

The Golden Bull

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Exodus 32:1-14
Matthew 22:1-14

This golden bull story is so compelling it is not an uncommon cultural reference. Even people who are not religious know that the “golden calf” is an idol, a betrayal. But since we are part of the religious, we have the opportunity to go deeper.

Earlier this year, on Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday before Lent, we read a passage that precedes this one. While the New Testament reading for the day was about Jesus on the mountain transfigured before the disciples, the Hebrew Bible text was Moses ascending the mountain to be in a cloud with God.

Seven months later, we are reading this story from a different perspective. The enchanting cloud that covers God and Moses on Transfiguration Sunday (in Exodus 24) now seems somewhat ominous (in Exodus 32). In the intervening chapters, God has been speaking directly to Moses, dictating a “how to” manual on building the Ark of the Covenant as well as a tabernacle complete with tables, lamps, lamp stands, tapestries and more. Instructions are given for choosing priests and how to make each part of the priestly vestments. YHWH describes an elaborate seven-day ceremony of ordination involving the sacrifice of a bull and rams and ceremonial markings with blood.

The specificity is amazing. God goes on and on giving directions, for 40 days and 40 nights. At the conclusion, God gives Moses two stone tablets that have written on them the Covenant, the Ten Commandments.

But after 40 days and 40 nights, patience is wearing thin down below. From where the rest of the people stand, the mountain seems to be on fire. They see smoke

and clouds, and it seems possible that Moses may never come back down. Maybe he has had a heart attack up there; maybe God's glory is too much for him. The people are done waiting for Moses and God. They go to Moses' brother Aaron, the one in charge when Moses is away.

"Look, we need someone to lead us. That Moses, who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we don't even know what has happened to him. We need a real God."

Are they saying that they thought Moses was God, and he has failed them? Are they asking for a God to replace Moses? Are they saying they need a God they can see in contrast to the God that hides on the mountain in smoke and clouds?

Aaron doesn't need much persuading. He instructs the men to go to their wives and daughters and sons and hand over their gold jewelry. He melts it all down, puts it in a mold and out comes a young bull calf. They seem reassured. Kind of reminds them of the Egyptian fertility gods they were so familiar with. The people say, "Israel, here is your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!"

These fickle people go from calling the God of the mountain their God, to calling Moses their God, to calling the golden calf — made from their own jewelry — the God that rescued them from slavery.

Aaron sees their new devotion; he must be relieved that they are no longer grumbling. He announces that the next day they will have a feast in honor of YHWH, not in honor of the idol, but in honor of the Most High God that the idol represents. Yet the revelry the following day is debauchery of the kind that is associated with worshippers of other Gods, not YHWH.

It must be quite a party because all the way up on the top of the mountain God gets wind of what is happening below. God says to Moses,

“**Those** people you led out of Egypt have forgotten me already. They have made a golden bull to worship instead of me. They say this golden bull — that they created — brought them up out of Egypt. Just leave me alone so that I can destroy these stubborn people. Let me at ‘em. Let me at ‘em. But don’t you worry Moses; I will make you into a great nation.”

Whoa, talk about your vengeful God with some issues.

But then, something remarkable happens. Moses talks God down. The inclusive translation says *Moses “soothed the face” of YHWH, his God*. Moses reminds God of who God is. Moses says,

“Why should you let your wrath pour out on these people whom **you** delivered from Egypt with great might, with **your** strong hand?!

“And besides, think how bad it will look for you if you destroy the people that you just liberated. What kind of God does that, liberates the people only to destroy them? What will the neighbors think? What will the Egyptians think?

”Oh Most High, you must remember that promise you made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel? You said you would make their descendents as numerous as the stars. You destroy your people now and it will certainly be a setback.”

So God relents and the people are saved, for the moment. (For the rest of the story keep reading. But I warn you, it is another one of those rated R parts of the Bible.)

This is not the first time God has been talked down. Remember how in Genesis 18 and 19 Abraham talked God into not destroying Sodom, at least until after his nephew, Lot, and family escaped.

Often we followers of Jesus think that the God of the New Testament is a kinder, gentler God. Hmm. The king in the parable that Jesus tells the Pharisees is pretty angry. Though he plans a magnificent wedding banquet he can't get people to attend. Some who receive invites even kill the messengers delivering the invitation. So the king sends servants outside the city limits, to the highways and the byways to invite people. Finally one of these shows up, but isn't wearing "going to a fancy wedding" clothes so the king says, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." What happened to the malleable God of the Hebrew Bible, the God who can be convinced to hold back the wrath?

So what are we to make of these texts? In Exodus, we have a people who have been rescued from generations of slavery. but don't respect the one that led the liberation. They recall fondly how in Egypt they knew the rules and what the next day would hold. Now they are in the desert, waiting on a leader who seems to be taking direction from a God they cannot see.

We see a people that get so impatient they try to make their own God. They want a god they can control, one that will do what they want. A god they can see, that is predictable. They want a golden god in whom they can see their own reflection. The people aren't the only impatient ones. God is impatient too. God has done so much for these ungrateful people, saved them in some most unusual ways and yet they

cannot remember long enough to be grateful. They are a stubborn and stiff-necked people. How can a great nation come out of these people?

We have learned that the moral of this story is that we must not make false idols and worship them. It is one of the commandments after all, "Do not worship any gods except me!" Certainly that commandment is broken in this story.

But maybe the story is as much about patience as is it about idolatry. The people mistake miraculous liberation for continuous instant messaging from the unseen God. If they can't wait 40 days and 40 nights, how will they ever cope with 40 years in the desert?

This past week civil rights leader Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth died. He was impatient. He was not waiting for a word from the Lord; he had his word from the Lord. He was impatient with the inequality and prejudice, the violence and injustice that his people lived with every day. Should he have been more patient? Should he have saved his body from the fire hoses and mobs that attacked him until the system recognized the worth of African Americans, the descendants of slaves?

In many ways those who worked with Rev. Shuttlesworth and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were very patient. They tried negotiation. They waited to begin their protest in Birmingham until after the local election. Then they waited until after the run-off election. Then they could wait no longer. The white clergy wrote to Dr. King while he sat in jail to register their displeasure at the non-violent protests. But Dr. King was clear in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" that the time for waiting was over.

There may be some who say that Leymah Gbowee, Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Tawakkol Karman, who were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on

Friday, should have had more patience. Perhaps they should have waited until the men were ready to work with them in Liberia and Syria. Maybe they should have negotiated more, not taken to the streets. Why couldn't they be more patient, until the government was ready to negotiate peace?

Certainly this congregation and others have been told that we should be quiet and wait until the church is ready to accept lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Even some who support membership, and all its privileges, for LGBT people tell us that we should wait quietly. Others remind us that the church has spoken clearly on matters of sexuality, and we are to wait patiently for a further word.

But my friends, we have received the banquet invitation. Like Rev. Shuttlesworth, like Dr. King, like Leymah Gbowee, President Johnson Sirleaf and Tawakkol Karman we cannot wait. We must act now. We are heading to that banquet with due haste to get in before the doors are closed.

Exodus shows us an impatient people. Matthew's parable features an impatient God. And we know that patience is a virtue so where does that leave us?

While the stories from Exodus and Matthew seem to be non-sequiters, I think they have something in common. We can see in both stories that when there is no relationship impatience arises. In Exodus, the people talk about "that Moses," and God talks about "these people." This is not how we talk when we respect someone, when we are in a good relationship. "That Moses." "Those people." The people and God have stopped reaching out to each other. They depend on Moses to be the go-between since there is no relationship, and he seems to have disappeared.

In the parable, the king has prepared a wedding banquet to share his joy and yet no one will respond to the servants delivering the invitations. There is no connection between the king and those who are invited. The people should know and love the king, and yet they are disrespectful of the opportunities that are offered. As there is no relationship the king has no trouble going overboard with a response, throwing the people into the “teeth gnashing” place.

When there is no communication, no relationship being built, we get impatient with each other. This is true in our families, with our friends, in congregational life, with the conference, with Congress, even with God. It takes time to listen to each other; it takes patience, sometimes more than we possess as individuals.

So it is together that we find our way to the banquet, that we know how to prepare properly, that we find that we have enough patience to wait for a word from God. By the same token, it is when we stand together that we decide that we have waited long enough. And the power of working together gives us enough strength to endure fire hoses, violent mobs, corrupt governments and confused conferences. May we be given patience to listen for the voice of God. May we be given impatience when injustice calls for action. And may we be given wisdom to know the difference.