

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"A False Image of a True God"

Scripture: Exodus 32:1-14

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Songs/Hymns: #803 -- Come, ye thankful people, come, #672 -- Jesus calls us, o'er the tumult I desire Jesus,
Think about his love

Have you ever been wrong about someone?

She was always well-dressed,
Well put-together.

But she always stood back in public gatherings,
so you figured she was snooty.
Too good for the rest.

But when you got to know her,
When you finally got to know her,
You found her incredibly fun and friendly.

She wasn't snooty.
She was just shy in big groups.

Have you ever been wrong about someone?
And have you ever discovered a side of someone
That you might have missed?

You knew she liked watching sport
But had never seen her play them.

And so you were surprised to discover
That she was on the team at her university
And that for three years in a row
They had won the national title.

You knew he was comfortable.
He had a nice home in a nice neighborhood.
But who would have imagined
that a guy who drove a teenaged Toyota
had registered hundreds of patents
And was sitting on millions.

Often we are surprised by the people around us.
We are forced to recognise that many
Won't conform to our stereotypes or expectations.

But if this is true about people,
could this be true about our Heavenly Father?
And could it be, that instead of worshipping the true God,
the living God

We are worshipping an image of our own creation...

Could it be that our polished image of God
More closely resembles a beloved parent,
modern notions of justice,
or even Santa Claus,
Than the God we hear about in the Bible?

Today we are continuing our tourist trip through the Old Testament.
It's a whirlwind tour,
so while we are visiting some of the top attractions
We are skipping over much.

Last week we heard about the plague of the firstborn
And the preparations for Passover.
Today we are with the people of Israel in the wilderness.

This means we have skipped over a number of famous stories:
The Crossing of the Sea,
The provision manna and quail,
And the giving of the law:
The Ten Commandments.

Today we are with Israel in the wilderness.

At this point we are told
that Moses has gone back up the mountain to meet with God,
and that he has been gone for a very long time.

The people are nervous and worried not to have their leader,
God's prophet with them.

And so, they ask Moses' brother Aaron,
To make a visible representation of God
which they can focus on in this extended time of absence.

Aaron fashions a calf

With the gold that he collects from the people.

He presents it to them

as the gods who brought them out of Egypt,

And declares a festival to the LORD.

When I was young I was shocked to hear this story.

A golden calf?

People had clearly given up on the LORD who rescued them from Egypt

To follow some other Egyptian or Canaanite God

they had encountered along the way.

But if you pay attention to the story,

You'll realise that they are simply seeking a way

To imagine the God who had saved them.

The feel bereft without Moses, God's representative, among them.

This was a way that they could

remind themselves of God's presence.

It is understandable what they are doing.

Just consider that God has already shared with Moses,

God's plans for the construction of a golden ark

and the Tabernacle, a visible home for God's presence.

But in their impatience the people are not

Waiting for this gift,

This revelation.

And more than just imaging God's throne
they are trying to make God visible.

This is a violation of those commandments God gave the people,
The commandments that people accepted.

Earlier in Chapter 20 we encounter these words:

"I am the Lord your God,
who brought you out of Egypt,
out of the land of slavery.

"You shall have no other gods before me.

"You shall not make for yourself an image
in the form of anything in heaven above
or on the earth beneath
or in the waters below.

You shall not bow down to them or worship them;
for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God,

punishing the children for the sin of the parents
to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me,
but showing love to a thousand generations of those
who love me and keep my commandments."ⁱ

The people are doing what God has clearly asked them not to do.

God will brook no rivals.

And God prohibits any attempts to image God.

God will not be constrained or contained
in gold or silver or stone.

This breach of this law, this breach of God's covenant

Makes God very angry.

After we've been shown the mayhem

of what has been going on among the people below,
downstairs if you will,

we are given a description of what's going on

between Moses and God upstairs on the mountain.

God is not happy with the people's breach of the covenant.

God is so furious

that God is ready to disown them.

Just consider the distancing language that is being used:

"The Lord tells Moses to "go down" because *your* people,
whom *you* brought up out of the land of Egypt,
have sinned so very badly..."ⁱⁱ

While the rest of the Exodus story makes is clear

That the liberation from Egypt is the result of God's work

Among a people God has chosen,

Now God wants to pawn them off on Moses.

More than that God is ready to annihilate them:

“Now leave me alone” God says to Moses
“so that my anger may burn against them
And that I may destroy them.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This does not bode well

For the people who have just started
On a new road of freedom.
God wants to declare year zero
And begin again.

God asks Moses to leave God alone,
But Moses refuses.

Moses argues with God reminding God that they remain God’s people:

“Why should your anger burn against *your* people,
Whom *you* brought out of Egypt...”^{iv}

Moses asks God to consider God’s reputation:

“Why should the Egyptians say,
‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out,
to kill them in the mountains
and to wipe them off the face of the earth?’”^v

Moses asks God to remember God’s promise:

“Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel,
to whom you swore by your own self:
‘I will make your descendants
as numerous as the stars in the sky...”^{vi}

Moses makes his arguments
And we are told that God relents.
God doesn't deliver on God's threats.

So what do you think of this story?

I think that most of us are surprised
by this revelation of a jealous and angry and holy God.

This does not fit with that image of a kindly old grandfather in heaven
Who smiles and says 'boys will be boys'
when the people are busy sinning.

PAUSE

I think that most of us are surprised
To hear about a God is open to human influence
Open to persuasion.

This does not fit with that image of a God who is aloof
Or a God who has made all his choices
And has resolutely decided everything.

PAUSE

Does what we heard this morning fit in with your image of God?
If not, could it be that like the Israelites,
You have made a false image of the true and living God.

Could it be that you are worshipping
A caricature of the Living God,
a shadow of the God revealed in the Bible
and made know in Jesus Christ?

Could it be that the LORD is much greater
That that favorite image of God you
Like to snuggle up to at night?

Listen to this warning from American Author Annie Dillard:

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs,
sufficiently sensible of conditions.
Does anyone have the foggiest idea
what sort of power we so blithely invoke?...

The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets,
mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning.
It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats
and velvet hats to church;

we should all be wearing crash helmets.

Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares;
they should lash us to our pews.
For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense,
or the waking god may draw us out
to where we can never return.”

LORD have mercy. Amen.

ⁱ Exodus 20:2-4 NIV

ⁱⁱ Frank Anthony Spina "Exodus 32:1-14" The Lectionary Commentary: the Old Testament and Acts 106

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 32:11 NIV

^{iv} Exodus 32:11 NIV

^v Exodus 32:12 NIV

^{vi} Exodus 32:13 NIV