

October 25, 2020

Exodus 32: 1-20

Matthew 22: 15-22

Devices and Desires

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As you know, this fall we've been making our way through the wilderness with Moses and the Israelites on their long exodus from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. This isn't just meant to sharpen your skills for Bible trivia (though there are some great stories awaiting your re-discovery in the book of Exodus!). We're making this trip because we've noticed that we, too, as a church, are on a trying journey through what can sometimes seem like a wilderness – longing to definitively leave behind certain kinds of bondage, and trying to weather various crises along the way to a place of promise of our own – and wanting not to miss any of the lessons about who we are, and how to live, and what matters, that we'll need to have taken to heart by the time we get to where it is that we hope we're going.

Today our errand through the wilderness brings us to one of the most brilliantly told, and painful, stories in the whole Good Book. As you read it, I invite you to consider, again, the remarkable fact that our tradition has chosen to preserve *this* story, of all stories, in the collection of the most sacred stories that we tell about ourselves and our God. It begins with the people Israel encamped at the base of Mount Sinai – after they've all heard the voice of God thunderously speak the Ten Commandments. Moses, we're told, then climbed to the top of the mountain by himself, at God's invitation, to commune with the Immortal Invisible. What happened while he was gone has inscribed itself permanently on us.

Like Moses I often find that, having had only one chance to hear something that seems likely to end up being really important, it helps me to see it in writing; so I sympathize with Moses's trip up the mountain, after hearing God speak the Ten Commandments aloud (Exodus 20:1-20), and amid the distraction of all that divine thunder, to ask for a hard copy. God evidently has a lot to say up there: Moses is gone for a full forty days and forty nights (which is biblical code for "a *long* time") – and it's long enough that the people encamped at the base of the mountain to start to worry, and then to let their fear turn to anger (as fear so often does): "This man Moses, we do not know what has become of him." It's not the first time that they feel "suffocatingly" alone on their dangerous journey; but this time moves them to a new level of desperation. If you remember that practically the first seismic sentence out of the mouth of God, in the Ten Commandments, had been "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of slavery; *you shall have no other gods before me*" – if you remember that, then maybe

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you gasp as you hear the people point their fearful rage directly at Aaron, their priest, and say, “Up, make for us gods who shall go before us.” No more of this absence; *do* something.

You have to feel for Aaron, in the spot this puts him in – but the heat of the moment helps him forge an idea for an astute political maneuver. “Give me whatever you’ve got that’s precious,” he says to the people – and when they hand him their bits and pieces of jewelry he melts them together to form something that can be bigger than the sum of its parts, something that can stand as an emblem of their self-sufficiency, something visible and valuable that says back to them, “we’ve got this. We have it within ourselves to make as much of a god as we need.”

We’re not just at the bottom of the mountain of God; we’re at the bottom of their whole religious history. To many faithful Jewish readers, what happened there, at the base of Sinai, makes the business in Genesis with Adam and Eve and the apple look like – small potatoes.

When I was old enough to start noticing things in church, one of the things I remember was being pricked by a prayer we often used to say, all together, in the Presbyterian church where I grew up. I recognize it now as having been the Prayer of Confession – but at the time I hadn’t yet figured out that that was a thing. Some of you may recognize it; even to this day I can say it by heart:

ALMIGHTY and most merciful Father – We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou those, O God, who confess their faults. Restore thou those who are penitent, according to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.

There are some harsh turns of phrase in that prayer that are hard to say: “miserable offenders” ... “no health in us” ... And there are phrases that hit the target in a way that kind of takes your breath away: “we have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done.” That prayer – which, by the way, comes from the 1662 Anglican Book of Common Prayer, so really it speaks from the heart of the same Reformation where our own Presbyterian roots lie – that prayer started lumbering around in my memory last week as I worked through the story of the golden calf: how the people had indeed done those things which they ought not to have done, and ended up worshipping one of their own devices – as we so often do, to soothe an insecurity or prosecute an anger or fill a chasm in the soul.

The contemporary theologian Willie James Jennings has written that the purpose of our religious engagement ought to be “to open up sites where we can enter the struggle to rethink our people”¹ – to think critically, that is,

¹Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), p. 10. Jennings is actually speaking about the purpose of theological education, which is the subject of the book. But I believe that his point is applicable to the “theological education” we’re all seeking after by coming to church, by following the path through the wilderness marked by worship, learning, service...

about who we've become, and to think hard about who, in God's name, we want to be. Well, here we are in the Exodus wilderness where the pilgrim people have just been given, in the providence of God, manna in the desert and water from a rock and precepts to live by: ten of them in fact, an enduring set of rules that stand out as foundational in the whole history of human civilization. And then, no more than the turn of a page or two later, here we are trashing the best guidance we have for setting our eyes on things that matter, for tuning our hearts to each other instead of to ourselves, for trusting things that are worthy of our trust. And the story goes on: there's no turning away from the horror-show that follows. We have to watch Moses try to talk God out of giving up on us altogether, and then watch Moses take those words God gave us to live by – and listen to how poignantly, carefully, the story describes them: “the two tablets of the Covenant written on both their sides, on the one side and on the other they were written. And the tablets, God's doing they were, and the writing, God's writing it was, inscribed on the tablets”² – every step he takes down the mountain gives us time to notice another tender thing about the guidance God is giving us for all posterity. And we have to watch while Moses lofts the hard copies written in God's own hand into the air and then smashes them in a rage of despair - and then, finally, and isn't this incredible, watch as Moses grinds the golden effigy that was supposed to save them into powder and sprinkles it on whatever sparse water they've got and makes them drink it. If this is what you think will sustain you – if this is all the god you need – think again.

When Willie Jennings says that the purpose of our religious engagement is to find a place to enter the struggle to re-think our people – I don't think we need to look much farther than the foot of Sinai, standing there among the shards of the broken tablets so tenderly engraved. We enter the struggle at the point of noticing our tendency to worship things that are not worthy of worship; our pattern of following too much the devices and desires of our own hearts; our indifference, lately, to bearing false witness, as though it were a legitimate strategy for keeping hold of the power that we've coveted, or the power, or the wealth, or the status; our failure to recognize that there's a more accessible form of murder than the one that the commandment forbids, and that's hatred. We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep – and it is time, says the Exodus journey, and it will *always* be time, to re-enter the struggle to rethink our people.

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There's a little moment in Matthew's gospel, when some of Jesus' enemies come to him to see if he can tell the difference between God and the emperor. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar? they wonder – but it's a trick question. They're trying to let Jesus get himself into trouble – either as a traitor to the Jewish people by saying

² The careful, emphatic repetition comes Robert Alter's splendid, nearly literal translation, in [The Five Books of Moses](#) (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 496.

that it's fine to acknowledge the tyrant-emperor who claims to be divine, or a traitor to the empire by saying that it's blasphemy to pay. Jesus asks to see one of the coins they'd use to pay, and they fish one out of their pockets – a coin that would have had stamped on it, not only Caesar's likeness, but Caesar's title: august and divine one. The adversaries lean in: are you a blasphemer or a seditionist? But in the heat of the moment Jesus forges an idea for an astute ethical maneuver: he hands them back the coin. And when he asks them, "Whose image do you see here?" and pulls out his brilliant line, "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" – there's another question we're meant to hear in the background: *And whose image do you see everywhere else you look - in every face, in every life, in every moment?*

Caesar can stamp his picture and his pedigree far and wide – but he doesn't come anywhere near the true commerce of our spiritual economy. So, many or most of the coins will end up passing through Caesar's hands – and he'll be flattered, as they go by, by how well his likeness is rendered in the medium of cold, hard cash. Before too long Caesar's empire would lie in shards of its own at the foot of the mountain of history. Meanwhile, the coin of the realm of our flesh and blood is the image of God – and we have persisted in believing that every life is marked with that inscription. And in the godly, righteous and sober life that each week we say we're willing to try again to live, baptism is the watermark of our true currency, and Jesus stands behind it with full faith and credit.

In the end, Jesus says, each one of us has to consider the inscription, and re-decide: reenter the struggle to re-think. As at the foot of Sinai, so also here. If the aggregate of what we have in our pockets is god enough for us – well then, perhaps we shouldn't be surprised by the bitter taste left in our mouths when we've drunk our fill of fear and anger. As the Israelites learned at the foot of the mountain, staring at the broken shards of the first copy of the Covenant that ended up saving their lives, but that would have been lost altogether had it not been for the prayerful persistence of their leader and the vast mercy of God – as the Israelites learned, and as we keep learning, it all depends on who we decide we belong to, when we rethink our people.

And interestingly – as I hope you're in the process of discovering as you consider your commitment to the work of this church for next year – having once decided who we belong to, and then having practiced seeing *that* image engraved all around us – well, don't you find that it turns out not to be very hard, after all, to figure out what you want to do with all those coins?

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