

Called to Worship

Exodus 32:1-14
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First Presbyterian Church
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St. Augustine once defined idolatry as “worshiping anything that ought to be used, or using anything that ought to be worshiped.” To this day, it’s still one of the best definitions around. It’s a question of getting our priorities straight.

A thousand years after Augustine, John Calvin called the human race “a perpetual factory of idols,” and he wasn’t referring to golden statues. It’s generally things that are good in and of themselves that become our idols. Idolatry is a tricky thing.

And, as we see in our Old Testament lesson today, idolatry is a matter of life and death. When it comes to our relationship with God and our wellbeing in this world, idolatry turns your whole life upside down and backwards.

The story of the Israelites making a golden calf to worship and trust in place of God shows us the danger of getting our priorities out of whack, and it gives us insight into how we can overcome the lure of idolatry.

We all are subject to idolatry, to putting people or things or ideas ahead of God. And we do that in much the same way as the Israelites. The Israelites found themselves feeling lost and lonely, and they didn’t know where to turn.

As Exodus says, “... The people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain” where he went to meet with God. And so they said to his brother, Aaron, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” Not only did they give up on Moses, but they gave up on God. It’s as if they forgot about God defeating the Egyptians and delivering them from slavery, leading them day and night with a pillar of cloud and fire.

I mean, they actually refer to Moses as “the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt,” when clearly it was God working through Moses, and even apart from Moses, when God performed miracle after miracle right before their eyes, sending plagues upon the Egyptians.

In asking Aaron to make gods “to go before” them, the Israelites were seeking for guidance and protection from something other than God. When you feel lost and lonely, where do you turn for guidance and protection? We know we should turn to God, but too often we turn to things of our own making.

It's not easy to be in an uncomfortable place in life and hold out hope in God as the only way to get you through. Oh, ultimately, we may believe that. But in the midst of the pain and loss, the uneasiness and anxiety of life, we turn to distractions, or we take control and go it alone, white knuckle it, or we fall back into things we've done in the past, even though they didn't work then and aren't going to work now.

Of course there are the classic false gods that people rely on – drugs, alcohol, caffeine, work, TV, and the like. But there are also more socially accepted addictions like success, wealth, power, and material possessions. If you're using any of these things to get you through the day, beware of the effect on your life. Be careful that you're not putting such things ahead of your faith and trust in the Lord.

Looking at what happened to the Israelites, we come to know that we can trust in the Lord. We see this where the Lord says to Moses, "Go down as once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely," worshiping and relying on false gods to overcome their fears.

Notice that it's God who makes the first move here, in speaking to Moses. God could have remained silent. Then where would we be? But instead, God reaches out to the Israelites, his wayward children; God reaches out to us. Israel had given up on God, but God was not going to give up on Israel; God never gives up on us.

Have you ever had a time when you felt God reaching out to you just when you needed him most? What was that like? Sometimes we get words of encouragement just when we need them. Other times, what we hear and feel is not so reassuring. Sometimes the message is more like what God said to the Israelites, laying it on the line when it came to the bad choices they were making.

Talking to Moses, God calls the Israelites "your people" instead of his people, and then God throws their own words back at them, when they made for themselves a golden calf and said to themselves, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

God is saying, look people, you're either following Aaron and worshiping these false gods or you follow me and worship the one true God. The choice is clear for them, and the choice is clear for us, as well – turn to God or go it alone. God then turns up the heat, calling them a "stiff-necked" people – stubborn – and saying to Moses, "... Let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them, and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation."

We all know we sometimes turn from God, but have you ever felt that God has turned away from you, or that God is not really concerned about you, your welfare?

If so, that might be a time to check yourself. Are you being stubborn, stuck in your ways, set on the choices you've made, or are you willing to look at what God might want for you?

When we find ourselves lost and lonely or, worse yet, lost and stubborn, that's when we need to ask ourselves, have we lost sight of God, have we allowed something or someone to get in between us and the Lord?

If so, that's when we need to find our way back. And often, that takes help from those around us. Whether we come right out with it and ask for help, or simply hold our need loosely as an ongoing prayer for deliverance, God will reach out to us, God will bring us back to him.

We see this when Moses speaks on behalf of the Israelites, saying, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?" Moses assures the Lord that he knows who his God is, and that he knows who the people of Israel are – they are God's people. And Moses knows that it is God who is in control, God who is to be trusted and followed.

Finally, Moses appeals to the faithfulness of God, pointing to the covenant that God made with Abraham, Isaac and Israel. "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel," says Moses, "how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'"

We can be thankful that God does remember us. And that when we forget who we truly are and whose we are, God reaches out to show us our misguided ways, reminding us of his love for us and guiding us back to him. There is only one being in heaven and on earth powerful and faithful enough to always be there for us, for you.

So if you ever feel lost and lonely, or worse yet, lost and stubborn, stop to look and see where and how God is reaching out to you. And then place your trust in God and follow the Lord in the spirit of faith and perseverance, discipline and self-examination, courage and truthfulness. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, your grace is a mystery that is incomprehensible to us. It draws us to you, inviting us into your presence. It allows us to experience your delight in us, and helps us to trust your love which we do not deserve.

It's only by your grace that we dare to hope for eternal life with you, and heaven on earth as it is above.

Thank you for this vast mystery. Thank you for grace that amazes, convicts, invites and consoles.

We ask your blessing upon those suffering from illness and disease, especially those we've been keeping in our hearts and prayers. And for all those who are grieving, we pray for your comfort and sense of peace, even amid the hardest times imaginable.

Help us to be mindful of all your blessings, O Lord, and to let our lives sing out as our grateful response for your extravagant gift of love, care, compassion, and provision. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, who is and was and forever shall be, and who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.