

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | SEPTEMBER 11, 2022

EXODUS 32:7-14 | PSALM 51:1-10 | 1 TIMOTHY 1:12-17 | LUKE 15:1-10

Earlier this summer, we heard the famous story of Abraham's argument with God about whether the city of Sodom should be destroyed. Will you destroy the city if it has fifty good people? Five good people? What if it just has a good coffee shop?

Today's reading from Exodus is similar in many ways, it's about an argument with God, but it turns the focus. Abraham's argument was about how God should act with other people. But today Moses's argument is about how God should act with and deal with us.

At issue is the golden calf, but it's really about something more than that. This story begins when Moses leaves the Israelite camp to go talk with God on Sinai. The Israelites have just made a covenant with God, and now Moses needs to leave to get some more details. And Moses is gone for a while. Forty days and forty nights, which is a way of saying, a long time.

The Israelites are left in the camp by themselves. Moses is gone. God appears to be absent, too. There's nothing there. Just silence.

Silence can be a gift. Kierkegaard once wrote that because humans can speak, silence is an art.¹ We all know the silence that feels like a work of art. The silence you hear on a warm summer night when the day's work is done. The rests between the notes that stretches out ponderously. The moment right after we celebrate the Eucharist when you just want to take it all in for a moment.

But this is a different kind of silence. It's the silence not of rest or anticipation but of absence. We know about that kind of silence, too. You ask how the surgery went, and there's a long pause on the other end of the line. You have an extra chair at Christmas this year. You pray and pray all night, and all you hear is the terrible silence of God.

That's the condition these Israelites find themselves in. The Israelites build the golden calf not because they like calves or they have extra gold lying around, but because they are terrified by the prospect of being alone. Of not having a god they can keep grab at a moment's notice. Sure, this golden calf isn't the God of our ancestors who brought us out of slavery in Egypt, but at least it's *something*.

To state the obvious, this is a breach of the covenant. The Israelites just built an idol and bowed down before it when God explicitly asked them not to, like, two chapters ago. But the fundamental issue is less about the calf than it is about the silence. God's people believe that because God is silent, God must be absent. The struggle of the Israelites is less about deciding whether they should build an idol or not than it is about learning to trust a God whose presence, action, and purpose are not always immediately and tangibly present in ways they expect.

And we know something of that, too. That when we find ourselves feeling alone, when the silence becomes too much to bear, when God feels absent, we try to fill the void with something. Status. Money. Praise. Credentials. Reassurance. Sure, maybe it's not the

¹ Soren Kierkegaard, *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air: Three Godly Discourses* (Princeton University Press, 2018), 16.

resurrection and the life. *But at least it's something.* No one builds a golden calf because they think it's better than God. You build a golden calf because it's difficult to stand the silence.

But this story isn't all silence. There is a conversation, an argument, happening up the mountain. God is, understandably, upset. "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. 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." Since the Israelites can't keep up their end of the covenant, God's plan is to get rid of them and start over. The Israelites make golden calves. They give Moses a hard time when he's trying his best. They're always talking about wanting to go back to Egypt. And most of all, they are stiff-necked, which is the Hebrew Bible's way of saying that they complain constantly. These people are not fit covenant partners for God. God may have created the heavens and the earth, but the best he could do is these people?

Moses, on the other hand, is pretty good. Trustworthy. Capable. Diligent. Good mountain climber. So God decides that we're going to restart the whole covenant thing and just do it with Moses.

And Moses says, "No way." Moses gets offered an incredible life of divine favor, the patriarch of God's new chosen people, and he turns it down because—here's the important part—it wouldn't reflect God's character. "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."

If God is simply going to start over with a new group of people every time they don't trust God properly, then God is basically just going to be like every other god the ancient near east. Even Pharaoh and the Egyptians will think God is a bit harsh. No, Moses says, "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self." If you start over now, you'll be backtracking on all your promises to our ancestors.

So what does God do? "The LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people." God continues to be faithful to people who find it difficult to be faithful in return. The mark of God's character is not that the people who worship God behave perfectly all the time. The mark of God's character is that God will continue to be with them even when they get it wrong.

Sometimes people get hung up on the fact that this story is about changing God's mind. Isn't God supposed to be changeless? But the point isn't that God never changes in theory. It's that God remains devoted to us. That no matter how many times we turn back into our old ways of being, our ways of self-sufficiency and nativism, our ways of prejudice and indifference. The invitation to new life is always here at font, word, and table.

Even when the silence becomes difficult to bear, even when we try out another golden calf, even when we think God should have been back by now, God remains devoted to us. Not because of who we are. But because of who God is.

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