

## Homily, Sabbath, October 8, 2011

The texts that we have gathered to think about today provide an interesting panoply of scenes for us to think about.

[Exodus 32](#) gives us three people to focus on -- God, Moses, and Aaron in contrast and in dialogue about sinning and forgetting.

[The Psalms](#) provides a picture of our God, a God in his majesty, and purity, Moses in his role as intercessor—an almost Messianic figure, if you will.

[Philippians](#) shares the attitudes that describe a true follower of God and the feelings that come when all is right with God and the world.

And [Matthew's parable](#) of the wedding festival shares God's desire to have us near and the lengths to which he will go to include everyone in his invitation to His Kingdom.

And even though these texts are far apart in sacred canon, they share a common thread because we can see ourselves in all of them, either by contrast to what we should be, or by observations of what we really are. The picture of God they each present is one of a God that is present with us always, even when we don't want Him near. A God that just won't go away.

They also point to the fact that God is in charge, you and I are not. Our attempts to follow anyone but God will probably fail, and our failure to fully appreciate the Divine image in which we are created, which enables us to have a true connection with God, is a primary root of sin in our lives.

Let's focus for just a moment on the story of the sin of the Golden Calf and its message to us, and I will let you draw your own conclusions about how the other texts relate when you spend time with them later today. Let me set the stage for this story with this poem about the aftermath of the Exodus from Egypt and their gathering at Mt. Sinai for the reception of the Law.

Already so many changes.

Our long column of refugees  
snaking into the wilderness.

Through the sandal-sucking mud  
where the waters had been.

Their men and horses consumed.

And then that Voice  
speaking directly into us,  
reverberating in our chests...!

But Moshe ascended by himself  
into the sapphire sky  
and he didn't come back.

Of course we asked Aharon  
to make something to remind us  
we weren't as alone as we felt.<sup>1</sup>

This poem provides a sneak peak at a valuable lesson these texts together teach us.

Most sermons you and I have heard about the Golden Calf moralize at their conclusion about idol worship and how contrary it is to one of the commandments they had not yet heard.

Others argue we have our own idols, modern idols that trap us and draw us away from God's presence. We all have heard preachers ask, "What 'idols' do you have in your life?" Remember, idols don't have to be statues of cows. Idols can be anything we worship, What are your idols? Money, sex, drugs, and material possessions?

Some Biblical scholars argue that the breaking of the commandments was, in reality an act of love, for where there is no law there is no lawbreaking. Others argue that this story may have been added by editors during the Exile when the Book of Exodus may have taken its final form. These scholars say it was added to bad-mouth the religion practiced by people in the Northern Kingdom like the golden calf worship described in the time of Jereboam (1 Kings 12:26-33). So don't take it too seriously!

Archaeologists make a strong point to note that calves were seldom worshipped in antiquity. More often than not, numerous engravings and artifacts show that the calf was the throne of the gods. In that way the Children of Israel were making a home for their God since he was obviously not coming back to be near them and had been gone for at least 40 days with Moses on the Mountain.

And if you study rabbinic literature, in the words of Elazar Ezkari, “If we are commanded to remember that our ancestors provoked God in the desert, how much more is it incumbent upon all of us to remember that we have provoked God.”<sup>2</sup>

So what is the moral of the story of the Golden Calf?

It teaches a most important lesson of appreciation to God, for God.

The rabbis in thinking about this text taught that as long as Moses was present, it seems that the Children of Israel had in some way a living example of how to sense the closeness of God. They had relied on Moses to provide that closeness, and when he was gone, up the mountain for so long, they felt bereft of any tangible guidance of how to attain that closeness. What was their only conclusion...to make something concrete, something tangible that might be a go-between themselves and their god. They felt as human beings the need for something they could touch in order to focus their faith and actions.

“Of course we asked Aharon to make something to remind us we weren't as alone as we felt.”

They did not request a new god, but rather some one or thing that will “walk in front” and lead them to the Promised Land. This was understandable since God promised to send a messenger to lead them and help them conquer the Land.

“Behold, I am sending a messenger before you to guard you and bring you to the place that I have made ready. For My angel will go before you, and bring you to the Land.” (Ex 23:20-23)

This was the last promise they heard before Moses ascended Mount Sinai, and now they demanded that Aaron provide them with a messenger in order that they may continue their journey to the Promised Land.

The text in Psalm 106 we read concerning the sin of the Golden Calf says, “They exchanged their honor with the sculpture of a grass-eating ox.” The word for “honor” can also refer to the soul in the Hebrew. They exchanged their soul -- their very

essence, their humanity, their likeness of God, so to speak—for something made from their possessions and by someone else's hands.

Look how this story ends in the Message Bible. It shares an intimacy between Moses and God that the children did not understand and had forgotten.

God spoke to Moses, "Go! Get down there! Your people whom you brought up from the land of Egypt have fallen to pieces. In no time at all they've turned away from the way I commanded them: They made a molten calf and worshiped it. They've sacrificed to it and said, 'These are the gods, O Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt!'"

**9-10** God said to Moses, "I look at this people—oh! what a stubborn, hard-headed people! Let me alone now, give my anger free reign to burst into flames and incinerate them. But I'll make a great nation out of you."

**11-13** Moses tried to calm his God down. He said, "Why, God, would you lose your temper with your people? Why, you brought them out of Egypt in a tremendous demonstration of power and strength. Why let the Egyptians say, 'He had it in for them—he brought them out so he could kill them in the mountains, wipe them right off the face of the Earth.' Stop your anger. Think twice about bringing evil against your people! Think of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants to whom you gave your word, telling them 'I will give you many children, as many as the stars in the sky, and I'll give this land to your children as their land forever.'"

**14** And God did think twice. He decided not to do the evil he had threatened against his people.

Psalm 106: 19 At Horeb they made a calf  
and worshiped an idol cast from metal.  
20 They exchanged their glorious God  
for an image of a bull, which eats grass.  
21 They forgot the God who saved them,  
22 miracles in the land of Ham  
and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.

Now, we all have times when we wonder about God's presence. We wonder when things don't go very well. We forget to look back over our lives and remember how God has worked in our lives before. The "retrospectiscope" would be a wonderfully practical invention.

We wonder at times of personal and national crisis—last summer was a challenge for our family when our granddaughter had a brain tumor and then after two successful surgeries she caught C-Diff, a terrible, deadly sickness you can get in hospitals and was in intensive care for 31 days before we saw much hope. Testing times make us wonder.

There is a story told of a famous developmental psychologist who was testing children to see what they understood about their parents. They had a study center near a Kindergarten where there were always children they could talk to with parental consent. One day he was behind the mirror with his students and there were five children being interviewed by a counselor.

“Can you tell me what you like best about your father?” The child paused a moment then said, “My Dad has an airplane and he takes us to Catalina whenever we want.”

Another shared that his father took him to his favorite restaurant to get pizza whenever he wanted. And a third child said, “My Father is very rich and he just bought me a pony for my /irthday.” Then the counselor turned to the fourth boy. He was the son of the psychologist who was behind the one-way glass and running the research project. He decided to have his own son take part in the research, and he moved forward close to the one-way mirror to hear what was going to be said.

“What is it that you like about your father?”

The young boy stood up, walked over to the one-way mirror and said. “What I like best is that my Dad is right here!” And he pointed to the mirror.

God is always with us; we are at our best when we can know that our God is with us. We reflect the image of God as we understand his presence in our lives on a daily basis.

[Ezekiel 16:8 says: "I came by again and saw you, saw that you were ready for love and a lover. I took care of you, dressed you and protected you. I promised you my love and entered the covenant of marriage with you. I, God, the Master, gave my word. You became mine."](#)

And as Rabbi Reuven Buka says about this story, “Whatever unfolded in that dismal circumstance was tragic, and even though partially understandable, still reverberates

with a most powerful message that resonates to this day—the message that nothing should ever compromise unwavering faith in God.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <http://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/2011/02/this-weeks-portion-a-poem-about-the-golden-calf.html>

<sup>2</sup> *Sefer Haredim*, p. 73, no. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Reuven P. Bulka, "The Golden Calves: What Happened" *The Jewish Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No.4, 2009, 254.