

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the true object of our worship, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

I can't resist starting with a question: who really brought Israel up, out of Egypt and whose people are they anyway? The people began by saying, "Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt". Then they changed their mind, saying the golden calf was their god who brought them up out of the land of Egypt. Then, speaking to Moses, the LORD referred to Israel as "your people, which you brought out of the land of Egypt. Moses replied to God in prayer that it was your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand. I find this aspect of the story so comical. I mean, the people of Israel, Moses, and even the Lord God all want to disown each other when things aren't as they want them to be and they claim each other only when it suits them to do so. I'm not certain there's any great theological insights to be gained from this observation, but it made me smile and I thought you might smile too. Can you imagine the tone in God's voice to Moses as he says they're your people...??? I remember so many times saying to PJ guess what **your** son has done now! Other times like when he got a big hit in the baseball game, I was the first one to say "That's my boy!

The sarcasm runs deep in this story about a people's disloyalty and betrayal of their God. I think it was intended to make us smile. It was intended to soften

the blow of the deadly serious issue caused by the people's desire to put their faith and trust in a created object rather than the faithfulness of a loving God. The Golden Calf is much more than a slap in the face to God. I mean when you put this story into the context of the entire Exodus story you can see how disappointing this must have been for God. This should have been a triumphant moment where a thankful people worshipped the living God who had just freed them from slavery. Instead, they can't wait to set up an idol as the object of their worship. Walking away from Pharaoh's chariots and armies on dry land and watching as those chariots and all of Pharaoh's armies utterly destroyed was still fresh in their minds when they begged Aaron to make a graven image for their worship. Instead of giving their worship to this living God who loved them, who had saved them from their suffering, they ask for and bend their knees to a molded piece of metal.

The truth is, all they were really asking for was a visual aid. Ever since they left Egypt, they had something they could look at and point to and say, "There is our God." Remember God's messenger, or angel of God, led them through the wilderness by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. So, now they're camped out, at the foot of Mt Sinai, and Moses heads up to speak to the Lord. In the story just before what we read today the Bible says the entire glory of the Lord settled over the top of Mt Sinai as a cloud. The pillar of cloud and fire have rested atop the mountain, their leader, Moses had gone up into that cloud, and the people were

left without a visible, tangible God. They simply wanted Aaron to fashion something that looked like the messenger or Angel that had been leading them along throughout their wilderness journey. The Bible doesn't come right out and say this, but it seems to me that's exactly what they're asking for when they say, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us." They want a replacement for the pillars of cloud and fire who had been going before them on their wilderness hike. All they were looking for was something they could look at and believe in. The problem is they placed the object on the same level as the Lord God.

This whole scene is a kind of anticlimax to the larger Exodus story. God had carried Israel out of slavery in Egypt with many miracles and mighty acts. He gathered them together at His Holy Mountain. All of this had one singular purpose, so they would be free to worship the living Lord God right there on his mountain, while all the rest of the world looked on in order that all the nations of the world could come to know the one true living god. So, with all the nations of the world watching, these very chosen people, handpicked by God for this very purpose, panic and bow to a cheap imitation made out of someone else's costume jewelry. How frustrating and embarrassing for God! Is there any wonder he changes from calling them his people to **those people**?

This Golden Calf story is repeated in our lives today. God has brought each one of us, out of slavery to sin, through the miraculous provisions of our two Holy

Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. He gathers us together today at this Holy place of worship. Yes, the ground you walked on to get to your seats, either here in the sanctuary or in your sanctuary at home, are all this ground is consecrated Holy Ground because we gather together to worship the one true and living God. And God still has one singular purpose in mind for us. God's purpose is still for us to worship Him unashamedly before the eyes of the watching world, so that all people and nations can come to know the one true living God at work in our midst. Unfortunately, we're still molding God after our own sinful image. Imagine the deep disappointment felt by the Lord when we offer up our weak excuses for failing to honor the God who has given us everything...

Martin Luther said anything that comes between you and the Lord God is your idol. As I pondered Luther's statement again this week in the context of this story, where the people fashioned an idol to replace the twin pillars of cloud and fire, I wondered what the god of our favorite temptations might look like... I imagined the god of gossip to look like a gigantic ear with a jabbering mouth coming out of the ear canal! No doubt it would be made of pure gold!

Before we condemn these stiff-necked people from long ago, let's not excuse ourselves so easily. Some of my favorite excuses for bowing to false gods go like this: My friends influenced me to do it. Everyone else is doing it... Or, I prayed and prayed, but God didn't answer me. I had to do something... Or, the

pressure was too great. I couldn't help it! All our excuses for why we turned to something other than God as the foundation for our faith and trust seem to center on the fact that we can't seem to take responsibility for our own actions. I know I'm impatient, so I take action based on my best judgment. Who can fault someone for that? When we can't hear or see God for some time, the natural thing to do is take matters into our own hands. We build our own idols and we try to shape God into our image rather than trusting the God who created us in God's image and gave us, well, everything... God sees our actions of placing created objects between ourselves and God and it grieves God. We too, do it with the whole world watching... And just like that... We're right there with the Israelites, a frustrating, embarrassing, disappointment to God. That's our common human predicament.

How can we be saved? The Israelites had a crafty and insightful advocate by the name of Moses. Moses used every argument at his command to change God's mind about the punishment for the people's betrayal. He even used God's own words against Him by reminding God the nations of the world were watching. What would they say if God destroyed the very people God had rescued? Moses was successful in getting God to repent of his intentions to consume these wretched people. Who can convince God not to give us what we rightfully deserve for our own betrayal? Every confirmation student should be able to answer that

question! It's our Lord Jesus Christ, of course. Jesus, God in human form, came here from heaven to live that perfect life, keeping all the commandments, including the 1<sup>st</sup> one by having no other gods. Thanks to Jesus who was obedient to the perfect will of God, even though it led to his death on the cross, we have someone who sits at God's right hand. Jesus is the one who not only lived the life we cannot, He also has the ear of the Father and constantly reminds God as He whispers into God's ear, how much He loves you.

Jesus has one more gift for us. Not only did His life, death, and resurrection set us free from our bondage to sin, not only does he continually lobby the Father on our behalf, He also sent us His very own Holy Spirit to live in us as our pillar of cloud and fire. The Holy Spirit, living in you, reminds you who your God really is and continues to make you a pure and righteous soul despite all our sin and our tendency to create false gods.

May this story of the Golden Calf remind us all of God's great capacity to forgive, even the most heinous of sins. May the Holy Spirit lead and guide you as plainly and as clearly as the pillars of cloud and fire led the Israelites through the wilderness. May God's mind be changed and our witness to God's greatness never be sullied by our disobedience. May our worship and acts of service be a powerful witness to the nations, so they can come to know the one true, living God. Amen.