

Imago Dei, Part 6: The Golden Calf
by Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.
Countryside Community Church (UCC)
February 12, 2017

Scripture: Exodus 32:1-18

Have you ever sought God's guidance only to be answered with silence: day after day, week after week, try as you might, your prayers just seem to be taken up into a great Void without the slightest indication of a response?

Or have you ever felt called strongly in a certain direction but then inexplicably found yourself stymied: just spinning your wheels, or even moving backwards, even though you had felt sure that God, the Universe, and your Magic 8 Ball, were all giving you a clear signal to move full steam ahead?

If your answer is "Yes" to either of these questions, with or without the Magic 8 Ball, then the story of Israel and the Golden Calf may have special relevance for you.

As we've been observing throughout this series, many stories in the Bible were never intended to tell us exactly what happened at a certain point in time, at a particular location long ago, but to tell us what *keeps* happening, over and over, on up to the present day. Even biblical stories that *do* have a strong historical basis often seem to have been chosen more for their timeless qualities than their time-bound ones – qualities that reveal patterns and dynamics in our relationship with God, with each other, and with the earth, that tell us not only what happened but what *is happening*.

The story of Israel and the Golden Calf is just one of these timeless stories that tell us as much or more about "right now" than "back then."

The story starts with a delay. The Israelites are encamped at the base of Mount Sinai in the middle of their wilderness journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. God calls Moses to climb to the top of the mountain to receive further instruction and bring it back to his people. Yet apparently the "word of the Lord" took a lot longer to receive than anyone had anticipated. According to the Book of Exodus, Moses was gone for a full forty days. "Forty days" is the Bible's way of saying, "One heck of a long time."

By the way, can you think of someone else who spent forty days by himself in the wilderness? The parallel is intentional. When we look at the story of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness during Lent, we'll find that Jesus was understood to be a new, greater Moses – and that he, like Israel, was tempted in the wilderness – and proved to be far more faithful. But we get ahead of ourselves ...

With Moses gone, the people grew restless. Days turned into weeks. A month passed. Still no word. And here is where we join Israel's story, and Israel joins ours. God is silent. Israel is stymied – spinning her wheels in the middle of this godforsaken wilderness at a time when she felt God's call so strongly to journey to the land God had promised them in Canaan. A "land flowing with milk and honey" was infinitely more appealing than the desert of stone and sand they were stuck in at the moment.

Can you feel Israel's frustration? How have you responded when you have felt this way?

We know what Israel did, according to the story. Moses finally returned bearing the "word of the Lord" on Day 40, but on Day 39, Israel decided that they had had enough of waiting and decided to take matters into their own hands. Or rather, they decided to entrust themselves to another god. How could they have known Moses would return the very next day?

The Golden Calf was an image of a well-known god in the ancient Near East. It was a representation of the Canaanite god, Baal. As both the high god of the Canaanite pantheon and a fertility god, surely Baal would know the way to the Promised Land and could probably supply them with some bountiful food on the way there.

So Israel took up a pricey collection, donating every scrap of gold they could come up with to melt down and fashion into a representation of Baal in order to worship their new god. "Surely, our worries and frustrations are over," they concluded. In fact, their troubles had only just begun!

This story serves as an example of a perennial challenge to our spiritual health and well-being that the Christian tradition calls the sin of Gluttony. Today, people tend to associate Gluttony almost exclusively with overeating. But if Gluttony were merely about overeating, the ancient Christians wouldn't have labeled Gluttony as one of the Seven Deadly Sins. After all, overeating may kill the body but it can't kill the soul. It is Gluttony's effect on the *soul* that concerned the ancients.

In the 13th Century, Thomas Aquinas taught that at the center of Gluttony is the word "too," as in "too soon, too expensively, too much, too eagerly, and making too much fuss" (*praepropere, laute, nimis, ardentem, studiose*). I call these the "terrible too's." This definition of Gluttony suggests that someone who is excessively impatient, or who regularly overspends their bank account and persists on going on spending sprees, or someone who is just excessively persnickety about having their exact needs met, is suffering from Gluttony as much or more than someone who can't stop eating.

For someone who struggles with the “terrible too’s,” the pain they generate both for themselves and often for others is so much greater than the joy they experience when (and if) they finally get what they crave that they are forever living in a spiritual deficit. They continually feel drained, discontent, and inwardly famished. The more they invest themselves in the “terrible too’s,” the less they have ... to the point where something inside simply dies. Tragically, sometimes spiritual death takes the body down with it, as body and soul are connected more deeply than we often realize.

The antidote for Gluttony, according to Christian tradition, is one of the Seven Lively Virtues: Temperance. Temperance is usually associated in our society with abstaining from alcohol, but it is about a lot more than simple abstinence, just as Gluttony is about a lot more than eating too much. Temperance is really about *mindfulness*: being more aware of, and therefore more appreciative of, what you already have. In order to focus on what you already have, you have to stop obsessing about what you might receive in the future. This focus on what you have over what you lack kills the power of Gluttony’s “terrible too’s.”

Back to Israel in the wilderness. What caused all the trouble was not that they wanted something bad or evil. In fact, they wanted something quite good: to live in the land that Yahweh had promised them, toward which Yahweh had been guiding them until this point. Their problem wasn’t wanting a bad thing, but wanting a good thing “too much,” “too eagerly,” to come about “too soon”. In order to get it, they made “too much fuss,” building a monstrosity “too expensively” that they could worship under the assumption that they could get what they wanted a lot more quickly than Yahweh was giving it to them.

Can you find any Golden Calves in our society?

We all want peace. But expensive guns, missiles, fighter planes, and drones make “peace” more quickly than years of diplomacy and humanitarian work, cultural exchanges, work with refugees ... and Tri-Faith Initiatives. So we spend far more time and money on the former set than the latter set.

We all want plentiful jobs and a strong economy. But the economy’s health comes a lot quicker if you disregard the health of our planet, or the health of those who work in those plentiful jobs, or the wages they make. Worshiping a Golden Calf will often get you rich ... in the short run. We can let our grandchildren clean up the mess.

How do we deal with the temptation to worship Golden Calves? Sometimes turning to the Bible isn’t such a bad idea. If you aren’t a biblical literalist, the Bible’s perennial wisdom helps meet perennial challenges with great vision and insight.

In this regard, it's helpful to remind ourselves what was being conceived up on Mt. Sinai that caused Moses to be gone so long while the people grew so restless. What Moses was being given was the Ten Commandments – the most famous set of principles ever conceived or promulgated in human history.

Now, one would think that it wouldn't have taken Moses all that long to receive the Ten Commandments and return with them. What took forty days could have been accomplished in forty minutes, right? It may seem this way until you consider that God does not actually speak with an audible voice, but with a "voice" that can only be received by human intuition. Deciphering intuition takes time and experience – especially when those intuitions involve creating something that is so revolutionary that it has no historical precedent.

What Moses was being given was essentially Version 2.0 of the human operating system. He was being given a set of principles to live by that, while brief, would fundamentally change – and improve – human relations and human spirituality from that time forward. Their brevity is what made the Ten Commandments so powerful and elegant at the same time.

By introducing the Ten Commandments into Israelite society and taking them into the Promised Land, Israel's "calling" was essentially to replace an old operating system with a new, better, justice-oriented one. Canaanite Baal was an icon of a bygone age that was in the process of being replaced – an age that still honored slavery that denigrated entire classes of people, and that celebrated and reinforced political and economic systems that enabled the rich to grow richer at the expense of the poor. (Nice to know we no longer live in such a primitive society, huh?)

The way of Yahweh – and the people of Yahweh – was a fundamental threat to the old system even as following this way was an opportunity to change and bless all people.

So when the Israelites became so impatient with Moses' delay in returning from the heights of Sinai that they turned to Baal to show them the way forward, you can see the problem. Yahweh had not organized Israel's escape from slavery in Egypt and led them across the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land, simply to swap out one group of people for another. Yahweh was replacing one *operating system* for another, as a way of making the world more just and ultimately more inhabitable.

The story shows us that when we get so caught up in the "terrible too's" of Gluttony that we become impatient, we never move to a higher way of living. All we end up doing is reinforcing an old way of life. Then, we complain when the satisfactions of the old operating system don't last.

Will worshipping the Golden Calf of military supremacy lead to lasting peace in our world today, or make the world ultimately more dangerous? Will spewing carbon into our atmosphere lead to stable, long-term economic growth for our country and others, or will our carbon “footprint” become a “boot print” stamping out all possibility of a sustainable future?

These are big questions, with largely unforeseeable outcomes. What is clear is that we can take all this to an up close and personal level. The story of Israel and the Golden Calf invites you and me to consider our own lives, and our own paths, asking, “What do I tend to do when God is silent longer than I think God should be silent? And what do I do when I feel a sense of call to move in a particular direction and feel stymied, like I'm just spinning my wheels? Do I fall prey to the “terrible too's” and take matters into my own hands, or does Temperance allow me the trust necessary for God to show me a better way?

Temperance is so powerful because it reorients our focus from what we don't have to what we have already been given. When we take time to notice and be mindful of what we've been given, our feelings of deprivation transform into an awareness of abundance, which allows us the patience necessary to be content with God working in God's own time rather than on the schedule we would prefer.

If only Israel would have been more focused on the miracle of what they already had as they waited for Moses's return – on their recent liberation from slavery, their dramatically increased sense of community as a people, and their discovery of a God who loved them beyond their wildest imagination. Perhaps they would not have done on Day 39 that which they became ashamed of on Day 40.

If God has been overly silent as you strive to discover your path, or if you feel like you are just spinning your wheels while trying to move along a path that has already been revealed, Israel's story serves as a reminder. Sometimes the surest way to move forward is to look backward – to appreciate what has already been revealed, and what you have already been given – until Day 40 arrives and you discover that the *wonder* was worth the *wait*.