

At first glance, it may not be obvious that today's reading from Exodus has anything to do with us. In fact it sounds rather bizarre and unbelievable. Moses is up on Mount Sinai hanging out with God; meanwhile back at camp, the people are gathering up all of their gold jewelry to make themselves a "golden calf." It's the kind of material Bill Maher loves to use to mock religious people, and maybe if we're honest about it we would admit that it does embarrass us at least a little bit. It just feels so primitive. On top of all that, this Exodus story just keeps going on and on and on...it's been months now but it's starting to feel like forty years, isn't it? Maybe we should just tackle something easier, like today's gospel reading!

Everett Fox, who teaches Hebraic Studies over at Clark (University in Worcester) insists that without this story the entire Exodus narrative would be "incomplete, or at least hopelessly idealistic and idealized." He reminds us that twelve chapters in a row have been unfolding on the heights of Mt. Sinai: we've heard about divine revelation and the giving and receiving of the Decalogue and the making of a tabernacle. But this story brings us back to earth and gives us a glimpse into the "real world of human frailty." On the chance that he might be right, perhaps we should take a closer look...

*Moses has been on sabbatical for forty days and nights.* And what this story is really about are the emotions that get stirred up during the absence of the community's leader: doubt, anger, and panic being the big three. Having Moses around helped the community to find a sense of balance and equilibrium. As the journey through the wilderness continues, the people are learning to trust Moses. It helps that he can do that thing with his staff to part the Red Sea, and find potable water in the desert, and that he talks to God. But he's been gone for a while and without him around it isn't clear what's happening, or who is in charge, or even whether he's ever coming back. And so the anxiety level rises.

You don't need to be a Biblical literalist to take Scripture seriously. (In fact, sometimes that is what gets in the way; if we are constantly fighting battles about what *literally* happened then we'll miss the larger point about what it *means*). The challenge for us is to see what is going on *inside of the story* if we want to begin to make some connections to how there is a "word of the Lord" here for us.

On Friday as I sat and worked on this sermon the news on my Yahoo homepage is the same as it was all week. "*World markets plummet: gripped by fear.*" Over the past month or so as people have watched the value of their savings for college and retirement eroding, most of us have been in touch with those primal emotions of doubt and anger and panic. In the midst of the most serious economic crisis our country has faced since the Great Depression it doesn't seem clear (at least not to me) that either side has a plan to help us move forward through these dangerous times. So here we are in the midst of a presidential election that many of us hoped would be about the profoundly serious issues facing this country; but it hasn't really turned out that way, has it? What was promised as a noble debate on ideas has become more of the same: a bitter, partisan battle that has turned personal. We continue to view the whole thing through prisms skewed by our deepest fears.

So doubt and panic and anger are familiar to us. The financial crisis isn't the only reason either. In the midst of all of that it would be nice if the Church was rock solid: a constant in an unsteady and confusing world. Ha! From Lambeth to the Diocese of Pittsburgh to the more local level you can feel the doubt and panic and anger in the air. I can hardly wait for Diocesan Convention this coming week! Closer to home, perhaps there are some of our youth and their parents who are also in touch with these same emotions as Lori Churchill prepares to leave the staff.

Here is the thing: while those emotions are real, they also tend to block us from critical thinking. Fearful and anxious people tend to do stupid things, and I think that is the larger point of this text. In fact as I've listened to the financial gurus over the past month I've noticed that they sound like pastors or therapists counseling people not to panic, not to make rash emotional decisions in the midst of so much anxiety.

I sat with the local clergy at First Baptist Church this week for our monthly gathering and one of my friends asked if I thought that given the challenges we are facing right now if church attendance would see a bump, like it did right after 9/11. I said I didn't see it coming—not because I'm a cynic but because I think this plays out differently for people. 9/11 tended to, at least initially, bring us together. At least initially when church attendance did rise I think it is because those events reminded us of why we need community. But the challenges we face right now tend to isolate us. I think the more likely response among many will be that those places where we carry our stress will make us even more susceptible.

There is something built-in to the human psyche that can leave us, in the midst of such challenges, settling for lesser gods, gods of our own making, gods that cannot deliver on the promises they make. Now I'm not too worried about someone in this congregation gathering up the jewelry and making a golden calf. But the problem is that when we feel panicked and angry and doubtful, our desire to worship God too often falls short of the mark. We substitute *penultimate* things for that which is ultimate. That is, by the way, what idolatry really means and it's what this text is really all about. We worship nation, or a political party, or a particular way of being church, or even family. We begin to define ourselves by gods we can more easily control and manipulate: *our* preferred version of the *Prayerbook* or *our* notion of what makes music "Anglican" or *our* notion of what constitutes "right thinking." I submit to you that these are all *golden calves* and that this text has everything to do with us.

So you probably saw this coming, but here goes—it's time to invite Walter Brueggemann into this sermon. He says that the great sin being explored in this text is that we try to substitute an "available, produced God for the sovereign God who refuses to be owned by or manipulated by or domesticated by us." Let me interpret that. There's a book I read many years ago now called, *Your God Is Too Small*. I think the fact of the matter is that most of us worship a too-small-god. On good days we confuse our images and metaphors for the great "I AM." On our worst days we project our fears and uncertainties outward and call that god.

Yet God is in fact much bigger than all of our words and images and certitudes and ideologies. And how do we grasp that? I think we grasp it when we come together in community. I think we begin to grasp it when we challenge each other—in love, by making space for one another in the process by making space for the living God to dwell in our midst—the God who can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.

As difficult as the challenges we face are, there is good news in the midst of it all—not a cockeyed optimism or a state of denial but the real heart of the matter that rarely comes into focus when we are just rolling along doing our own thing. We learn something about God in this text, I think—some of which is actually pretty interesting and even humorous. Notice how God says to Moses, "*your* people are acting up again." It makes God sound like a parent who says to the other parent: "guess what *your* daughter has done now." The rabbis argue that this is a rhetorical device, however; and I think they are

on to something. God is practically daring Moses to argue with him. In fact while golden calves don't ever argue back with us, God actually seems to enjoy a good theological debate. God wants our questions and our prayers and our brutal honesty—in fact these are the very tools that lead us out of panic and anger and doubt. So God engages Moses—inviting him to advocate for this people but ultimately to remember that they are not really Moses' people at all; they're *God's* people. God is being ironic (and maybe even sarcastic).

We also learn some things about Moses as a leader here. Notice that God is giving him the chance to have these people all destroyed and have a nation of Moses clones—every despot's dream. But Moses sees that for what it is: its own “golden calf.” Leaders from every walk of life face this same temptation at some point in their work: college administrators, CEOs, baseball managers, rectors, politicians. If everyone in the organization was just like me things would go so much more smoothly. It's dealing with *these* people (who are a total mess) that is driving me crazy.

But *these people* are *God's* people. God actually gets Moses to say it out loud. We need to say it out loud ourselves from time to time. That woman who is so fearful she is paralyzed; she is a beloved child of God. That man who is so angry he's yelling at me; he is a beloved child of God. There is nothing sentimental or fake about that reality. It just is what it is. It is these panicky, angry, doubtful people are the ones God is trying to bring to the Promised Land.

It is we—we, panicky, angry, doubtful people—we are the ones God is still bringing into the Promised Land. It's not an easy journey and we ought to get used to that fact. The Christian faith is not a consumer product—it's not fast, it's not about us getting our needs met, it's not a formula. It's a journey toward discipleship, a journey from slavery to freedom by way of the wilderness and the setbacks and challenges faced along the way have the potential to be our undoing to the raw material that builds character.

We too easily settle for a god who looks something like a giant Santa Claus in the sky, a god who knows when we've been bad or good so we better be good for goodness sake. Or we settle for the God of the philosophers: an Unchanging- Unmoved Mover. Maybe those are golden calves we need to let go of. Notice that at the end of this story we heard today, God relents. *God changes His mind*. For some people that sounds pretty disconcerting. But it only sounds disconcerting if your image of God comes more from Plato than the Bible. The God of the Bible is a God in relationship—and relationships usually require some degree of relenting and change. The God of the Bible does feel passion and gets frustrated when people mess it up and just don't get it. What is constant, however, about the God of the Bible is steadfast love and mercy. What is constant (and yes, even in the Old Testament) is that God relents, forgives, loves us into second and third chances. A God who meets us in the midst of our foolishness and our anxiety to show us the way forward. Our anxiety doesn't get the last word, because God is still God. Ultimately, of course, this is exactly the God we need—a God beyond the images we hold so dear—a living God truly worthy of our trust and our devotion.