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Moses & His People & Their God IX. A Golden Calf & An Angry God

(Exodus 32:1-13 NRSV) When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "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." 2 Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." 3 So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. 4 He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" 5 When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD." 6 They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel. 7 The LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; 8 they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" 9 The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. 10 Now 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." 11 But Moses implored the LORD his God, and said, "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? 12 Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. 13 Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, 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.'"

As we come near the end of our time with the Hebrew people's escape from Egypt and their contentious and complaining way towards the promised land, it's been quite a ride, hasn't it? We have seen them enslaved in Egypt, their very existence threatened by Pharaoh's harsh treatment and his edict that all the boy babies should be

killed. We have seen God raise Moses up and how he finally convinced Pharaoh to let the Hebrew people go. We have seen them step out in faith to do so. But we have also seen them grouse and grumble and still the grace of God fed them every single day. We have seen them camped on a dry and desiccated spot and God's grace shows Moses how to give them water. We have seen them swear to Moses and to God that they will always obey God and do what God asks.

Except, they didn't. In today's story, Moses has gone up to the top of Mt. Sinai to receive the final instructions, the final Words, the final commandments from God that God will be giving the people as a way to shape and form and protect them. Forty days Moses is on that mountain, being tutored by God and in his absence, things just go to pot. The people decide that they need a different God, and they make an idol, a Golden Calf, and they begin to worship it. And God is angry – angry enough, it seems, to want to simply walk away from this people, leaving them to their own penchant for self-destruction. What do we do with this rather distressing, disturbing, dour story? What can we learn from it? Well, although we could probably spend a month on just this story, let me suggest three things that I think we can learn from this encounter and this story, three things that are important for our lives and the life of our church.

First, finger-pointing gets us nowhere. There is a darkly humorous detail to this story that shows this. Did you notice how the conversation between God and Moses went. God has the first word; and says to Moses: *“Go down at once! **Your people... have acted perversely.**”* To which Moses responds: *“O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against **your people**, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt...?”* They're *your* people. No, they're **your** people. No, no, no – they're **YOUR** people. I am reminded of those times when Barbara and I had four small children at home and I

would wait until she walked in at the end of a long day and then – and I’m not terribly proud of this, mind you – would ambush her with: “*Just wait until you hear what **YOUR** son did today!*” Of course, if it was something wonderful – like a school achievement or an honor or award – my greeting went differently: “Guess what **OUR** daughter did today?” While it may be amusing in retrospect, what is clear is that such verbal games, such finger-pointing, never advance things at all and never make things any better. Even in our scripture today, things don’t move forward until both Moses and God give up their apparent oneups-manship and gaminess of the “your people – no, YOUR people” stuff. So, lesson one: **finger-pointing gets us nowhere.**

Second, **when you leap to a conclusion you often fall down.** There are times that we admire folks who make what we might call leaps of faith. On the night of Dr. Martin Luther King’s assassination, Senator Bobby Kennedy climbed up on a pickup truck at a rally in Indianapolis and told the crowd the news, most of whom – in that pre-cell phone era – had not yet heard, of the killing. Some of Kennedy’s advisors told him not to do that, to cancel his rally, that they feared for his safety. But Kennedy did not do that; his was the leap of faith that the folks to whom he was speaking as a fellow grieving and angry brother in Christ would likewise respond as brothers and sisters in Christ. And they did. Amidst poignant expressions of grief, Bobby Kennedy and those folks in Indianapolis that night shared a leap of faith that this was not the end, that further violence was not the answer and that in God’s good time justice and hope would prevail. And, almost alone among large American cities, there were virtually no riots in Indianapolis that week. Sometimes leaps of faith are what are morally required of us.

But sometimes leaps of faith are foolish and even sad and heart-wrenching. The Hebrew people, waiting there in the valley at the foot of Mt. Sinai, made one of **those**

sorts of leaps – and they fell down. You see, Moses had been gone for 40 days. And so they leaped to the conclusion that he must be dead and then made the further leap that they must somehow therefore fashion their own “god.” The scripture says that the people thought Moses was too “delayed,” and when that idea took hold it took on a life of its own and a leap of its own – he must therefore be dead.¹ And once you’ve started leaping about with no evidence, it’s easier to make even more leaps and lunges that take you further and further from where you should be and set you up for a tremendous fall. As a young child, I had a strong streak of insecurity and even a fear about being abandoned. There was absolutely nothing rational about it; my parents were wonderful and had never been abandoned. Ever. (Even though there are days they may have wanted to!) In the second and third grades, I took Saturday morning astronomy classes at the local children’s museum. Those classes were over at noon. My father would often take me to the classes and then spend a couple of hours at his office nearby. If he was 10 minutes late in picking me up, I began to worry, convinced that something terrible had happened. If he was 15 minutes late, I was beside myself and would be imagining all sorts of dire things and wondering who I would go to live with if he and my mother were dead – as must be the case since he was now a quarter of an hour late. And on the occasion he was twenty minutes late because of a traffic foul up, the museum director had to restrain me from calling the police. Leaping with too little evidence can get your in trouble. **When you leap to a conclusion, you often fall down.**

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One Jewish commentator on this passage writes: “... in difficult situations, our inclination may lean toward extreme action. We must harness our emotions and attempt to remain objective when we find ourselves in these positions. We must ask ourselves: What have we seen and what is only fear; did Moses really die on Mt. Sinai, or was it simply a miscalculation?” Avi Wagner on the website “Torah from Dixie” <http://www.tfdixie.com/parshat/kitissa/015.htm>

Third, no matter how tempting, **when we go back to what didn't work before it's probably not going to work again.** Having made the unreasonable and unjustified leap to Moses' being dead, the Hebrews then made the further leap to fashioning that Golden Calf and declaring it to be their God. Now, I've always wondered: why a golden calf? Not to be irreverent, but why not a Golden Lobster, or a Golden Dog, or a Golden Cat? Biblical scholars aren't utterly sure, but the best answer is twofold: first, in Egypt, the cow was worshiped as a sign of fertility and the bull was worshiped as the god of war. Now, maybe I can understand the fertility part. They Hebrews are wandering through a land that make the deserts of southwest Colorado look like a lush swamp. There is little that grows there, little that is alive – compared to the shores of the fertile Nile River – and what there is mostly dangerous – snakes and scorpions and poisonous plants. That calf, therefore, probably represents in part a longing for life, and fear that life may be over in the dry, hostile, quite un-fertile desert.

But what about the calf as a sign of the **bull**? Well, in Egyptian life, the bull stood for power and might; it was meant to occasion fear. If you've ever stood along the other sign of the fence from an angry bull you appreciate both the power of that symbol – and you appreciate the fence! But, remember, it was those very traits of Egyptian life, those very things about Pharaoh's brutal rule, that had nearly killed them as a people. One of my seminary professors, in a commentary on this passage, wrote *"...One of the 'ironies of Exodus' that the people turn and worship the very sort of image of power as that which had enslaved them in Egypt."*² But that didn't work before, and it won't work now. One of the questions that you often hear concerning the Exodus is *"Why did it take the Hebrew 40 years to go from Egypt to the Promised Land?"* If you

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J. Gerald Janzen, quoted at <http://hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au/WebOTcomments/OrdinaryA/Pentecost22.html>

look on a map, you will see that it's only a few hundred miles, straight line, at most, and even if you crawled, you could do it in far less than 40 years!

Well, one of the reasons, I think, is that it takes time to get rid of the habits of thinking and acting that have enslaved us. When you are enslaved by something, you begin to think like a slave. Your slavery defines you. Maybe for you it's a trait that has always hurt your relationships but which you think is something that you'll never overcome. For someone else, maybe it's an addiction of some sort, and that addiction drains away any sense of self-worth. Or, maybe it's a way of thinking about the world that you can't seem to help, but which makes your life more full of sadness than it needs to be. Anyone who has successfully escaped from and overcome something which has enslaved them will tell you that it takes a long time, it takes, so to speak, a long time in the wilderness to truly renounce, truly escape what has been holding you captive, to truly change the way you think. But that doesn't happen overnight, does it? Neither could it happen overnight for the Hebrew people. Those years that they spent in the wilderness were hard. But they also finally cleansed them of those voices from Egypt that they had in fact internalized that had told them they were nothing more than slaves. Moses' and God's anger burned hot at them because both of them knew that that Golden Calf represented a huge step backward – backward towards being possessed again by what had been hurting them, a turning away from the possibility of truly being free from seeing themselves as nothing and instead seeing themselves as beloved children of God. Being enslaved – both bodily and mentally – was such a loss before. It didn't work before; it was killing them. So God and Moses were angry, indeed, because they knew that **when we go back to what didn't work before it's probably not going to work again!**

How do these lessons speak to your life? Are there places where you feel stuck in your life, or in a relationship? Are there times when you feel like instead of moving forward, instead of living up ever more fully to where God is calling you, that you are stymied, that old ways that may or may not have once worked but definitely are not working now, or that you are leaping but you don't know whether it's leaps of faith or just lurching around? How about in the life of our own beloved congregation? Our town hall meeting last week was an opportunity for us to look both hard and lovingly at the places where we might be threatening to get stuck, of habits and expectations that may have once worked but which don't fit life and church in 2011. It was an opportunity for us all to think well and hard together about concrete actions and risks that we might take to respond to the vision that we have identified. Those of you who weren't able to be there will be receiving early this week, either by email or postal mail, the materials that were shared at the Town Hall meeting. You too will have your opportunity to read, discern, pray, and offer your best thoughts about how we move forward together.

And what I do know, as all of us take that exciting journey together, is that those habits and lessons we can learn from today's scripture will also serve us well in the coming months and years, won't they? That **finger-pointing never gets us anywhere good**, that **when we leap to a conclusion we often fall smack dab on our faces**, and that **when we go back to what didn't work before it's probably not going to work again!** And so, my friends, whether in our own lives or in our church, let us resolve to put our waggy-fingers back in their holster, let us be loathe to leap to conclusions that do not presume the best about one another, and let us face forward, honoring our past, but feet firmly planted to the new things that God is yet calling and equipping and luring us to do in this place, for God's mission. Shall we?