

A Peculiar Choice of Words

Exodus 20:1-6; 32:1-6

Matthew 6:24-25a

My Aunt Louise, whom I rarely disobey, sent me an interesting and cryptic email this week. It said simply, "Next Sunday, give your congregation the first message you had... can it be 10 years ago?" So I rummaged around in the files to see, first, what sermon I preached nearly ten years ago, second, to see if it was actually any good, and finally, if Aunt Louise had something there and I had preached a stirring sermon on being the Church that would fit my leaving the church just as well as it fit my arrival here. Alas. What I had forgotten was that my first Sunday here was also the first Sunday of Lent, and I had preached on sin. Maybe not the best choice for today. Probably wasn't a good choice for that day, either.

What I've chosen to do instead probably demonstrates just as great a lack of judgment as that. At least that's what my husband said when I told him I was sticking with the lectionary, and today's text was on the Golden Calf.

I have always found pleasure in words, and the power they have. Chosen carelessly, words can leave you offended, confused, and perhaps, tickled: Someone once attempted to compliment me after hearing me preach for the first time by saying that she had been "pleasantly surprised by my sermon."

Used well, on the other hand, and words have the power to stir, to challenge, to move you to tears. Words used well have the power to bring a room full of individuals together to praise God with one voice in song. Chosen and used well, words have the power to change you.

The story we just read tells how the Israelites pooled all their precious metals, melted them down and forged a golden calf, and then had themselves a big party to celebrate its presence in the middle of their encampment. The irony is that at the very moment they were doing that, Moses was up on Mount Sinai in a closed-door meeting with God scribbling down these words: I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before me. Words we call the first commandment, and words that, undoubtedly, were used well.

But it is an unusual choice of words. I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods before me. The implication is that there is a whole warehouse full of deities available to them, but the God of their ancestors was the only legitimate choice of all the possible choices. If they were my words, if it had been up to me to choose and arrange them, I would have wanted to make it quite clear that there were no other gods; there was only the one true God. There was no sun god, no fertility god, no god that brought rain or ushered you to the afterlife. And that was that.

But God chose differently. I am your God; you shall have no other gods before me.

God knew that there is no point in telling them – us – that there are no other gods; people will have a god; they will order their lives around something. Human beings need something and will find something to bring order to the chaotic world around them. Something that can control what they are unable to control. Something they can beseech when they have a need. Something that can explain the unexplainable, and create what we cannot.

God knows that anyone who has wondered how we got here and what we are supposed to do now that we are here will find themselves a god. Anyone who has.... looked up at the night sky and marveled at the stars and the planets, or down into a crib and wondered about the results of genetic error; anyone who has lived with the devastating effects of domestic violence will seek out a god: Something to comfort or blame. Something that can fix, or give meaning, or explain. Something that will give us some sense that the world and our lives are under the control of something. People go looking for a god for all sorts of reasons, and to do all sorts of things. But everyone eventually goes looking.

The warehouse is as well-stocked today as it was in the days of the ancients. Some of the old standbys are still around, like the gods of prosperity, and Bacchus, from Greece. As long as people have been around there have always been some who will try to find their comfort and security in accumulated wealth or the fruit of the vine. And while fertility goddesses themselves have officially been taken off the shelf, there are still those who have never given up that particular form of worship, if you catch my drift.

But the Enlightenment made the need for most of our mythological gods obsolete. Fire and weather and the cosmos are no longer quite the mysteries they once were. We have a better idea of how we got here, and even how to keep ourselves here. So with the more basic needs met and mysteries understood, we can devote ourselves to more modern gods, designer gods. Since the need to bless the harvest isn't so urgent anymore, with Kroger just down the street, now we can worship at the temple of the twin gods, 'nip and tuck' (since immortality is out, you might as well look good right up until the end). Others find their comfort in the god of knowledge; the greater mastery you have over the mysteries of the universe, the less, well, finite, you feel.

We could probably spend all afternoon naming the gods, but there's really no need. The point is the same – none of us is particularly good at being human:

- not knowing everything there is to know,
- not being in absolute control of our every moment,
- not being able to stop the terrible things that go on in the world,
- not being the center of the universe.

And so we latch on to something that we hope will do some of that for us. We are wrong, of course, but even knowing that doesn't stop us from doing it.

There is one other peculiar choice of words in this commandment: I am the Lord your God. God doesn't threaten us with death and destruction, God offers us a gift. The

promise to be exactly the kind of God we are looking for. The one God who can do what all those other gods only profess to be able to do:

give us security,
hold all worlds and universes in his hand,
create, know and understand all things, and....
redeem the evil in the world.

And that isn't all. This God is a personal God. A God who chooses to need us, and be as attached to us as we are to him; not a cavalier god who tinkers and experiments with us. Not a god who is so busy watching old stars die and making new ones, and looking after wars and famines and stuff that he doesn't have time to go with me on my morning walk, or doesn't know that you had a terrible argument with your spouse last night. This God is not only mighty and glorious, this God is close, and interested, and responsive.

That's the reason why the golden calf incident was such a big deal. The gods that we make up – whether they are carved or minted or consumed – they aren't animated. Not only do they not create life or give breath or have the ability to keep the planets in their rotations, they don't visit us with comfort or surprise us with things we never dreamed of. They don't think we're pretty funny at least ten times over the course of the day, and their deepest desire isn't to be with us every waking, and every sleeping, moment of our days. Those gods didn't and wouldn't become human, suffer, and die for us. Those gods care nothing about us. Our gods take from us, and they give nothing in return. We live in service to them, and all it does is leave us tired.

You're probably still trying to figure out why, on my very last day here, I have continued my stubborn trek through Exodus when it brings you such a seemingly unsuitable sermon for the occasion? Well, first, because I think its message is an important one, no matter what the date or occasion. There is a reason that the first commandment was "you shall have no other gods before me," and the very first thing the Israelites did afterwards was create another god for themselves. I think idolatry is the primary breach in our relationship with God. The minute we find ourselves on shaky ground the first thing we do is find ourselves something to hang onto, something to give us some semblance of control over our lives, or if it can't do that, at least make us feel better.

But I would also argue the question about its suitability for the occasion. The golden calf is a story about communal idolatry. Community idolatry.

I read somewhere this week that the real issue in this story isn't other gods, per se, it's patience and anxiety. Moses was gone too long, to their way of thinking. And they got panicky. Insecure feeling. Maybe even a bit bored. Find us something new and solid and shiny and exciting to hang on to, they told Aaron. Something that will make us feel like things are going to be okay and we haven't been abandoned here in this no-man's land.

Well, folks, Moses is going to be gone for a while. Longer than you will feel comfortable with. The time is going to come when you'll feel like you've been hanging around the

foot of Mount Sinai without purpose or direction or leadership for longer than is expedient or reasonable. And the great temptation will be to forge something for yourselves here that will bring the church order and strength and comfort.

But, do you see the problem there? It's Moses who is going to be gone for a while, not God. And Moses isn't your deity. Moses isn't the one who grounds you, and gives you direction and hope and comfort. That's God. And God hadn't gone anywhere. God isn't going anywhere.

Wait and trust. Not very eloquent or profound words to leave you with, but I think they are words that will carry you through the next year or so. Keep on doing what you do so well: Break bread together, worship, pray, study together. Give generously to the work of the church. Care for each other.

You don't need a golden calf. God will be right here with you.