

The Golden Calf

Exodus 32:1-20

How quickly they forgot. Back in chapter 20, the people had heard the voice of God thundering His Ten Commandments from the top of Mount Sinai, and they had trembled at the awesome might of His power. In chapter 24, the people had heard the words of God's law, and they had made solemn promises to obey all of it. They had even taken a blood oath, promising upon pain of death not to worship any other gods, not to make any graven images, and not to do any of the other things that the Ten Commandments forbade them to do.

In fact, at the conclusion of that covenant ceremony, the elders of the people had gone up on Mount Sinai and got at least a glimpse of God's glory as they enjoyed a peaceful meal in the presence of God Himself. In a very real way, if only in a partial way, God's covenant restored the fellowship between God and man which Adam's sin had broken.

Now, it's true that, at the beginning of today's passage, forty days had gone by since that wonderful ceremony had taken place. And during that time, Moses had gone back up on the mountain to receive further instructions from the Lord. And yes, forty days was a long time for him to be gone. But let's face it: Christmas was a little more than forty days ago, and we all still have so many fond memories of our family and church celebrations back then. So how could the elders have forgotten the marvelous vision of God they had seen? How could the people have forgotten the powerful voice of God that had made them tremble?

And, worse yet, since it rarely rains in the desert of the Sinai Peninsula, the blood stains on the twelve pillars – the signs of the blood oath they had taken – were very likely still visible to the people who had promised in such a graphic way to keep all of God's commandments. No, there's just no way the people could plead ignorance or collective amnesia, or even blame the influence of drugs or alcohol. No, they knew exactly what they were doing in today's passage.

In fact, they seem to have intended to break all of them, going down the list as methodically as these pews were turned over last week. First, they asked for Aaron to make gods for them, that's obviously breaking the first commandment. Then, Aaron made a graven image for them, and the people worshipped it – there goes the second commandment.

They broke the third commandment when they gave credit to the golden calf for bringing them up out of Egypt, and when they called their festival of worship to the golden calf a feast of the Lord. For let's face it – there's not a more dramatic way to misuse God's name than to get it mixed up with pagan worship.

And of course they broke the fourth commandment by making up their own sacred times and festivals of worship. And we can only imagine which of the rest of the commandments they broke when, as the Bible explains rather delicately, "They sat down to eat and to drink and rose up to play." You see, many ancient people worshipped bulls as fertility gods, and most of their fertility rituals were, well, not something you want to talk about in church.

But the people's defiance of God was even more shameless than that. After all, on the very morning of their blasphemous festival, they had gone out to gather the miraculous manna God had provided every day for them to eat in the otherwise barren desert. And so when they sat down to eat and drink in the presence of the golden calf, worshipping their false god, they were probably eating the very same manna that the true God had provided for them. They offered up this amazing example of the true God's love for them to a false image they had made for themselves. Oh yes. There's no way they didn't know what they were doing.

How ungrateful. How perverse. And yet how typical. For, no matter how obvious or how subtle, isn't all sin basically like this? Oh, maybe we don't mold our wealth into golden images of cattle. But how much of it do we spend to glorify God or to bless our neighbors? For let's face it: to the extent that we devote our resources to anyone or anything other than God, to the extent that the first priority in our life is anything other than God – well, that's all idolatry is.

And how much thought do we give to how we worship the one true God? No, we probably wouldn't approve if someone brought a molded calf in here and propped it up on the communion table. But how many of us could explain why that's a bad idea? And do we care enough about God's glory to spend the time studying His Word to find out how He wants us to worship Him?

And sure, it was wrong for the people to say that a carved image had brought down the plagues on the Egyptians or parted the Red Sea or sent a pillar of cloud and fire to lead them through the desert. But how often do we give credit for God's guidance to our own reason or experience? How often do we give the credit for our blessings to luck or chance? How often have we looked to technology or learning to explain away God's miracles of healing, miracles for which we have earnestly prayed?

And if the people were wrong to make up their own religious festivals, do we do a better job of keeping the one festival that we know good and well that God wants us to keep – the weekly Sabbath? Do we ever even think about whether our Sabbath activities honor God or draw us closer to Him or His people?

No, if we are honest with ourselves, we will confess that most of the time we are just as selfish, just as thoughtless, just as focused on this world and what we can get out of it as those shameless idolaters were in today's passage. But perhaps the most stunning similarity between those Old Testament worshippers of the golden calf and we modern worshippers of, well, everything except God, is this: we all imagine that somehow, some way, we will be able to sin against God with impunity.

Think about it. The people obviously knew that what they were doing was wrong. They knew it was totally opposed to what God Himself had specifically told them to do. And yet there they were, breaking every single one of God's commandments right at the bottom of the same mountain where God had revealed Himself to them in all His power and might. Could they possibly have imagined that the God Who had led them out of Egypt suddenly couldn't see them? Did they really think God didn't know what they were up to?

No, of course He did. In verses 7 and 8 God told Moses exactly what was going on at the bottom of the mountain. And David told God the same thing in the psalm that we read responsively this morning: "You know everything I do; from far away you understand all my thoughts. You see me, whether I am working or resting; you know all my actions. Even before I speak you already know what I will say."

Yes, we may be able to hide our sins from one another, but we can't hide them from God. God hears us every time we come to His table, promising to live in love and charity with our neighbors. God hears us when we ask Him for the grace to do all the good works that He has prepared for us to do.

And God has seen how often we have failed. For God has also heard all the unkind words we have said. God has seen all the hurtful things we have done to others. And God knows how little we have trusted Him, giving ourselves over instead to worry and despair. Yes, God knows how little we love Him, how little time and attention we have given Him, when compared to all those other things we think are important. God sees how far away from Him we all have drifted.

For that, at root, is what all sin does – it pulls us away from God in one way or another. God makes this point quite clearly in verse 7, when He describes the people to Moses. For notice that He calls them "thy people" – Moses' people, not God's people.

God is, in essence, disowning them. It is as if God is saying to all those sinners, "Fine. If you don't want to do what I say, that's okay. If you don't want to give Me credit for all the wonderful things I've done for you, that's okay. If you don't want Me to be your God anymore, that's okay. But if that's what you want, that's exactly what you'll get. You are on your own."

And Moses made this clear to the people as he broke the tablets on which God's law had been written. For by conducting their little calf-worshipping party, the people hadn't just taken a break from obeying God – they had shattered the relationship God had made with them. Yes, that's what all sin does – it cuts us off from God.

Does that sound severe? Well, think about it. Would you like it if someone said he liked you and then went around behind your back, talking bad about you, lying about you? How would you feel about someone who kept

refusing to trust you, even if you had always been fair in your dealings with him? What if that someone was part of your own family? What if that someone who was stabbing you in the back owed everything he had to you? Wouldn't that make you angry?

Well, why should God feel differently about being treated that way? And sure enough, in today's passage we find that sin doesn't just disappoint God. It doesn't just make God sad. It makes Him angry. It makes God angry when the people He made for His glory take the blessings He gave them for their good and then turn away from Him. It makes Him angry when His people are ungrateful. It makes Him angry when His people fail to trust Him.

And in today's passage, God was so angry with His people that He made Moses a tremendous offer. In fact, in verse 10 God said that he would destroy all His ungrateful people and start over with Moses. In other words, God said He would do again what He had done in the days of Noah – saving just one man and his family, and giving everyone else what they deserved.

So, what was it that saved God's people from the destruction that they obviously had coming to them? What saved them from the death sentence they had taken upon themselves when they took the blood oath of the covenant? It certainly wasn't that they deserved to be forgiven. And it wasn't that God just overlooked their sin, saying it was no big deal. No, what made the difference for them is what makes the difference for us – a mediator.

For you see, Moses stood between God and His people. Instead of taking advantage of the situation, instead of looking to his own interests, Moses urged God to save His people – not because of anything they had done, but because of the covenant promises God had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In other words, Moses appealed not to the people's faithfulness, but to God's faithfulness. And because of Moses' pleas, God's anger was turned aside.

And that's the same thing that Jesus did. For like Moses, Jesus didn't appeal to His own interests: after all, if He had only cared about Himself, He would have stayed in Heaven, safe and sound, and He would have left us to get what was coming to us. Jesus had every right to do that, especially since He was the very One we were sinning against.

But instead of cutting us loose, Jesus did what Moses did, standing between us and God, making intercession for us. But unlike Moses, Jesus didn't just try to persuade God to turn away His wrath from us. No, Jesus shed His own blood, the blood of the covenant on the cross so that our blood would not have to be shed for our own sins. And by His sacrifice, Jesus did more than appeal to God's faithfulness – He demonstrated it, fulfilling all the promises God made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and making all those promises available to all those who would trust in Him.

So sure, we can go on sinning, living according to our own reason and experience, focusing our hearts and minds on all sorts of things, bowing down before all sorts of golden calves, forgetting the God Who made us and everything else for His glory. But if we do, we shouldn't be surprised when God takes notice of our sin. We shouldn't be surprised if the wrath of God falls on us. For that is exactly what we will deserve.

And we can go on trusting in our own goodness or our own efforts, or our own niceness, or the fact that we are church members, or the fact that we aren't committing socially unacceptable sins like trashing a house of worship, smashing an organ and breaking 120-year-old stained glass.

But while pews can be set back on their feet, and while organs and windows can be repaired, there's nothing we can do to put the tablets of God's law back together once we have broken them. There's nothing we can do to wipe the blood of the covenant off of those pillars, the blood that testifies against us.

But we can flee to Jesus our mediator. We can confess all those things that He knows we've done. We can trust Him to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. We can look to Him to pay the penalty our sins deserve. We can look to Him to forgive us, to make our hearts new and clean and willing to obey God, ready to keep His covenant by loving Him with all our heart and mind and soul and strength and our neighbors as ourselves. Let us pray for the grace to turn away from our sins and to draw ever nearer to Him today.