

Holy Cow?
Exodus 32:1-6
1/19/2014

Meanwhile...back at the camp...things were getting completely out of control. So begins Phil Ryken's sermon on this passage. I didn't feel that I could improve on that! The people had been waiting, and waiting, and waiting. Verse 1 says that Moses delayed coming down the mountain. That word "delayed" has the idea of shame attached to it. Moses was not fashionably late, as we say here in the South. He was shamefully late. In the eyes of the people, Moses was standing them up on their date. As day passed into another day, and week into week, the people started panicking and they got very short and sarcastic, as we will see.

It is important to remember the sequence of events. Moses went up the mountain more than once. The Ten Commandments and the book of the covenant (up through chapter 23 of Exodus) is something that Moses received and immediately gave to the people. The people had the Ten Commandments, and all of the case law that went with it. In other words, what the people do in this chapter is not done out of ignorance. They knew better. The forty days that Moses was on the mountain occurred in the second journey up the mountain. During this sojourn, Moses was getting instructions for the tabernacle and the ark.

But, as we said, Moses' delay was shameful in the eyes of the people, and they got panicky and sarcastic. They were afraid and impatient. In fact, this whole sin is set up by their impatience. They say, sarcastically, "As for this Moses fellow...we don't know what became of him." The words "this Moses fellow" are very dismissive. The English would say, "this Moses bloke." The people dismiss him with a wave of the hand. They claim that they do not know what became of him. Of course, they do know. They know that Moses is on the mountain. If they had reasoned through the situation carefully, they would have recognized that Moses could not possibly be dead, since he was with the Lord, getting careful instructions about the tabernacle. But impatience and fear rule the day. Possibly the people feared that they would get attacked by someone.

So, the people go to Aaron, the guy in charge at the time. Their instruction to Aaron is plainly a violation of both the first and second commandments. They want to worship other gods, which is why they say, "make us gods" in the plural. Furthermore, they want an image of something. They want a god they can control. They want a visible thing they can believe in. They are a "see it, believe it" kind of people. Of course, they had seen countless signs and wonders already from the one true God. However, when they get panicked and angry, they forget all about God, and go back to their Egyptian ways. How like us! When we get into a situation that seems unsolvable, we get get panicky and impatient, and we go back to our old ways that have zero trust in the Lord. God is obviously not doing anything, right? So we can't wait on God. We think we need to shove our oar in and help God out, because He is falling behind on the job. How often the Psalms tell us to wait patiently for Him. Every time we try to jump the gun on God, we almost always make an absolute mess of things. Isn't God's timing better?

Aaron was in a difficult position at this time. It is possible, for instance, that he was looking at the crowd and thinking to himself that he needed to placate the people, but also try to persuade them that what they were doing was wrong. This could explain the language he uses in verse 2: "break off the golden earrings." That word "break off" implies an almost

violent tearing away. Perhaps Aaron was hoping that the women would not part with their beautiful jewelry. If so, he thought wrong. Again, notice how forgetful the people are. This is the jewelry that the Egyptian women had given to the Israelite women, because of God's signs and wonders. It was also out of this jewelry that gifts had been made to build the tabernacle. In other words, they were using the same gifts for both God's tabernacle and the golden calf. How often we do the same! We will use God's good gifts to us for both good and bad purposes. In so doing, we are talking out of both sides of our mouths, aren't we? I mean, holy cow! Oh, wait...

The people, as we said, didn't even hesitate. They brought all their jewelry to Aaron. So now Aaron was stuck, and he had to do what the people wanted. His problem was giving in to them in the first place. He gambled in verse 2, and lost that gamble. It never works to gamble with sin, does it? Satan will try very hard to make sure that you lose that gamble, and are faced with more sin, and then more.

So Aaron fashioned a cow with an engraving tool. Notice Aaron's role in this. He was the one who actually used a tool on this gold. This will be important later in the story when Aaron tries to minimize his own role in Israel's fall into sin. Aaron makes the golden calf. It is possible that it was a wooden structure overlaid with gold.

Whatever it was, it must have been fairly impressive looking, because the people immediately praised it to the skies as being the god that brought Israel out of Egypt. Were they really that forgetful? The answer is yes! You see, they were doing everything the opposite of what God was telling Moses at the top of the mountain. Very different events happening at the top and the bottom of the mountain! Moses was getting instructions for the true tabernacle and the true ark at the top of the mountain. The people were creating a sort of anti-tabernacle and anti-ark at the bottom of the mountain. Notice the many ironies and contrasts here, as one commentator (Fretheim) notes: God already provided them with the one true God, whereas they are trying to create a false god; the people, rather than God, take the initiative; offerings are demanded rather than willingly presented; elaborate preparations are completely absent; the painstaking length of time needed for building becomes an overnight rush job; the careful provision for guarding the presence of the Holy One turns into an open-air object of immediate accessibility; the invisible, intangible God becomes a visible, tangible object; and the personal, active God becomes an impersonal object that cannot see or speak or act. The ironic effect is that the people forfeit the very divine presence they had hoped to bind more closely to themselves. They created an anti-tabernacle and anti-ark. Aaron would build an altar before this calf in verse 5. In doing all of this, they were rejecting the very covenantal agreement that they had said they would follow. They had said, "All that the Lord says, we will do." But when a time of uncertainty comes, they go back to what they know: Egypt. The cow itself was probably a replica of the Egyptians gods that they had known when they were slaves in Egypt. The Egyptian god Apis was represented by a bull. Hathor, an Egyptian goddess, was represented by a cow. Of course, looking forward, some of the Canaanite gods and goddesses were also represented by bovine animals. It was all over the ancient near east. Why? Because the calf symbolized fertility. Not only did cows give milk and meat, and calve every year, but also they worked in the fields to make sure that the grain would grow. There was no more important animal to an agricultural community than the cow. That is why the cow was holy to the Egyptians.

It is possible that they saw the cow as a sort of footstool for the gods and goddesses they had in mind. Oftentimes, ancient near eastern worship had the cow not as the object of

worship itself, but as the footstool, the place where the real god was enthroned. Aaron tries to make the best of it in verses 5-6. He tries to tell the people that they should at least be worshipping the one true God by means of this calf. This is why he proclaims a feast for the following day, a feast for the Lord. The problem with that is that the only thing Aaron manages to accomplish by doing this is combining various gods and goddesses together with the one true Lord in very mixed-up way. The official word for this is syncretism. It's sort of like a cafeteria form of religion: take a little bit from this religion, and a little bit from that religion, and a little bit from another religion over there, and voila! You have your own personalized form of religion. Yes, Aaron's way of doing things is very much alive and well today, isn't it? But, as we will see, the Lord has only one way of describing such efforts: it is sin!

The last part of this passage shows what happens when the people got their way: utter chaos, or is that udder chaos? They offered burnt offerings, peace offerings (all the while making war on the one true God!), and then they feasted and played. This word "play" at the end of verse 6 has certain connotations to it. It is the word used to describe what Isaac was doing with Rebekah when Abimelek saw them and deduced from that "play" that Isaac was Rebekah's husband, not her brother! This kind of "playing" was very common in ancient near eastern fertility religions. After all, if people had sex, maybe that would work on the gods so that they would have sex, so that the entire world would be fertile. You can easily see what kind of appeal that would have: not only were they worshipping, but they were also having fun! I mean, holy cow! Oh wait...

What we need to realize in all of this is that this incident reveals to us our own hearts. Whenever we are faced with a frightening situation, or a delayed situation, and we start to get panicky, we will manufacture an idol that we think will do a much better job of taking care of our situation than God can. For instance, if a man loses his job, he will be tempted to think that God is not going to take care of him and his family, and so what he needs to do is panic. When a man panics about his job situation, he can sometimes do desperate things and go desperate places instead of having recourse immediately to God in prayer first. Or, if a woman is barren and wants children, what will she be tempted to do? See all the specialists first thing, instead of go to her God in prayer. Whenever we leave God as our last resort, after we've tried everything else, we are really making an idol out of that "everything else." We think that "everything else" can take care of our problem better than God can.

Paul explicitly relates this passage to us in 1 Corinthians 10:6-7: "Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.'"

The truth of the passage comes down to this: the real situation about which we should be most concerned is usually the one situation about which we are least concerned, and that is our sin. Even if we are concerned about it, we often go about it the wrong way. We think that we can improve ourselves to the point where we will sin less. We try everything else before we go to Jesus. But when we consider what Jesus has done about the problem, we realize that God's timing is, again, perfect. Not only did Jesus come at the fulness of time, according to Galatians, but also the Holy Spirit is poured into our hearts at the right time. God's eradication of sin in our lives goes according to His schedule, not ours. We need to remember that when we get frustrated with our lack of progress in the Christian life. Maybe there is something that God wants for us that is just as important as holiness: our own dependence and humility before God, recognizing that, left to ourselves, we will sit down to

eat and drink, and rise up to play. We will have a very unholy cow, left to ourselves. But if God is in control, then your life will get under control. Just make sure it's God's control, and not yours.