

The Golden Calf

Exodus 32:1-35 by Patty Friesen (May 28/17)

Exodus 32 is called The Drama of the Golden Calf, but actually the calf plays a small role as lead character and has no speaking parts! The calf is merely a vehicle to tell a larger story about God, describing the jealousy and mercy of God. God has just told the people, “I am the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, therefore you shall have no other gods before me.” But that quick, they have forgotten the God who bore them as an eagle, and have chosen a calf, a typical Middle Eastern deity and will pay homage to the calf instead of the eagle.

“When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said, ‘Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us into the promised land; 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.’” Aaron tells them to bring their gold earrings and he fashions the calf with them but in telling Moses about it later, Aaron says he merely threw the gold into the fire and out came the calf. If that wasn’t bad enough, Aaron also builds an altar to the calf and declares a festival for it.

Up on Mount Sinai where God is giving the Ten Commandments to Moses, God sees what is going on below and tells Moses, “Go down at once. Your people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt have acted perversely.” Even God has turned from saying, “Let My People Go” – to speaking about the people as if they only belonged to Moses. The people have refused to acknowledge God as their God so God refuses to acknowledge them.

God says, "Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them." Moses quickly implores God with three reminders: #1 - Why destroy these people whom you worked so hard to bring out of the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? #2 – What will the Egyptians say? They will say you only saved them to destroy them – what kind of God does that? #3 – Remember Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and how you swore to them by your own self that you would multiply their descendants and give them a place to live? God can be reasoned with and in verse 14 God changed God's mind and did not destroy the people as planned. Verse 14 is the turning point of the whole golden calf story and throughout the Old Testament we will have such turning points where God changes God's mind from destruction towards mercy.

Moses goes down the mountain, carrying the Ten Commandments lovingly engraved on both sides of the stones. This covenant has been lovingly initiated and written out by God and was broken even as it was being written. As soon as Moses saw the golden calf, he threw the commandments and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the golden calf, melted it down, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it. Moses is a hot-head like God and his action of making the people drink the golden calf parallels a law in Leviticus about someone accused of adultery. The one accused had to declare their innocence over water and drink it. If they were guilty, the water would make them sick. Moses is giving them the lie detector test and the people are guilty of adultery against God and in verse 35, they become sick as a result of it.

God hasn't destroyed them but God doesn't know what to do with them either. 33:5, "You are a stiff-necked people, if for a single moment I should go up among you, I

would consume you. So now take off your party clothes and I will decide what to do with you.” It’s that tough probation where you’ve been caught doing a bad thing but you’re not sure what the consequence is going to be yet. It’s that tense, anxious time when Mom would say, “Just wait until your dad gets home.” And so Israel has to wait, anxiously twisting their unadorned hair and everyday work clothes.

Chapter 33 is the waiting chapter. Israel is waiting to see what God will do and God is waiting to see what God will do. God tells Moses later in chapter 34:14, I was so jealous for the people. My name must be Jealous. It is like God is just figuring out the passion God feels for this people and has felt the emotion of jealous so strongly that God even names God’s self Jealousy. God has been deeply wounded by Israel’s unfaithfulness. God is capable of hot anger and jealousy but God’s mind can be changed.

In one chapter of waiting, we see God moving from “I’m not going with you into the promised land” to “OK, I’ll come along but I won’t clear the guilty – they will pay to the third and fourth generations,” to “OK, I won’t punish the third and fourth generations, only the first golden calf generation will not enter the promised land but even in the wilderness I will care for them.” We have the great proclamation of a God who has evolved in self definition and identity saying in 34:6, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.”

From the frenzy of the calf party and broken tablets, Exodus 33 is very quiet with Moses quietly going into the tabernacle to speak to God face to face and gently advocate for the people. Moses speaks tenderly with God saying, “If I have found favour in your

eyes, show me your ways so that I may know you and so that your people who are your people may know you.” God says, “OK I will do what you have asked for you have found favour in my eyes and I know your name.” This is a pivotal chapter in the whole Bible – that God changes God’s mind and very character based on relationship with a trusted human. Trusted relationships change us. Who is this Moses whose face-to-face relationship can even change God?

We’ve been with Moses long enough now to know that he is a man of monumental and sometimes problematic passions. We first know Moses through his intense compassion and rage in killing the Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave. Even in maturity, Moses never fully governs his temper. He offends God in the wilderness by taking too much personal credit for bringing forth water from the rock and is denied entry into the Promised Land for blowing up at God.

In the words of Ellen Davis, Old Testament professor at Duke Divinity School, “I wonder if it was not Moses’s very passion that drew God to him in the first place. God seems often to take a fancy to people whose emotions are not quite under control – people who have some crazy gleam in their eye and their feet slightly off the ground. God seems always to have an eye open for the place where the lid is not screwed all the way down – where there is a small opening into our hearts.” (Preaching the Luminous p. 40)

Without passion, we cannot come to God. Yet passion alone will never direct our hearts surely, for they are willful and balky beats. And so Moses’s passion needs to be disciplined, trained to go the way that leads to God. Rabbinic legend has it that it was for the sake of Moses’s own discipline that he spent those forty days and forty nights on the

mountain with God. The one who received God's word on behalf of Israel needed first to receive it into his own heart. So all day long he listened to Go God and by night he wrote down what he had learned in order that he might teach those who waited below.

After 40 days and nights on the mountain with God, Moses comes down with a new covenant, the second set of commandments and the second chance with Israel in which we see the fruit of his refined passion. We see it in his patience, for Moses does not keep his anger forever. Like God, Moses is able to set aside his anger of the golden calf, to forgive and work again to draw this people into obedience to the one living God. This is surely the greatest challenge of his leadership: to wean Israel from an idolatrous obsession with their own passions and enable them to trust God. If they are able to hear God at all, perhaps it is because Moses teaches them to accept their terrible failures of the past and still try to love and obey God. (Ellen Davis p.42)

Moses is a man for our time – who despite his rash words and hot temper learns humility and patience and restraint and forgiveness.

Let us pray: “Our God who is merciful and gracious, thank you for your steadfast love and faithfulness to us when we blow it. Thank you for your patience and forgiveness with us, and giving us second chances, time and time again. Amen”