

**October 11, 2020**

**Pastor Dan**

**Exodus 32:1-14**

The story of the golden calf is one of the quintessential cautionary tales of the Bible. It's a lesson that has stood the test of time, yet it's a lesson that's still *relevant* because *gosh* if we don't keep making the same mistakes the Israelites made three thousand years ago.

It's such a simple and human experience the Israelites went through. They were lost in the wilderness, in a time of uncertainty, and though God had gotten them *this* far they had good reason to feel that God was gone, that God had left them. Their leader Moses, the one God had been working such miracles through, had been missing for quite some time. He said he was going to go up a mountain by himself to talk to God... and he hasn't been back in a while. I'm startin' to wonder...

They had no sign or sight of the Promised Land on the far side of the wilderness, and even God's promises seemed to have dried up. They were *desperate* for something to grab onto. A firm foundation that would not abandon them. Even *Moses* would have been *something*, but even *he* had left them. There was no indication that their prayers or worship were being *received*, because not only could they not *see* God, and not only did God not seem to be *answering* their prayers... but even God's mouthpiece Moses wasn't there to nod thoughtfully and say everything was going to be all right.

So they took what little gold they carried with them, the most precious things they had in a world of scarcity, and melted them down to create something, *anything* they could *see*, they could *touch*, they could put their pain and their fear onto.

It wasn't God, of course, that they had built there. It was an imperfect reflection of the God that had created them and been there for them their whole life long, and if anything it actually served to *distract* them from the God that hadn't *actually* gone anywhere, whether they could feel it or not.

But can you blame them? Can any one of us, adrift in what, month seven of a global pandemic? Who among us isn't *desperate* for something solid to hold onto that won't abandon us? And who among us doesn't have days when we have trouble feeling the presence of God?

Well in the time that they waited for Moses to return with God's good news, the Israelites came to rely more and more on the golden calf for peace of mind. Worship, sacrifice, prayers: it all went at the foot of the golden calf, and I love the imagery the original Hebrew wording gives us—they became so focused on the god they had created for themselves that it was like their *necks* had become too *stiff* to turn *around* and see the God they had *needed* in the first place.

Naturally this turn of events *disappointed* God. In fact, we see in the Scripture that it *upset* God—which I love, because obviously our all-knowing God *knew* this was going to happen, but it still *upset* God when it finally *did*.

But in the end, God was *big* enough to choose *not* to flip the whole Monopoly board over, as upsetting as the Israelite's failings *were*. God *worked* with Moses, and subsequently with *all* the Israelites, to forgive them their hubris in thinking they could make their *own* gods... and from then on never gave up massaging the knots out of those stick necks to help them get their heads on straight and back on the right path.

And it's work that continues to this day, because even us, Christians or not, have moments when we feel that void, that perceived absence of God, those moments when we can't find anything to hold onto. So we make our own. Can *you* think of any golden calves we have today? Things, people, ideas that aren't God, but that we build our whole lives around? And even worse, people and things that aren't even *god-like* or *god-ly* at all, that we still commit ourselves to because we believe in them all the same? I don't want you to shout any out, but I assure you I could spend the rest of this worship service listing off golden calves good and bad, left and right, simple and complex, all of which we hang onto so strongly that it stiffens our necks *even* from the God that each of us have gathered today to worship. I've got a few a few of my own. It's distracting, it's even harmful at times... and it's not enough.

Just like those lost people in the Scripture reading, we make gods out of the things we carry around with us. We make the gods we feel we need out of *us*, out of our stuff. And sure, we all of us have God within us, and we have but to look within to find that God has been among us all along... but there is a lot of God that is *also* beyond us. Separate from us, bigger than us.

I've had a lot of people say to me the last few months how important it is to them to have something to believe in that's bigger than them. That's why we believe in God, right? Or at least that's one of the biggest reasons for a lot of us. To have something bigger than us to lean on, or even just to know it's there, especially when life seems impossible and the world doesn't seem to care. Knowing that there's more *to* it than *this*... that's the only thing that gets some people out of bed in the morning. I know it does for me.

But I think there are two major distinctions we should note between the gods we make for *ourselves* and the God that makes *us*.

One, is that sure, as human beings we have the power to create, and we can even create things that are *greater* than us. An unassuming writer or composer or painter can make a work of art that touches and informs lives for centuries. Think Vincent van Gough, whose art wasn't appreciated during his too short and far too tragic life, but whose *Starry Night* and sunflowers and straw hats grace museums and cell phone backgrounds and dorm posters and inspire new generations of artists every year. Think of all the composers of every hymn we've ever sung in church; I bet there are very few of us who could name more than *three* of them, *if* that. I know *I* couldn't, and I'm the one who types their names into the subtitles for virtual worship every week! Yet what they have created has brought so many to Christ and deepened the faith of most of the people listening to this sermon, I'd say. And we feel their absence so acutely now when we can't sing hymns together.

There are novels that all of us read in school; there are statues and buildings and inventions and medicines that stand as more than the sum of those few who put them together in the first place. Cities, nations, cultural movements, leaders, dreams, alliances, heck economic philosophies—all these things are greater than any one of us, and we *made* them, and that's something to be proud of!

But *because* we made them, they are subject to every flaw we have within *ourselves*. No matter how great our creations can be—and they are—there is nothing any or *all* of us have ever created that's perfect, that can stand up under every pressure, that is immune to corruption or mistaken oversight. Everything has a weakness, even Superman, and we came up with him too.

No country is perfect. No economy is blameless. No art speaks to *everyone*. No system can be trusted in *every* situation, and *nothing* we build lasts forever.

But God does. God is. And God will always be there. No matter the sands shifting under our feet, no matter the tempests blowing against our walls, no matter what crumbles down and what tragedies we suffer... even when our very lives leave us before we are ready... God is still there... bigger than it all, able to shoulder it all... and able to catch you.

That's the second distinction. Remember I said there were two? God isn't *just* always there... God is there for *you*. The biggest thing in the universe, that which is greater than and stretches beyond all else, the unmoved mover, the largest, most erosion-proof shoulder to cry on our minds could ever conceive... it cares for *you*.

You matter... to the *universe*. You may not matter to the sun in the sky, you may not matter to this planet that spun for billions of years before you were born and will go on spinning for billions after you're gone... you *might* not matter to your elected officials, or your favorite movie stars, and you *certainly* don't matter to capitalism or socialism or the Great Pyramids of Giza or some piece of paper in a glass case written two hundred years ago. There's a good chance we won't even matter to our great-great-great-grandchildren, who wouldn't be *alive* without us.

The gods we create for ourselves won't always be there for us. But the God that created *us*? The God who works to continue to create us anew every day we draw breath? That God feels our cries of pain as if that pain was happening to God. That God celebrates our successes and strives to help us build new life out of our failures. The Israelites were not precious to that golden calf, but we *are* precious to *God*. *You* are precious to God. And God will never let you be destroyed. God will never abandon you and leave you lost and alone. God will always be as close to you as the next breath if you but ask. You will never have to grieve alone or face tragedy or challenge without someone in your corner. You will always have a friend who thinks of you first, and who cares about even the dumb little victories that only you care about. Even in the dark valleys of pandemic or war or oppression, you have a God who knows and whispers to your heart "This too shall pass."

And when you put your faith in golden calves because you feel there's nothing else to grab onto... you have a God who will *always* forgive in the end, and who is even big enough to work *with* us to get our heads on straight and help us move forward.

And when all else has passed and the very hearts in our chests that our parents made for us fail... that God will be there to catch us.

No hunk of gold, no matter how precious, could *ever* be that for us.

I hope you can carry that reminder with you today wherever you go from here. You are more precious to God than gold, and in God you always *always* have something to grab onto.

Thanks be to God. Amen.