

Exodus 32

This chapter contains one of the most famous, or perhaps infamous, events in the book of Exodus, the golden calf incident. To set the stage for this event, we need to remember that Moses has been gone for quite a while. He has gone up the mountain that is covered in fire and smoke supposedly to meet with YHWH, the mysterious and invisible God. The question that confronts the people is how will they respond when their leader, Moses, is gone? Remember that these people are only recently removed from 400 years of slavery and exposure to Egyptian gods and worship practices.

The response of the people to Moses' disappearance is a natural one. It is the same one as that of Adam and Eve in the garden. A choice is made to ignore God's commands (Don't make idols/don't eat of the fruit of the tree) and to take matters into their own hands. The people, now "on their own" seek a more user-friendly God. It is not clear why Aaron does not resist the impulses of the people. It could be fear. It could be that he too had believed that Moses was not coming back, and that God had consumed him. Regardless, Aaron asks the people for a sacrificial gift (recall again that Moses had been told to ask for similar gifts for building the tabernacle) in order to make an idol. The people agree, give up their rings and earrings, and Aaron crafts a golden calf (golden calves have been found in digs in Israel). Aaron then declares that the calf is the god who brought them up out of Egypt. This is followed by sacrifices and a wild, spring-break like party. Granted, the people had agreed to not make idols, but as of this moment, there was no declaration from God about a punishment for so doing.

God responds to these events in the same way God responded to the sins of the world in the time of Noah (I will destroy all except Noah and his family) and the event at Sodom (I will destroy all the people in the town) by planning on destroying the people and then choosing one person to carry on (Noah, Abraham, Moses). Much like Abraham, Moses resists this divine destructive impulse. Even though God has promised to make Moses a great people, Moses pleads for the people. In so doing Moses appeals first to God's reputation (what will the Egyptians think?) and second, Moses appeals to God's covenant promises (remember Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). These pleas cause God to change God's mind and reveals one more aspect of Moses' leadership abilities. Moses is willing to risk everything for the people he is leading.

Moses, however, does not remain calm for long. When he sees the extent of the revelry, he breaks the tablets of the law given him by God, burns the calf, grounds it to powder, makes the people drink it, then confronts Aaron. Aaron responds as did Adam and Eve, the people made me do it. This is all too much for Moses, who then asks for volunteers to indiscriminately go through the camp killing people. Though this mass killing may have been necessary to restore order, it is not Moses' finest hour. Even so, Moses returns to God and asks that God take Moses' life (as a sacrifice) if God will not forgive the people. God ignores the offer and returns to the reality of the situation; the people have sinned and need discipline, which comes in the form of a plague (they acted like Egyptians so God will treat them as Egyptians). In the end though, God's covenant faithfulness prevails, and God sends the people on their way to the Land of Promise.

Reflections: while we may desire to see this story as an isolated event of "unfaithful" people, it is the refrain in the hymn of human existence. Human beings listen to God, try their best to be faithful, and then they falter, going after more user-friendly gods. Calvin writes that idolatry is at the heart of all sin; the idolatry of making gods who will give us what we want and whom we can control. We can see this in the Word of Faith Movement which claims that God must do what we want if we give enough money to certain ministries. This is simply a modern version of the golden calf.

Questions:

1. Where have you seen God's people worshipping a "golden calf" rather than the living God?
2. What do you think about God changing God's mind?
3. What is your impression of Moses after this incident?