

Your Face, O Lord, I Will Seek
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
June 18, 2023 PM Sermon
Reverend Peter Jonker
Exodus 32:1-24

My reaction to the story of the golden calf has changed over time. When you first hear the story, when I first heard the story, you start with the, “How can these people be so thick-headed?” reaction. Specifically, how can they be so forgetful!? God has done everything for this people, how can they forget that! He has made his faithfulness clear to them over and over again. God freed them from Egypt through a series of 10 plagues. Great, unforgettable displays of power. Then there was the incident at the Red Sea. God split the water, saved them and drowned their enemies. You would think that would stick in their memory. And then there was the manna. Every day, the people woke up to a miracle of bread. Every morning, through the bread, God said, ‘Here I am! I am real! I am with you!’

And yet, despite all those vivid reminders, all it takes is a couple of weeks of Moses being away on the mountain, and the Israelites are ready to throw it all away. Moses is away and they plan a party. Not just any party, a frat party, an all-night rave in the desert, the whole nation dancing around the golden calf that Aaron had made out of their jewelry.

Ah yes: Aaron. He’s even more of a head-shaker. What a wet noodle! He is the original spineless clergyman. He’s seen the manna and the plagues and the water canyons just like the rest of them, but when the people come up to him and say, ‘Make gods for us!’ He responds, not with resistance, but with a plan. “Give me your jewelry and we’ll see what we can do.” Apparently, he will do anything to please his congregation. Then, when Moses catches him red handed, he comes up with what might be the most pathetic lie in the Bible, “Moses, it’s the craziest thing; you won’t believe what happened! The people gave me their gold, I threw it in the fire, and out came this calf!” He acts as though the calf were a random act of sculpture. So, our initial reaction to this passage is to shake our heads at the faithlessness of the people and the faithlessness of Aaron. That’s a legitimate reaction.

But as I’ve spent more time with this passage, my reaction has changed. I still find the Israelites’ behavior ludicrous, but now I’ve started to feel something more like sympathy for them. Not sympathy in the sense that I don’t think they are responsible for what they’ve done, but sympathy in the sense that I understand why they did what they did, sympathy in the sense of: “There, but for the grace of God, go I.”

What is it that made the Israelites demand the calf from Aaron? What causes them to allow all their rather expensive jewelry to be melted into a statue? It’s their desire to see God. It’s their hunger to see God. What you have to see is that this calf isn’t meant to be an alternative god, this image is Israel’s attempt to connect Israel with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I know that’s probably not how you understood this story growing up. You probably thought that Israel was switching gods here, abandoning the Lord for something different. But if you read the story carefully, I don’t think that’s right. Did you notice what Aaron declared right after the calf was built? ‘Tomorrow will be a festival to the Lord.’ He uses the divine name. “Tomorrow will be a festival to Yahweh.” This calf is for the worship of the Lord. It is the Lord God these people are trying to reach through this golden statue. It’s the Lord these people are trying to reach when they engage in their revelry, when they have their wild party at the foot of the mountain.

So when you read closely, you see it’s the second commandment that the Israelites are breaking not the first. The first commandment is: You shall have no other gods before me. That’s the commandment broken when we worship another god. The second commandment is about worshiping the Lord God in the wrong way. God had said, “When you worship me, don’t use images in the shape of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath!” When you worship me, don’t use statues. That’s the command broken by the golden cow.

Look even more closely and you’ll see that the Israelites break this commandment because, with Moses gone, they lost contact with the one person who they relied upon to connect them with God. “Aaron, please make a god who will go before us, because Moses this man who has been leading us out of Egypt, we don’t know where he has gone.” Moses was the face of God for these people. Moses was the one who went into the tent of meeting for them and then came out and told the people God’s will, Moses was the one who told them

what God wanted and didn't want. So long as he was around they had a human face to connect them with God. He was their mediator. But now Moses is gone. They can't see Moses. Haven't seen him for weeks, and they're lost. They are desperate for some other face to mediate God's presence for them, and so they build a calf. At the bottom of all this idolatry and revelry is a desire to see God's face.

This desire is something we can sympathize with, can't we? This desire to see God's face is as natural as it can be. If you've ever found yourself in a dark place with your eyes closed and your face in your hands saying, "God show me what to do here!" You know all about this desire. And it's not sinful. You see it all throughout the Psalms. Psalm 27: "My heart says, seek His face and your face, O Lord, I will seek." "How long will you hide your face from me!" says Psalm 13. "Lord, let the light of your face shine upon us," says Psalm 4. And, in the very next chapter, Moses expresses this basic desire. He asks to see God's glory. He wants to see God's face. God says you can't see my face, but I will pass by in front of you and I will show you my back. I will show you my glory. All human beings have this transcendent desire, which, whether they know it or not, is a desire to see God's face. It's what Calvin called our *sensus divinitatis*.

It all adds up to a tragic paradox for human life. We worship a God who is invisible, who dwells in cloud and majesty. But we have in our hearts an overwhelming desire to see him face to face. We can't see God. We aren't allowed to picture him, and yet we want nothing more than to have him turn his face toward us.

This is very hard for us because when we really love someone we need to surround ourselves with images and physical reminders of that person. When we are lonely, we turn to images and tangible, physical things. A soldier is sent to a faraway country for a tour of duty. For a full year he will be away from his wife and children. How does that soldier handle the absence from the people he loves more than anyone in the world? He uses visuals. Near the area he sleeps, he keeps pictures. He and his wife on their honeymoon. A picture of his daughter perched on his shoulders at the last Memorial Day picnic. A picture of the whole family smiling at the beach. At night when the darkness and the loneliness close in he stares at them. Even talks to them. And it's not just pictures. He has keepsakes too. On his little bedside stand next to his Bible is one of his daughter's stuffed animals that she's sent him. Around his neck he wears a necklace given to him by his wife the day he left. It's what we do. We gather mementos and pictures of the people we love of the places we miss and we return to them as a way of warming our hearts.

There is no excuse for what the Israelites did. But can you at least see how a kind of loneliness, a kind of hunger for their creator was at the center of their wild party in the desert?

That same loneliness and hunger still burns in people today. As I read about the Israelite's wild party in the desert, I thought of another, modern, American wild party in the desert. Have you heard of the burning man festival? It's a festival held every summer in the desert of Nevada, in the Black Rock desert.

What is the Burning Man festival? In the words of its own website, it's about radical self-expression, radical creativity and radical freedom. For a week, people live in a camp in the middle of the desert and they fill that camp with outlandish things. They wear face paint and body paint, they build elaborate sets and whimsical buildings that they call temples. They fill the desert with sculpture and art and drums and music. There are plenty of mind-altering substances being shared; a healthy percentage of the attendees are stoned, although not all of them. It's a Mad Max meets Blade Runner kind of place.

At the center of the revelry is a 50-foot figure of a man. It stands raised up on a pyramid platform above the desert, it's abstract so it has no facial features and its arms are extended over the camp. On the last day of the festival all 50,000 participants circle around the man. A thousand people spin fire batons. 500 people beat drums and then the man is set on fire while the whole crowd shouts its approval. And you thought the golden calf was just a story.

Now, it would be easy for me to pound the pulpit, and say "Sodom and Gomorrah!" It would be easy for me to rail against the burning man festival, and I'm sure many preachers have. But if we look deeper, if we look beneath the surface, something Christians should always try to do, we can see that the same loneliness hunger for God that drove Israel to make the golden calf, also drives the burning man festival.

Do you know what's really interesting: guess what sort of person attends Burning Man? Maybe you think it's all a bunch of druggies and burnouts and ex hippies. Well, you'd be wrong about that. The people who come to these things tend to be wealthy, well educated. Often they're techies. In fact, an article I read this week says that Silicon Valley almost shuts down during the Burning Man festival because so many of the software

people head out to the desert. Executives from Amazon and Google have attended. The place is full of highly paid engineers and software developers, graduates of Cal Tech and Stanford. These are members of the generation who have grown up without God, without church, without any real religious instruction, without rooting in a religious tradition. They've grown up on sitcoms and naturalism. They've grown up in families who told them about the evils of organized religion. But despite all that they can't shake their religious impulse, they can't escape the knowledge that there is more to life than atoms and microchips. God has set eternity in their hearts, and though they don't know it, they hunger to see his face, and that hunger is deep enough that it drives them to burn things in the desert.

It's interesting isn't it that the generation who grows up without God ends up turning back toward something that looks like a primal religion. Go ahead and condemn these desert revelers, but feel compassion for them too. They are lost and lonely, like sheep without a shepherd.

It's when you really see the depth of this human longing and the depth of this loneliness, that you really begin to see the height of the good news of Jesus. Here is the news all humanity needs to hear. God has shown us his face. God has turned his face toward us. The Word has become flesh and has tabernacles among us. Jesus has been born and now for all the ups and downs of life we have a face we can turn to. When we are afraid, his face shows compassion and he says, "Don't be afraid, I will never leave you nor forsake you. When we are rebellious and sinful, his face is strong and stern: "Be Holy as I am Holy! This behavior cannot inherit the Kingdom of God! Go and leave your life of sin!" When we are confused about the direction of our lives, his face is re-assuring: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. Follow me. You'll be OK." When we are joyful his face lights up, and he says, "I came that you might have life and have it abundantly!" And when we are terribly sad, when loss and death have completely clouded our horizons, his face is tearstained, but his voice is clear as he says, "I am the resurrection and the life. The person who believes in me will live, even though that person dies."

We see some pretty crazy stuff going on in the world, in the lives of the people around us. Let me also invite you to look more deeply at the crazy and desperate behavior of so many of your friends and neighbors, to look beneath the surface and see how hungry they are for connection with God. And then let me invite you to be the friendly face, the kind face, the compassionate face, the strong, the reassuring face that shows them the One who is the desire of their heart.

©Rev. Peter Jonker