

October 15, 2023  
Pentecost 19 – Proper 23A  
Grace Church, Muncie  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

*Exodus 32:1-14*

*Psalms 106:1-6, 19-23*

*Philippians 4:1-9*

*Matthew 22:1-14*

*In the Name of God: Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Please pray with me. O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

This morning's passage from Exodus finds the Children of Israel completely ensnared by fear. Moses seems to have been up on that mountain for ever. No longer willing to believe in a God they couldn't see, the people asked Aaron to make them a god they could see. The result was the infamous Golden Calf which, if the size of the party is any indication, had the short-term effect of alleviating, if not obliterating, their anxieties.

This week, this passage seems like an appropriate lesson about the idolatry of power, particularly the Golden Calf of lethal power. It is hard to overestimate the level of fear and anxiety in the people as they wait for Moses – he'd been gone for forty days. A friend of mine who teaches Old Testament reminded me that the language here is aggressive, if not violent. We read that the people "gathered" around Aaron, when "mobbed" would be more accurate. The gold rings weren't taken off so much as ripped off. This is not about a Sunday School picnic; this is a story of people who are deeply afraid.

When people are afraid, they, and we, tend to turn to something that we can see, something we reckon that we can control. We might even imagine that our Golden Calf is simply the best parts of who we believe God is, and how God protects "us" from "them." And then, we bend the knee to something of our own making, and proclaim it inevitable, perhaps even divine.

The problem is that, despite our best efforts, and pious intentions, our Golden Calves are simply a combination of our own needs and ambitions and fears projected

onto a large screen, like the great and powerful Oz. How many of were taught that this is how God works? After all, it's right there in black and white.

I want to share with you some wisdom from Rowan Williams, who was the 104<sup>th</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury. These thoughts are adapted from his book *Tokens of Trust*.<sup>1</sup>

What the Bible puts before us is not a record of a God who is always triumphantly getting his way by doing miracles, but a God who gets his way by patiently struggling to make himself clear to human beings, to make his love real to them, especially when they seem not to want to know, or to want to avoid him and retreat into their own fantasies about him.

The Bible sometimes does this by a very bold method – by telling a certain kind of story from the human point of view, as if God needed to be persuaded to be faithful to his people. It works like this. Someone like Moses, who has good reason to know something about what God is really like, is faced with a crisis. Things are going badly; surely God is going to give up and blast people into oblivion. So, Moses argues with God until he has persuaded God to be merciful.

The writers of these stories knew exactly what they were doing. They didn't believe in a bad-tempered, capricious God who needed to be calmed down by sensible human beings. They knew that the most vivid way of expressing what they understood about God was to show Moses appealing to the deepest, truest, thing about God.

This morning we have a story of Moses arguing with God. Moses has been on the mountain top, receiving the commandments from God; meanwhile, in the camp of the people of Israel, his brother Aaron has been persuaded to make an image of God in the shape of a golden calf. God's anger is aroused, and he tells Moses to 'let him be', and he will destroy the whole rebellious mob and start again with Moses alone as the ancestor of a new nation.

And Moses replies by saying, in effect, 'You can't do that; you have promised to be faithful to *this* people. Do you want the rest of the world to say that you couldn't cope with them after all, that you couldn't keep your promises?'

It's as if Moses is saying, 'I don't want to be involved with a God who changes his mind and isn't capable of forgiving and starting again with the same old sinful and stupid people.' What matters to Moses isn't his own safety and his own future; what matters is that the God he has believed in is still the same, still trustworthy because he sticks with sinful, stupid people and so demonstrates the absolute freedom of his love. If God were to tear up his promises to Israel, it would look as if his love were just

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<sup>1</sup> This material is carefully adapted from pp. 16-20 of Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.

conditional on their good behavior. But instead, there is this miraculous vision of a God who can still do something with this appallingly unpromising material...us.

It sounds as though the ancient Hebrews really understood the difference between a God who could do whatever he liked and damn the consequences and the God who had shown himself to them as a God of commitment and forgiveness, ready to be argued with, ready to be 'recalled' to his true nature by those who really understand him.

The stories are, in one way, tongue in cheek. They invite us into precisely the fantasy we've been thinking about: what would *you* do, faced with the disastrous stupidity of the people of Israel in the desert? You'd be very tempted to annihilate them, wouldn't you? Well, that's the difference between you and God, and between false gods and real ones; *this* is what God's almightiness looks like in practice. It's the unlimited power to be there, to be faithful to and for a world that is deeply unstable and unjust and suspicious and uncooperative: the power to go on trying to get through at all costs, laboring and wrestling with the human heart.

This is what Moses discovered – a God who never runs out of love and liberty. Thank you, Dr. Williams, for expressing this so beautifully.

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This has been a hard week. Watching the news from the Middle East has left me heartsick and nearly paralyzed with dread. Perhaps you find yourself in a similar place. So how does it feel to hear St. Paul's voice ringing down the ages, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Do not worry about anything."

It sounds tone-deaf and incomprehensible – Rejoice?? And yet, this is not a recommendation; this not some cosmic waiter saying, "may I offer you some rejoicing?" This is an imperative, "Rejoice!"

How can Paul, writing from prison, probably in Rome, not long before his martyrdom, tell the Philippians to rejoice? The reason is not hard to find: "The Lord is near." Paul expects the imminent return of Christ, who will put all things right. But as we have seen, Paul also experiences the nearness of God in Christ, even in his prison cell.

Paul tells the Philippians, *Do not worry about anything*. How does that work? The version of the Bible called *The Message* puts it this way. *Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray.* (Oh! Instead of worrying, pray.)

Again, how? Paul tells us how to do just that: *by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God*. How often do you and I forget that we

pray to a God who never runs out of love and liberty; bringing lists of supplications and requests that are so long that we forget about the thanksgiving part?

We forget that everything that we have is a gift from God. Everything. When, and only when, we remember to remember the thanksgiving, the incomprehensible peace of God will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Who wouldn't rejoice?

On September 11, 2001, some of the flights headed to the United States were diverted to an airport in Gander, Newfoundland. It was a day of great uncertainty, anxiety, and fear. Thousands of people found themselves stranded in unfamiliar places, far from home. The people of Gander and the surrounding towns opened their homes and schools and public buildings to these travelers.

In one story that is told in the musical *Come from Away*, a group of passengers is making its way to one of those shelters on a bus. It's completely dark outside; they have no idea where they are or where they are going; many of passengers do not speak English. One of the locals sees the Bible that one couple is holding. He pulls out his own Bible and opens it to this passage, Philippians 4:6 and they are able to read, together, and each in their own language, the comforting words he is trying to convey: Be anxious for nothing. Do not worry. They are not alone. The Lord, in and through those folks from Newfoundland, is near.

As we walk together through these days, let us remember that the God we are called to love and serve is not the Golden Calf of our collective fears, but the God who Moses and Paul knew, a God who never runs out of love and liberty. A God who can still do something with sinful, stupid people. So, we pray with the Psalmist, "Remember us, O Lord, with the favor you have for your people, and visit us with your saving help." Amen.