

Title: The Golden Calf in the Room
Date: 10/15/2023 (Proper 23, Year A)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [Exodus 32:1-14](#); [Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23](#); [Philippians 4:1-9](#); [Matthew 22:1-14](#)
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/yaOD1C7t2Qc?t=1478>

Give thanks to God, for God is good,
for God's mercy endures for ever. (Psalm 106:1)
Amen.

First, let's name the golden calf in the room.

And no, I'm not talking about Bevo.

Even though there are folks that bleed burnt orange and religiously follow the Longhorns, pun very much intended, this is **not** going to be a sermon about the religion of football or the sport of your choice, or making idols out of college athletes.

I'm not just saying this because I don't burn with that kind of passion for college sports or for *my* college mascot; in case you're wondering, it's a tree (Fear the Tree!).

I **do** burn with that kind of passion for certain Broadway musicals and TV shows, as you may or may not been able to tell in this week's eNews.

It made me **so** happy to use references to *Doctor Who* and *The Good Place* to illustrate the twisted nature of our relationship with time. If you haven't watched either, I highly recommend them. Don't read *anything* about *The Good Place* before you push play, and start with the Ninth Doctor, or the Tenth, if you haven't ever watched *Doctor Who*. And if you fall in love with David Tennant, and you will, check out Good Omens. It's an interesting and irreverent meditation on what we identify as good and evil, sin and the will of God. Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett really make you... *cough* as I said, passion.

This is **not** going to be a lecture/sermon about not treating sports or tv shows as the golden calf because for most, if not all, of us in the room, we don't expect them to be our gods. We may sacrifice more time and energy to them than is good for our physical, emotional, or spiritual well-being, but we don't see them as a replacement for God. We're not trying to use them to fill a God-shaped hole.

The problem with the Israelites in the book of Exodus wasn't that they started worshipping foreign gods. The problem was that in the absence of what they perceived as the active presence of God, they wanted their own version of God, one that was safer to encounter and easier to please than the God who came down to Moses in fire and spoke to him in thunder.

Once the Israelites reached Mount Sinai, God asked Moses to tell them, "If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possessions out of all the people.

Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Ex 19:5-6).

In response, the people answered as one, “Everything that the Lord has spoken, we will do” (Ex 19:8). Everything? That’s quite a promise. Maybe they were still high on the miraculous appearance of all that bread and quail, and water that sprung from rocks in the desert.

Then Moses went back up Mt. Sinai to get the details of this agreement they signed off on. At first Aaron and some of the other elders went up with him, then God wanted to speak to Moses alone, and Moses was up there for forty days and forty nights.

Maybe the people of Israel got nervous about the promise they made, the length of the list God was going to send back with Moses. The eleven chapters between the Ten Commandments and the golden calf include everything from social laws concerning slaves to justice for all, to the three annual festivals, to instructions for building the tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant, to rules regarding priests and daily offerings. This might include two versions of the same underlying story, but still, that’s...a lot.

Maybe this story helps justify some of those laws and rules that are still in place. Maybe this is actually a story that criticizes the actions of a king that will appear much later in the history of Israel,¹ closer to when this story was being written down.

When we look closely at the Bible, time isn’t the straight line it appears to be. There is the time this story is said to take place. There is the time this story is being told in the oral tradition, maybe even more than one oral tradition. There is the time this story is being written down. Then there are all the times this story is being edited, translated, interpreted, and so on. All these periods of time overlap in this single passage we heard this morning.

The same applies to the parable we heard. This parable appears in the gospel according to Matthew, the gospel according to Luke and the Gospel of Thomas. Scholars analyze the difference between them to try to figure which is the version Jesus might have told and the agenda behind each of the authors in telling this parable.

Would Jesus really have told a parable about a king who burned down a city and killed a bunch of people who rejected an invitation to his banquet? Granted, some of them mistreated and killed his slaves, but even that seems like an extreme way to say, “No, I don’t want to come to your party, so stop sending your slaves to ask me.”

And after the wedding hall was filled, would that king really single out a man for not wearing a wedding robe? Why would he tell his servants to bind this man hand and foot and throw him into the outer darkness when he wanted guests so desperately that his party was filled with good and bad people?

Maybe this is a warning from the writer, or writers, of this gospel. This could be a warning to the communities of Jews he was writing for so that *their* cities do not fall the

way Jerusalem did in 70 A.D., before this gospel was written. This could be a warning to the newly baptized, “You have been clothed with Christ; if you go back to your old ways, you’ll end up back in the darkness.”

Dr. Joel Baden, professor of Hebrew Bible at Yale, explains that the Israelites in the golden calf episode are “trying their hardest to worship Yahweh without Moses, their leader around, and not quite knowing or remembering what it is they’re supposed to be doing, right?...They’re trying to worship Yahweh; they’re just doing it badly.”²

The word gospel means “good news.” Evangelists are those who spread good news. The gospel is meant to contain good news, and it feels like a stretch to call this week’s gospel and the last two weeks’ gospel “good news.” Maybe they are retelling the parables badly, because we humans can’t ever get out of our own way, because it’s hard for us to be aware of all the agendas that shaped our agenda. Maybe this serves as a reminder for us to never stop checking whether we know or remember what it is we’re supposed to be doing. Otherwise, we might end up making our own golden calf without realizing it.

This week, as I read about and listen to the stories of what’s happening in Israel and Gaza, there is a lot of chatter of what is or isn’t being said, who is supporting who and how. There is a lot of false information. There is a lot of finger-pointing and dehumanizing. In the United States, Jews **and** Muslims alike are on high alert.

And when we are tempted to judge and criticize the death and heartbreak happening over there, and the generations of trauma that have been passed down and will continue to be passed down, let us take a good look at this part of Texas and how the history of this place has shaped our present.

Yesterday, One Human Race shared the 1928 Master Plan adopted by the Austin City Council, which was “interested in finding legal methods to enforce segregation of the races.”³ It forced Blacks living all over Austin to move to a single district in Austin.

As a result of that policy and a long history of policies like it, a 2015 report called Austin one of the most economically segregated cities in the country,⁴ and a 2019 report projected that there is nearly a 20-year difference in life expectancy between parts of West and East Austin.⁵

A year and a half into my time here, these are the kinds of things I’m learning about my new home. To be clear, these kinds of policies, these kinds of numbers are not unique to Austin. This was also true of Chicago, so I’d probably be doing this kind of wrestling with the past and present wherever I am.

At this point, part of me wishes that God would lead the way as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, or at least type out the instructions on my keyboard. Is that too much to ask?

I wonder if that's what the Israelites were longing for. It's one thing to follow God toward liberation and another to actually have that privilege...and all the new problems, challenges, and responsibilities that come with it.

It's one thing to have God lead the way and provide all the bread and quail and water and another for it to be **our** turn to provide it to those who are as lost and lacking as we could have been, as our ancestors might have been.

Can't God just issue an open invitation to the banquet that we accept on **our** timeline? Why would God care what we wear? Apparently, we don't follow a God who simply does what we want. God demands a response to God's invitation. Paul told his fellow laborers, "Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me," (Phil 4:9) which looks like keeping our minds on what **Jesus** would have considered true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, and commendable. Otherwise, we'll end up with our own golden calf.

So, let us strain together toward Christ Jesus. Let us ask questions of the gains and loss we see, and listen for the call of God in the noise and in the silence. Let us stand in the breach as Moses did, and turn away the kind of wrath that can eventually consume all of us, physically, emotionally, spiritually.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqORL3OPAFU&list=PLbQINmUy3n7Yd56ISO-zbVMu0vLtkExB8&index=9>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqORL3OPAFU&list=PLbQINmUy3n7Yd56ISO-zbVMu0vLtkExB8&index=9>

³ <https://peasepark.org/news/2021/2/28/black-history-month-austin-city-plan-of-1928-segregation-of-the-city>

⁴ <https://www.unitedwayaustin.org/looking-back-to-look-forward-the-1928-master-plan/>

⁵ <https://www.kut.org/health/2019-10-01/theres-a-nearly-20-year-difference-in-life-expectancy-between-parts-of-west-and-east-austin>