32 comes to a close, things are not fully and finally settled between God and people. Moses is not yet done interceding and God is not yet

done responding. The story and the text is in transition, with possibilities for Israel that are still open as God and Moses sort through the options available to them.

One of the most powerful aspects of this story is that it reveals an amazing picture of God, a God who works at the level of possibility while not being indecisive, vacillating, or filled with uncertainty. As we have seen from the beginning, this is a God who chooses not to act alone, who honors his human partners and their contributions. This is also a God who stays open to the future for an extended period of time in order to do what is best for as many people as possible.

We do not know what God would have done if Moses had not entered into the discussion as he did. But the picture that finally emerges in chapter 32 is that Moses is responsible for shaping a future other than what would have been the case had he been passive and kept silent. This text lifts up the extraordinary importance of human speaking and acting in shaping the future. That cuts both ways, of course. Aaron shaped the future, as well. Our decisions and actions can have far-reaching impact, for good or for bad. The story of the golden calf is a reminder to all of us to seriously examine the ways in which we are not being loyal to God and to take with equal seriousness our opportunity to work as God's partner for good in the world. Amen.