

Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 23;
Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

Grace and peace to you from God who was, who is, and who is to come. Amen

So last week at the Saturday night service (were you aware we have a Saturday night service, 5:30PM, right here in Fellowship Hall?), we heard the lessons from Exodus, Chapter 20. Now, as you're all quickly opening up your Bibles to look at Exodus, Chapter 20, you'll see that Exodus Chapter 20 is a list of the commandments that God gives to Moses and the people. Then the next ten or eleven chapters, God extrapolates on those commandments as to how they are to be lived out, to be applied, because we humans tend to be a dense lot and need a few more examples of most things.

Meanwhile we get to our lesson today in Chapter 32 with the people of Israel, the descendants of Israel, waiting at the foot of the mountain, while Moses is up on top of the mountain doing the one on one with God. We don't know exactly what it looks like from the foot of the mountain. Different parts of scripture talk about the top of the mountain being enclosed in clouds and maybe some thunder and lightning bolts going on. We don't really know because CNN wasn't there, so we are not exactly sure how it looked. All we know is that Moses is up there having a face-to-face, and he had been there for awhile. He is up there with Joshua. He has left his brother, Aaron, in charge of everybody down at the foot of the mountain.

Aaron, who you might remember, was the spokesperson. Moses has the encounter with the burning bush and one of Moses' complaints was, 'Oh God, I can't talk, I stutter too much.' (I think I can relate to the guy) So God says, 'Fine. Your brother Aaron, I'll give you Aaron. I'll talk to you, you tell Aaron, and Aaron will tell Pharaoh.' So, Aaron has spent all this time being the front man for Moses. Aaron is now the guy who is down here with the people at the foot of the mountain.

These people of Israel had lived in the land of Egypt for several hundred years. The longer they lived there, the more persecution they got under. The harder the thumb of Pharaoh went down upon them. They lived through that persecution; they escaped that persecution, because God sent Moses and Aaron to do that one-on-one with Pharaoh. They lived through all of those plagues. They lived through the river turning to blood, frogs, gnats, flies, diseased livestock, boils, thunder & hail, locust, darkness, and of the course the last one, the death of the firstborn. Not only did they live through all that (they *survived* all that), when they left Egypt they were led during the day by a column of smoke and by night they were led by a column of supernatural fire, they crossed the sea when it opened up and got to the other side. When they got to the other side, it comes together and totally washes away Pharaoh's army. They have **lived** through these amazing miracles.

They have **felt** God's presence with them through all of that. They are on their way to Mt. Sinai and they realize 'we're out of food.' Tens of thousands of people and they don't have enough

food. God sends them white flaky stuff - they don't know what to call it, so they call it "what is it" - that's what 'manna' means, "What is it?" This white flaky stuff they gather together every morning and bake it into bread. It is just amazing how it tastes. At night God sends quail so that even an idiot can go out, grab a quail, whack it against the ground and have freshly roasted quail for supper. They are in the middle of a desert - a dry, arid desert - and need water. They cry out to Moses, Moses talks to God, God tells Moses 'Take your staff and strike this rock,' and from this rock, in the middle of a dry, arid desert, from this rock comes this wonderful fountain of water.

They have **lived** through all of these miracles; **felt** the presence of God; **seen** the power of God. They are here at the foot of the mountain. Moses has been up there forty days or so. The people say to Aaron 'Aaron, Aaron, where's God? God's not around anywhere here, Aaron. Aaron, make us a god.' Now, Aaron apparently has lost his backbone because Aaron says to the people 'All right, gather up all of your gold.' (Here's an interesting little side point - If you jump back to Chapter 11 in Exodus you find that the people had gathered gold. Before the tenth plague came, they went to their Egyptian neighbors and asked for gold, and their Egyptian neighbors gave them gold, so now they have all this gold) So Aaron says 'Gather up this gold' and they melt it down and Aaron crafts a golden calf. He must have been an amazing showman. I can just imagine him gathering the people together, whipping off the cover, and saying something like, "Israel behold your God that has brought you out of the land of Egypt." They built an altar; they eat, drink, and go to into wonderful and amazing revelry. They are astounded that now they have a god that they can see, and touch and feel. Because human beings are a tactile people. We don't do real well with this abstract stuff - 'oh, God's everywhere, God's around us.' God is ALSO omniscient.

While God is up here speaking with Moses, God also knows what is going on at the foot of the mountain. God gets a little peeved. God says, 'Do you **see** what those people are doing? I've had it, Moses. You know what; I'm just going to wipe them all off the face of the earth. I am going to make a new people for me out of your descendants.' Moses says to God, 'Lord these are your people. These are the people whom with you made the promise, so long ago to Abraham. Remember that promise, Almighty God. You promised to Abraham that because Abraham was so faithful, Abraham and Sarah's descendants would outnumber the stars in the sky. You would be their God, and they would be your people. Lord, you can't destroy them.' (I think, personally, that God said that to Moses, so that Moses could start to understand, just how much he really did care for these people who were driving him up the mountain, just to get away from them.)

They had lived through all these amazing things. For whatever reason, when they are there at the foot of the mountain, they start to feel 'Oh - God's not really here. God is not part of my life.' Well, were they busy at Bible study? Were they getting together at neighborhood prayer groups? Were they out helping someone whose tent fell down in the middle of the night? Or whose camel had run off with a local gnu? Who knows? We do know that they ate, drank, and were in revelry. Is it any wonder that they couldn't feel the presence of God?

It is obviously, at least to me, really easy for someone like me to stand up here and really put down these people of Israel because you know, I don't have any golden calves in my house. (If I had that much gold, I wouldn't be living in my house. It would be a whole lot nicer—maybe even

have insulation in it. That is what happens when you live in a two hundred year old farm house.) But I do think we have golden calves in our lives. I know I have golden calves in my life. Maybe yours is the stock market, or ESPN. Maybe your golden calf is the Food Channel, or goes by the initials BMW or ELCA. Maybe your golden calf is gay rights or family values; Consumerism; capitalism; or voyeurism. I don't know what your golden calf is, I don't need to know, I don't want to know. Even if you say you don't have one, I'll bet you probably do, because I know I do. Do we really, honestly, actually *need* that Golden Calf in our life?

In preparing for this message today, I was looking up some other articles on this passage, and happened upon an article written in 1993, who was quoting a book written in 1989. A book written by Paul Wachtel called *The Poverty of Affluence: A Psychological Portrait of the American Way of Life*. So 1989, twenty years ago, Paul Wachtel writes:

“In 1958, when economist John Kenneth Galbraith appropriately described the United States as the “Affluent Society,” 9.5 percent of U.S. households had air conditioning, about four percent had dishwashers, and fewer than 15 percent had more than one car. By 1980, when Ronald Reagan’s successful bid to replace Jimmy Carter was based on the widespread sense that people were suffering economically, the percentage of homes with air conditioning had quintupled, the percentage with dishwashers had increased more than 700 percent and the percentage with two or more cars had about tripled. Yet, despite the astounding economic growth—despite owning more of the gadgets, machines and appliances thoughts to constitute ‘the good life’—Americans felt significantly less well-off than they had 22 years before, polls showed.”

And that was written nearly 20 years ago.

Maybe we are feeling the economic crunch. Depending upon which commentator you've listened to in the past couple of weeks, we are either headed toward, or are currently in, a recession that is as bad as, or worse than, the stock market crash of 1929. Yet our standard of living runs circles around everybody else on the planet. But still, down here, at the foot of the mountain, I think, 'if I only had a faster computer, or a more fuel efficient car. You know, Lord, maybe if I just had a small pay increase, or a shorter commute, my life would just be so much better. Lord, I could feel your presence in my life. I would know that you are here and active in my life, if only those things were to happen.'

I stand at the bottom of the mountain, looking up, not seeing anybody, so I start to think more about what's **wrong** in my life, than about all the things that are **right**.

Now, I could end my little diatribe tonight with the old adage: How did Moses treat the people of Israel's sin? He said, 'Take two tablets and call me in the morning.' (Ok, that's a bad joke) If we harken back to the lesson from last week, those lessons that those of us in the Affirmation of Baptism this morning learned about, those lessons from Exodus Chapter 20, where the Lord God Almighty gave Moses the list, and then spent the next ten chapters elaborating on The List. Do you remember, though, what Jesus said, when he was asked 'Lord, what's the greatest commandment?' How did Jesus reply? "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,

and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” And the second, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Those Israelites were not loving the Lord their God, first and foremost. They were maybe loving their neighbors in the wrong way. I often times trip up on loving the Lord God Almighty first and foremost with all my heart, and soul, and mind. It is so much easier, with those golden calves, with those 54" big screen televisions, with those fast cars, with those large bank accounts, with nicer shoes, with bigger wardrobes, or a fancier kitchen, because we can see, and feel and touch. Yet, here at the bottom of the mountain, God is with us. Even when we don't feel God's presence, God is with us. Not in the form of a golden calf, not in a form of a nice home and a big meal or a large bank account. God is with us, actually, *despite* all of those other things. Even when we think God has forgotten us, God is with us **still** and **always**. God loves and cares for us regardless of what we do, in *spite* of what we do. It's how we respond, even when we don't feel God's presence in our lives that tells the world what we truly believe.

Amen.