

The Thing About Idols
Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost
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Texts: Exodus 32.1-14;
Psalm 106.1-6, 19-23;
Philippians 4.1-9;
Matthew 22.1-14

Have you ever thought about the place of storytelling in human life? We start telling stories to our babies the moment they are born. Or at least we should. They now hand out story books at the doctor's office at wellness visits for children because they have discovered that children who hear stories are better able to learn. But it's more than just building reading skills. Hearing stories exposes us to emotion, to the world of human relationships, we learn how things work, we begin to see cause and effect, and it opens our mind to imagination. Children who hear stories begin to tell stories and as they do they discover the wide open realm of possibility.

But it's not just children. We continue to crave and tell stories throughout our entire lives: a good book, a captivating film has the same capacity to transport us to another world as the stories of our childhood once did. A delightful evening with friends sitting around a table long after the meal has been shared almost always includes some storytelling. It's how we express who we are, what has happened to us, and how we are making sense of the world around us. The thing about a good story is that it pulls you in so that you can see not only into the heart and mind and soul of the people in the story but so that you can see more clearly into your own heart and mind and soul. A good story opens you up to see, and think, and feel in ways you have not done before. A good story makes you feel alive because it changes you. And life is change. Without the capacity to shift perspective and adapt to changing circumstance we cannot survive let alone thrive.

It is for all these reasons and more that God's Word comes to us as a story. Sure there are moments of ethical instruction and rules to live by. But those are shared as commentary really on the heart of God's Word which is

the story that unfolds between God and creation and the human beings within it. We've been reading through Genesis and Exodus this summer and fall. These iconic, mythic stories have been told and retold eventually written down and passed along through the generations. They are filled with the stuff of good story: gripping characters, universal dilemmas, drama and conflict, heart breaking choices, and heroic courage. These stories have endured because they reveal to us the heart and mind and soul not only of these ancient human beings but the heart and mind and soul of God as well.

The story of the golden calf as it has been called is on the surface a rather strange story to modern, Western ears. Idols made from stone or gold simply aren't a part of the culture in which we live. It's easy to look at the Hebrews here as backward and superstitious falling prey to a temptation that we sophisticates of today never would. But as I said to the children today, the Hebrew people were not stupid. They didn't believe God WAS a golden calf. They simply needed and wanted something tangible they could see and touch. It came from their longing for something reliable, something solid on which they could depend.

From the moment they left Egypt, their lives had been upended. And as each crisis came, God asked for some new step of faith from them. As the soldiers were closing in, God made a way for them it just included walking through the middle of a body of water. As starvation became imminent in the wilderness, God provided food for them but it was parceled out one day at a time. Every night as they went to sleep they had to trust that the provision would come again and was not some strange fluke. That kind of uncertainty takes a toll. And now Moses was up on the mountain talking with God and was taking forever to come down. They had seen religion back in Egypt and it was part of a normal life. There were temples and statutes and rituals and it was stable and the people there had food and every day it was sounding more and more enticing. The thing about idols, though, is that they are static. Yes they are solid but they also do not change.

The calf is not really the interesting part of the story. The really fascinating part of this story, the place where it really comes alive, is the part that starts in verse 7 where God looks down on this scene and tells one story and

Moses sees another. And in the course of conversation, Moses gets God to change God's mind. That's the really fascinating moment here. When God sees them turn from freedom to idolatry, God's anger flashes fiercely. They are turning their back on the invitation into relationship that God has offered. They are turning away from the vibrant life of freedom and vitality that God has been leading them into. God watches as they turn instead toward the static life of idolatry with its false promise of security and predictability. That's the story God tells.

Moses stands between God and the people in that moment and offers a different perspective. Where God is looking at the people's rejection and failure, Moses shifts to a different angle - to put the spot light on God's power of liberation, God's intention to reach the nations: "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self..."¹ And the most amazing piece of this story: "And the Lord changed his mind..."²

Here's the thing: life as you live it can sometimes feel inevitable. There are so many things that are out of our control. Things happen and a lot of the time there isn't anything we can do to change it. When someone tells you a story, you get to observe the pivotal moments where a single choice can create a crossroad; which is not to say that everything in life is within our control. Things happen. But how we choose to tell the story of those things can determine how we react and how we react becomes one of those pivotal moments that can create a crossroad.

We see that here in the story from Exodus. And it is God who is standing at the crossroad who is open to a different perspective, and as a result changes course. For those who think perfection requires a static and unchanging God...this story is quite troubling. For those who have discovered that life is change...this story isn't troubling at all. It's liberating. The thing about idols is that they do not change. What this story reveals is that God seeks to share life with us. And sharing life means being open to change - to seeing things from new and different angles - and letting that shift in perspective chart a new and different course.

¹ Exodus 32.13, NRSV

² Exodus 32.14, NRSV

I read a commentator this week who was reflecting on the passage from Philippians and the command to “Rejoice always...to not worry about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”³

He made the claim that joy is a discipline of perception. It’s a willingness to look for God’s presence even in the midst of painful circumstances and then to reconsider and reinvest in life from a different, more liberating perspective.⁴ He went on to claim that prayer in its many forms is the means by which we do this. Prayer becomes the place where we remain open to seeing our life, even the painful parts, from another angle – from an angle that is still “open to the multiple resolutions that God permits us to consider.”⁵

When I think about prayer and joy in this way, I begin to see what a creative endeavor the life of faith really is. The longer we live, the more that we pray, the better storytellers we become.

We no longer see life as inevitable. We start to see crossroads where others see dead ends. We no longer see prayer as a solitary experience between us and God but see it as an ongoing conversation anytime we are being opened up to new insight and fresh perspective. We begin to see idols everywhere – every time we or someone else casts God in stone⁶ and will not allow the wind of God’s Spirit the freedom to move and shift and change our perspective.

Instead we look for God in every nook and cranny of life in whatever is true, and honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, we think about these things. And we keep on doing the things that we have learned and received and heard and seen and we find that the God of peace is in the middle of it all.⁷

Praise be to God!

³ Philippians 4.4,6, NRSV.

⁴ Nathan Eddy, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 161.

⁵ Nathan Eddy, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 161.

⁶ Brian McLaren in his book *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2010) talks about the aversion to idols in Hebrew Scriptures in a similar way.

⁷ From Philippians 4.8-10, NRSV.