

THE STORY OF THE GOLDEN CALF
 (or, "Can God's Mind Be Changed?")
 Exodus 32:1-14 (NRSV)
 October 12, 2008 – Ordinary 28
 Oakland Avenue PCUSA
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EXODUS 32:1-14 (NRSV):

1 When the people saw that Moses had not come down from the mountain but was staying there a long time, they gathered around Aaron and said to him, "We do not know what has happened to this man Moses, who led us out of Egypt; so make us a god to lead us."

2 Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold earrings which your wives, your sons, and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me."

3 So all the people took off their gold earrings and brought them to Aaron.

4 He took the earrings, melted them, poured the gold into a mold, and made a gold bull. The people said, "Israel, this is our god, who led us out of Egypt!"

5 Then Aaron built an altar in front of the gold bull and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to honor the Lord."

6 Early the next morning they brought some animals to burn as sacrifices and others to eat as fellowship offerings. The people sat down to a feast which turned into an orgy of drinking and sex.

7 The Lord said to Moses, "Hurry and go back down, because your people, who you led out of Egypt, have sinned and rejected me.

8 They have already left the way that I commanded them to follow; they have made a bull out of melted gold and have worshiped it and offered sacrifices to it. They are saying that this is their god, who led them out of Egypt.

9 I know how stubborn these people are.

10 Now, don't try to stop me. I am angry with them, and I am going to destroy them. Then I will make you and your descendants into a great nation."

11 But Moses pleaded with the Lord his God and said, "Lord, why should you be so angry with your people, whom you rescued from Egypt with great might and power?

12 Why should the Egyptians be able to say that you led your people out of Egypt, planning to kill them in the mountains and destroy them completely? Stop being angry; change your mind and do not bring this disaster on your people.

13 Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Remember the solemn promise you made to them to give them as many descendants as there are stars in the sky and to give their descendants all that land you promised would be their possession forever."

14 So, the Lord changed his mind and did not bring on this people the disaster he had threatened.

Last Sunday when we read the 10 Commandments, we heard one of them to say:

"You shall not make for yourself an idol."

(Exodus 20:4)

That is what today's passage is about.

And in today's Exodus passage, while Moses is certainly an important part of the story, and the gold calf is certainly an important part of the story, we would do well to center our attention upon (1) **the people of God**, and (2) **God**.

Think with me for a few moments about these two parts of the story.

(1)

THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Listen to this: "The People of God are you and I!" Did you not already know that? Can you not see yourself in the crowd standing around Aaron when Moses does not come back from the mountain? "WE WANT A GOD WE CAN SEE! WE WANT A GOLDEN CALF!" (which, incidentally, was the symbol for god for other nations around the Children of Israel).

Do you think that I would be near the mark if I said that each of us here in worship this morning has a golden calf? Let me see if I can find the shoe which will pinch your toes.

How about: money, sex, knowledge, house, sports, popularity, acceptance, health, retirement, clothes, race, beauty, automobile, pride, addiction...

Let me tweak you with another question. Do you know of someone like Aaron whom you can manipulate into making you a golden calf?

Hundreds of years later, the Psalmist wrote a poem telling about the history of Israel:

*"They made a gold bull at Sinai
and worshiped that idol;
they exchanged the glory of God
for the image of an animal that eats grass.
They forgot the God who had saved them
by his mighty acts in Egypt."
[Psalm 106:19-21; TEV]*

Are you getting the contrast?

On the one side you have Almighty God, the Creator of the Universe, identified in the Old Testament as "The Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt," and identified in the New Testament as "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who sets you free from sin and death."

And on the other side you have a gold bull; he eats grass!

Now, whom do you want on your side?

You know, of course, that we are in our 2009 Stewardship Drive here at OAPC. And it is occurring right in the middle of all of this financial, economical turmoil that is stressing our nation, and indeed, the world. But is FEAR anything new in which we find ourselves?

Indeed, is not FEAR something which stalks our American society?

OLD PEOPLE are afraid of being placed on the shelf-----alone.
 MIDDLE-AGED PEOPLE are afraid life is fleeting past them.
 YOUNG ADULTS are afraid that they won't get their chance in life.
 TEENAGERS are afraid that their peer group will not accept them.
 MARRIED PEOPLE are afraid that their spouses will betray them.
 DIVORCED PEOPLE are afraid to risk themselves again in commitment.
 WHITE PEOPLE are afraid that black people are going to get their jobs.
 BLACK PEOPLE are afraid of injustice and poverty and lack of a chance.
 HISPANIC PEOPLE are afraid of being stereotyped as illegal immigrants.
 BUSINESS OWNERS are afraid their loans are being in jeopardy.
 LABOR UNIONS are afraid they will lose their health and pension benefits.

So, what else is new? When in history has the church not had to deal with the fears of society? Listen to this:

On one side you have Almighty God-----

On the other side you have a gold bull who eats grass.

One of the things that YOU are going to have to wrestle with in the days that lie ahead is

- (1) your committed investment or
- (2) your half-way investment or
- (3) your non-investment

in Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church which is on God's side. I am praying that you will choose to make a committed investment.

A half-way investment or a non-investment in our 2009 Stewardship Drive means that, whether you will admit it or not, **you worship some golden bull!**

The People of God in today's Exodus story are you and I.

Do you think that I am correct?

(2)GOD

The second part of today's story in Exodus upon which we need to center our attention is God. This particular story presents us with what Biblical scholars refer to as a "primitive" concept of God. The word "primitive" is a technical word used by scholars to refer to the development of the "cult" or system of religious practice and development. It means that the God-concept which is presented is an elementary concept, or a child-like concept, a concept of God which is anthropomorphous; it means that we attribute to Almighty God some of our human characteristics. **The example in today's story is God being argued into changing God's mind.**

One of the earlier Biblical stories of this kind is the story of Noah and the flood, when God changes God's mind about destroying all of creation because of the sinfulness of human beings. In commenting upon mind-changing by God, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes:

"Israel's God is fully a person who hurts and celebrates, responds and acts in remarkable freedom. God is not captive of old resolves. God is as fresh and new in relation to creation as he calls us to be with him. God can change his mind, so that God can abandon what he has made; and God can rescue that which he has condemned." [Brueggemann, Walter, Genesis, Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1982, p. 78]

Today's story in Exodus says that because of the intercessory prayer of his servant Moses, the Lord God almighty changed his mind. I wonder what you do with that concept. Can God's mind be changed?

Moses makes two appeals to Almighty God:

(1) he points out that the Lord will be dishonored in the eyes of the Egyptians if God slays his people; and

(2) he reminds God of God's promise of land and many descendants to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

And our text relates (in verse 14): **"So, the Lord changed his mind and did not bring on this people the disaster he had threatened."**

Hundreds of years later when the Psalmist wrote the poem telling about the history of Israel, the Psalmist wrote about God:

*"What wonderful things God did there! (in Egypt)
What amazing things at the Red Sea!
When God said that he would destroy his people,*

*his chosen servant, Moses, stood up against God
and kept God's anger from destroying them."*

[Psalm 106:22-23; TEV]

This is the same God, who, hundreds of years later, stood by his people who were in slavery and in captivity in Babylon, and God said to his people through the prophet Isaiah:

"Fear not, for I am with you,
be not dismayed, for I am your God." (41:10)

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you." (43:12)

And **this is the same God**, who, hundreds of years later, said through the Christmas angel at Bethlehem:

"Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of a great joy
that will come to all the people; for to you is born this day
in the city of David, a savior, who is Christ the Lord."
(Luke 2:10-11)

Do you mind if I ask you a rather "touchy" question? **Are you afraid for the future of Oakland Avenue Church? Are you willing to entrust OAPC into God's hands? Are you willing to back that up with your money?**

I wonder what you think about this.

Do you and I get a little uneasy, a little anxious, a little defensive when our church asks us to invest our money in the future of the church?

I don't want to be TOO hard on us!

Think just for a minute about yourself and your own financial situation. You know what you as an individual or a family group spend on a football weekend, or on a golf outing, or on eating out during the week, or taking a vacation at the beach, or whatever you do for fun.

Do you think that I am being too hard on us, raising questions such as these? The New Testament teaches:

**".....if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation;
everything old has passed away; behold, everything
has become new!" [II Corinthians 5:17; NRSV]**

That verse raises some questions:

Do we **really** want the new to come?

Do we **really** want to be different because of our faith in God?

Do we **really** want to be delivered from our bondage to the things of the world, or to money, or to priorities which have been set by our neighbors?

It seems that two football teams were playing each other, and one team was larger than the other team. The coach for the small team knew that his only hope was to call plays so that the ball would go to Chester Calhoun, the fastest back on the field who could easily outrun the larger defensive players once he broke free.

During a time out, the coach talked with his quarterback about giving the ball to Chester Calhoun and letting him run with it. There was not much time left in the game.

The first play the coach was excited, but Chester Calhoun did not get the ball. The second play was again sent in for Chester Calhoun to get the ball. But again, Chester Calhoun did not get the ball. The third play was the same.

The coach was very upset as he sent in the play again for the fourth and final play. The ball was snapped and the quarterback was sacked, ending the game. The coach was furious as he confronted the quarterback: "I told you four times to give the ball to Chester Calhoun, and now we have lost the game."

The defeated quarterback stood tall and told the coach: "Four times I called the play to give the ball to Chester Calhoun. Four times I tried to hand the ball to Chester Calhoun. The problem was that Chester Calhoun did not want the ball!" (Cavanaugh, Brian, The Sower's Seeds, New York, Paulist Press, 1990, p. 6)

Do you want the ball?