

Proper 23, Year A
October 11, 2020
St. Charles Ave Presbyterian Church
Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson
Exodus 32:1-14

“Pocket God”

It’s a classic sit-com trope, a scene that plays out in almost every teen comedy, maybe it’s a situation that even some of you have experienced first hand – a teen is entrusted with the great responsibility of getting to stay home over the weekend while her parents go out of town. Her friends, hearing that there will be no parents around, convince her to let them come over and hang out with just a few people. After she agrees, excited at the prospect of having some friends over for some unsupervised fun, things snowball from there and what was supposed to be a manageable gathering between friends has become an out of control rager with half the school in attendance. What happens next is all but inevitable, we can write this script – whether they are tipped off by a concerned neighbor or their parental intuition tells them something is not quite right, the parents make their way home and catch their child red handed, not only violating every house rule, but worse yet their trust.

I can’t help but to see a similar scene unfolding here with God, Moses, and the Israelites. I never really thought of this story as being humorous, but my deep dive into it this week has shown me there is some kind of comedy playing out here. God has just shared with Moses, Aaron, and the leaders of the Israelites the new house rules that will govern their covenantal relationship and their life as a new nation – the 10 commandments. Like something out of a Monty Python sketch, the quickness to which the people break the very first commandments is

astonishing – “You shall not make for yourselves any idols... What? Do you mean like this one? This idol? Opps!”

And God’s reaction to this betrayal is painfully familiar – “Moses, YOUR people are creating and worshipping idols.” How many times have we heard or used that phrasing in our families – “Did you hear what *your* son did today at school?” “did you see what *your* Mother bought at the store?” God wants nothing to do with the people in that moment, calling them Moses’ people and here’s where our story becomes much less comedic as God’s anger at what the people have done becomes all too apparent, and the dialog that unfolds between Moses and God here is very intimate and relational. Moses has the gall to ask God to “calm down” essentially and pleads the case for the people and for God to have mercy on them and not follow through with God’s plans to completely wipe them out and just start over with Moses and his descendants. There is a common perception, and I’ll admit that sometimes I fall into this easy characterization myself, that God in the Old Testament is wrathful and angry and quick to resort to violence and destruction – this story kinda proves that point, but what I think is a more accurate portrayal is that in God’s deep love for the people that he has freed from slavery and saved, seeing their worship of this golden calf, this idol, was a deep and hurtful betrayal. This story at its heart is about covenantal relationship, the dynamic back and forth between God and God’s people.

I have really been enjoying our journey through the Exodus narrative these past several weeks. And maybe “enjoying” isn’t quite the right word, but these texts have been so rich for preaching and teaching and learning, and it always astounds me how these ancient stories, thousands of years old, can still have this much to teach us, because Man! Have they been

relatable! The people's suffering and longing for freedom and a better life, the complaining and grumbling in the wilderness, and now here with their anxiety over what's next as they build for themselves a nation and a structure to worship and honor the unseen God who has liberated them.

So now this story begs the question, what kind of relationship, covenantal relationship, do we want and expect with God? I'm going to do my best to not over work the same ground that Michael has already covered in his sermon last week in regards to idols and idolatry, so if you missed it, you have the advantage of going back to last week's worship video and catching up and getting a fuller treatment of this topic, but essentially what I have gleaned is idolatry represents our misplaced trust and devotion in those things, people, institutions, etc. that we fashion for ourselves that take the priority and place of God in our lives. How many times do we fall into the trap of thinking that our money, education, or status in society will save us or at least isolate us from suffering? How many times do we turn to saviors in our institutions, whether that be our government, or the very idea of America and democracy, or our political parties – we may not have problem with golden calves these days, but the golden donkey and the golden elephant are a different story. Even the church and all that we hold special and sacred in our faith can become idols to us – our scriptures, our way of worship, our theology – all those tools we use to help point us to God, all too easily become God to us. And it's really no wonder, no great mystery as to why we do this, because as Michael said in his sermons the last 2 weeks, "we want a useful God." We want a God who will do for us what we need done and when we need it done.

Idolatry is also about our propensity to pinpoint and box God into a form that is most palatable for us. It's not that God is a complete mystery to us or is completely unknowable, it's just that God is just always beyond our grasp, just beyond our human understanding. As St. Augustine of Hippo said, "if you understood him, it would not be God." We can grab onto bits and pieces and build on that, but we will always be limited in our capacity to fully know God. As such we tend to limit God, we take what we can know of God or even worse we make God into our own image, rather than the other way around and make that to be all of who and what God is.

The Israelites ask Aaron to "make gods for us." Now the Hebrew word here for gods is the same for God – Elohim. It's an ambiguous word that can be both singular and plural.¹ So some scholars have argued that what the Israelites are asking for is not necessarily replacement gods for *the God* Yahweh, who they know has rescued them time and again, but for a physical representation of Yahweh – a way to bring Yahweh down to their level and hold on to. All too often we want a god we can keep in our pockets, put up on our mantels, and on our altars – a small god, a manageable god, a god that doesn't demand too much from us and we keep at arms length until we need something, instead of the God who has the power to actually save us, to liberate us, to change and transform us.

In the opening of the Gospel of John we get these words about the power of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ – "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." We don't need golden calves to worship God when we have the living Christ. We get the best idea of who God is and what this

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4611

covenantal relationship is supposed to be like in Jesus Christ. In him we see that it's a relationship that is real and genuine, made out of more than mere precious metals and stone, but out of a love that will not let us go and a mercy that doesn't give us what we deserve when we're caught red handed. What is so scary about this is that this kind of love in relationship is that it does change us. It causes us to look beyond ourselves and our needs, doesn't give us easy answers and certainties, and demands from us the giving of our whole selves to God. So then, may we then have the courage everyday to put our trust in the One Triune God, whose grace and mercy has saved, is saving us, and will save us, taking God out of the confines of our pockets and instead holding God gently in our hearts.