

*Texts: Exodus 32:1-14; Luke 23:32-38*

*Subject: The Golden Calf*

*Theme: Change of Mind*

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost; Oct. 11, 2020, *Online; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

I don't think I have the best memory. I usually do not remember quotes from Luther or recite verses of poetry, or even play many songs on the guitar without having the music nearby. But one thing I am pretty good at is remembering names. I'm not perfect, but it's something that I've tried to work on for many years, and when I served at Zion Lutheran Church in Iowa City on a pastoral internship, I knew I had my work cut out for me. There were about 450 people in worship each week. On Christmas, there were nearly 1000. I wanted to get to know the people and learn their names, so I spent some time studying the church directory, matching names with faces. Each Sunday I was able to shake hands (remember when we used to shake hands?) and address many of the regular members and children by name. It was good to be able to know them as well as I could for the year I served in ministry there. And I think people noticed. But sometimes, I would get an email addressed to "Dear Adam." Who's Adam? I knew what they meant, of course, but I mean come on - my name is right there in the email address! My name is Jason Adams, so I guess I see how they could get confused. If we can't see the person we're talking to, and trying to recall them based on a memory, things can get a little fuzzy. No harm, no foul. It still happens from time to time. Maybe I need to wear a name tag more often.

Today we hear the story of Israel in the wilderness. Now to catch up: the people were forced to work as slaves in Egypt for centuries. Pharaoh would not let the people

go. Then, God did signs and wonders, passing over the houses marked with the blood of the lamb, and Pharaoh changes his mind and lets the people go. Moses led them out slavery and into the wilderness, seemingly toward the promised land, where they wandered for years, until they came to Mt. Sinai. It was there that Moses went up the mountain to see God, and received ten commandments. Well, he was up there a while. For the people waiting around, there was no more smoke, no more fire, no more Moses. They must have wondered where God was.

Now, Moses first heard God speak from the burning bush, and for the people, Moses himself was their representative - the one who could speak to God on their behalf. In the wilderness, they were led by a pillar of smoke by day, and fire by night. They knew where God was. But as time went by, they grew more anxious. They had no control, no mediator for their fears and complaints, no place to direct their praise and their worship. So, they ask Moses' brother Aaron, who is a priest of the Lord, to make gods for them. What were they really asking? Couldn't they remember what God had done for them? Why would they need something like that?

Just after hearing the ten commandments, which included:

*You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them;*

They did exactly that. Perhaps they needed reassurance in the form of something tangible, something they could see and know with their human senses. We do it too. Because we cannot see God, we trust in what we can see. We trust in our good deeds,

our candidates, our teams, our organizations, our technology, and our devices. Where does that lead us?

Many of us know the feeling of lack of control. Our minds can turn against us, and one rough moment can become a downward spiral of thoughts that take over. When we get anxious or panic, we begin to lose our peace. There are plenty of techniques that experts recommend to give help, like deep breathing, yoga, or finding an object to focus on. Of course, prayer can change our minds. In prayer we can be in conversation and in communication with the God of the universe. When we are in distress, even when it might be difficult, we have words that help us relate to God is our source of peace, and in whom we find mercy, and grace. Prayer is powerful.

I'm going to give Aaron the benefit of the doubt here. He seems to hear what the people are really need, and directs their attention to God. He calls them to remove their earrings, this jewelry that was not a bodily decoration, but a marker of their former identity as slaves in Egypt. The earrings were symbols of bondage. He has them throw them into the fire. The Book of Genesis (Gen. 35.4) includes the story of Jacob at Bethel, where he had the people put away all foreign gods, and bury the rings from their ears - perhaps so they couldn't make any more idols. Bu from the mold, Aaron made a golden calf. He declared it to be their God - who brought them out of the land of Egypt. And he declared a festival to the Lord.

So the people were satisfied. They were able to offer their sacrifices, and they ate and drank, and reveled. But were they worshipping a false god? Or were they worshipping God falsely?

It's a common human need to relate to something we can see and touch. It's part of the reason many of us are so exhausted with Zoom meetings, social distancing, and virtual gatherings. We don't like to be limited, restrained, or isolated. We are a stiff-necked people too. The people ran wild, and some forgot who it was they were supposed to be worshipping, and others just forgot who they were all together.

And as often happened in our house growing up, when someone gets out of line, or messes up, the parents start to say things like, "Do you know what *Your child* did today?" and the other parent might say, "Oh no, that's *Your child*." No one wants to take responsibility, right? God and Moses have the same conversation. God says, "Moses - do you see what *Your people* are doing?" Whatever the festival was supposed to be had gotten out of hand. The people placed their trust in this statue to go before them - but the calf wasn't going anywhere. It had no power. It had no agency. It didn't care about them. The image was all wrong. It's like they've forgotten that the calf was the god *Apis in Egypt*, and also represented the *Canaanite god Baal*. They were more in love with the image than demonstrating love for the God who truly liberated them and led them this far. The Lord is angry, and tells Moses to stand back while he destroys them all.

Is this who we are? Are we so afraid of losing control that we cling to the things that cannot save us? What are the idols that we've created for ourselves that make God look and long for a fresh start? Our country has bowed down to elephants and donkeys that divide us, to traditions and systems that do more harm than good, to industries and corporations that turn people into products. And in the process we make enemies of one another, forgetting that we are one people, one body, freed from slavery to serving ourselves, freed to love and live and good neighbors.

Is this our God? An angry God? A jealous God? God whose wrath burns hot and can't handle us worshipping anything other than the true God of the universe? What will God do as we eat ourselves alive with fear and hatred, destroy the creation and sacrifice our children on the various altars we've setup for ourselves?

Moses seems to recognize that God's vengeance won't make the Lord look very good in the eyes of their enemies, the Egyptians, or other nations. So he speaks up on behalf of the people. He pleads for the lives of the people, his brother and sister, and the rest of them. He prays. He reminds God of the promise. God remembers.

Moses prays, "God, these are *Your people* - they have always been yours" - remember?" And God chooses to relent. The Lord had a change of mind.

Soren Kierkegaard wrote that, "Prayer does not change God, but it changes [the one] who prays." I know that my prayers for my favorite football team have not done them much good this year. I've seen people sitting at slot machines in the casinos praying. Does that work? As we enter our 174th day without rain, many are praying for some precipitation. I don't know that we expect the rain to fall the second we say Amen, but that the words we offer in prayer to God, help us change our minds. When we feel out of control, angry, out of touch, and out of options, we can always find ourselves centered in the grace and love of a merciful God, who continues to call us back, even when we've forgotten who we are.

From the garden, through the flood, into Egypt and out again, God keeps the promise of life and salvation. Even when we turn away and worship other things, even when we fail to live up to the standard of do to others, as you would have them do to you - God relents from bringing destruction. God returns to us again and again, and

remembers the promise by sending the lamb of God, the Son Jesus, who pleads for forgiveness even for the ones who hung Him on a tree. Jesus intercedes for us - prays on our behalf, that God would have a change of mind. Jesus prays that His Father would remember the promise and be graceful, even though we the people do not deserve it. And the Lord still sends the Holy Spirit to us, to form us and shape us for service, for love, and for deeper relationships with those most in need, and with one another, that we would be welcomed into a new kind of kingdom, and into the promised home of heaven.

Even though we might be afraid we pray. Even when we are unsure of the future, we pray. Even in the times when we cannot see God, or gather around the table together, we pray together. Even when we disagree, and disappoint each other, and are divided, we pray to be reminded that we are one in Christ Jesus forever.

In prayer, we acknowledge that God is our loving creator, who sustains us through the Spirit, who redeems us and the creation itself through the cross of Christ. This makes us more aware of our place in the order of created things. It brings perspective, peace, and mindfulness. As we pray for our nation, our elected representatives, our loved ones, for neighbors we know who are sick, hungry, or without clothing and shelter, can we expect that God will not work in us to come to their aid? Prayer changes the world by changing us.

Let us pray and remember. Let us relent from destroying each other. Let us change our minds and our hearts, to love and serve God and our neighbors. Amen.