

Sermon – Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 23A)

Scripture Texts: Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23, 43-45; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *While idols offer false comfort and security, God calls to us through icons, inviting us to the risk of relationship and community – for only there can we truly find meaning and support and true life.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. Introduction to Icons

- a. This week, I was reminded of a book that Heather and I read together shortly after we started dating (the 23rd anniversary of which we just celebrated last week!).
 - i. Madeline L'Engle's *Penguins and Golden Calves* opens with the story of visiting Antarctica in her mid-70's. When I read this book 23 years ago, I found the idea of trekking to the South Pole at that age to be incredibly impressive – but getting to know some of you has given me a much deeper appreciation for the adventures of 70 & 80-year olds.
 - ii. Still, L'Engle recounts in the opening pages how the trip almost did not happen. Although she had been planning the trip with her son and daughter-in-law for two years, she was in a major car crash less than 6 months before they were supposed to depart. The crash had nearly killed her, and her body was still recovering, so she had decided not to go.
 - iii. However, her son pushed her, saying that he wouldn't go on the trip unless she came along as planned. Ultimately, she decided to go – and the trip led to this beautiful little book.
- b. L'Engle's book explores our relationships to icons and to idols. With our OT story today being that of the golden calf, we'll get to idols soon – but I want to start with icons.
 - i. We deal with icons all the time – icons on our computers or phones represent the different programs and apps that we make constant use of. But, of course, that's not the kind of icon L'Engle is talking about.
 - ii. Religiously, icons are pieces of art that depict scenes from Scripture or tradition, and they can be incredibly beautiful. I have a collection in my office – a collection that I started after reading this book and then visiting the Middle East (a part of the world that has continued the ancient practice of creating and valuing icons).
 - iii. But, L'Engle goes even further than religious art, describing penguins as icons. Icons, she suggests, are windows into the reality of God and God's love.
- c. Anything that draws you into wonder and joy and love can be an icon.
 - i. The OT prophet Habakkuk speaks about the hope that earth will ultimately be “filled with the knowledge of the glory of God”, even “as the waters cover the sea.”
 - ii. God is the source of all wonder and joy and love, so any experience of these realities invites us to more deeply know and love our creator.

- iii. Thus, penguins and flowers and walks in the woods and trips to the opera and meals with friends and playing an instrument and making a quilt can all be icons.

2. The Golden Calf

- a. But, before we get too swept away with the wonder and beauty of icons, let's also remember that our text for today is focused on idolatry.
 - i. As we will see, idols are effectively the opposite of icons. However, we don't have to delve into that relationship to know that idols are a problem.
 - ii. Last week, we looked at the 10 commandments, and right there in the second commandment God forbids the creation and worship of idols.
 - iii. It is a strange irony that, so soon after having received these commandments, the people of God break this one in such spectacular fashion.
- b. Context
 - i. Remember where we are – Exodus is a book of becoming, in which the Israelite people are coming to understand who God is and who they are.
 - ii. God had raised up Moses to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt and across the desert. They have crossed the Red Sea on dry land. God has provided food and water in the wilderness. They have experienced God to be their deliverer and provider.
 - iii. After crossing the desert, God has now brought them to Mt. Sinai, where God is speaking with Moses and the leaders of the people. Last week, we saw the giving of the 10 commandments, and I suggested that these aren't just God demanding respect and obedience for the people. Rather, they are a guide to a life of freedom – freedom from the chains of empire and freedom to live with abundant joy and love and community.
- c. Exodus 32
 - i. Between last week and this week, Moses has been up and down the mountain multiple times, giving more commandments, and giving instructions for the creation of a tabernacle and a priesthood, that the people might journey deeper into relationship with God. But, as our story picks up, Moses has been up on the mountain for quite some time, and the people are growing restless. They say to Aaron, the brother of Moses who has recently been made their priest, "Come, make gods for us..."
 - ii. So, Aaron collects gold from the people – gold which, we were told several chapters earlier, the people of Egypt gave them as they departed. And, Aaron makes a golden calf. But, why a calf? Scholars debate this, but one possibility is that Egyptians commonly made and worshiped bovine idols, particularly of the god Apis. This would have been familiar to the people, and it is very hard to fully escape the logic of empire.
 - iii. Whatever the case, God is depicted as being outraged – the point of telling Moses that God will destroy the people and start over with Moses. I love the exchange that follows...Moses talks down God, almost like a hostage negotiator. And, God relents, changing his mind.
 - iv. This is a very human depiction of God...but that doesn't mean it is an accurate depiction. We humans regularly try to make God like us – and I wonder if the golden calf isn't the only idol of this passage. I'm grateful that we've made at least some progress in our understanding of God, not as wrathful and quick to anger, but

as a God who makes space for our stumbles and falls, loving us enough to keep picking us back up. Thus, in this passage, Moses is an icon of God for me.

3. Icons and Idols and Control

- a. Compassion is the right response – God has compassion on us, even when we turn to idolatry, and that is the right response to idolatry.
 - i. Notice, here, that the people call for idols not because they want to turn away from God or think they'll get a better deal with idols. Rather, they turn out of fear and anxiety – out of a sense of abandonment. Moses has been up on the mountain for a long time, and they've seen all the lightning and heard all the thunder. They are worried that Moses is dead and gone, that God has abandoned them. So, being out in the desert, they need a god or gods to lead them forward – to “go before us.”
 - ii. I don't think idolatry generally begins in greed or selfishness. Rather, it begins with unmet needs. It begins in insecurity, in seeking some reassurance or comfort or control.
 - iii. That is born out in what happens with the golden calf. While some scholars do suggest that Aaron made a calf because of the idols & gods of Egypt, there is another possibility that I find much more convincing. Scholars point to a motif of the time of depicting gods – especially storm gods – as standing on the back of a calf. Aaron makes the calf in an effort to make space for the God who led the people to this mountain, and who has been seen in the storm. Indeed, when Aaron presents the idol, he does not say “Come worship Apis, the bull god of Egypt.” Rather, he speaks of the God who brought them out of Egypt, and declares that they will have a festival to the LORD.
- b. The problem with idols
 - i. So, compassion is the right response, because idolatry is an attempt to seek comfort and reassurance, to meet an unmet but legitimate need. However, it is still a problem because the idol can never meet the need.
 - ii. To understand what I mean, let's look at modern forms of idolatry. We don't generally make figures of gold or silver to worship, but we absolutely turn to things other than God when we have unmet needs, or when we feel insecure. In such circumstances, we regularly turn to alcohol, or to gambling, or to sex, or to work, or to a host of other unhealthy options. We often speak about modern idolatry with the language of addiction.
 - iii. If an icon is when something created serves as a window to the reality of God, and idol is when we set up something created in the place of God, expecting miracles of it. An idol is anything we use to try and get control over the world in ways that lead us away from the God who truly is in control, and who promises to meet us in our places of need.
- c. Call to icons, rather than idols
 - i. The prohibition against idols is not because God is an egotistical narcissist who needs to be the center of attention. Rather, it is because idols can never truly meet our needs. Like any addiction, idols will promise more and more while delivering less and less. Like any addiction, idols will ultimately destroy us if we don't turn away from them. (That, I think, is the point of Jesus' stark parable in today's gospel).

- ii. Idols will always end up isolating us, cutting us off from community and from God. But icons will draw us into community – even though that involves uncertainty and the willingness to admit that we can’t control everything. Like any good art, Icons always mean more than we can understand, and defy our efforts at control.
- iii. Rather than seeking false comfort in idols, we are called to do the hard work of building community, of going to others with our needs and trusting them to support us. We are called to the hard work of doing therapy and healing and growth.
- iv. This is hard work, but God gives us all manner of icons to support us along the way – all sorts of glimpses into the reality of God’s love and grace, if only we will open our eyes and let ourselves see. So, let us close with the words of our Philippians passage today: *Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is 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, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.*

Amen.

Notes:

- Idols stem from unmet needs – the people are truly afraid when Moses is away, and when God has been so scary. Turning to an idol is a way of trying to find comfort and make things more manageable.
- More broadly, when we have unmet needs or unhealed hurts, we sometimes turn to something other than God to try and meet those needs. We see this with alcohol, gambling, sex, work.
- This leads us to recognize a definition for idols: some aspect of creation that we isolate and elevate, expecting miracles from it. But, the tragic thing about idols, is that they promise more and more while giving less and less.
- When we turn to idols, we run the risk of damaging our very souls, of ending up like the people invited to the wedding in Jesus' parable. This is not a threat – it is a warning of how turning away from God and toward idols will ultimately destroy us.
- Contrast idols with icons. Icons are windows into the reality and beauty of God. Icons, like art, always mean **more** than we understand. They lead us into mystery and wonder, while idols are a compression and narrowing of reality.
- When we are struggling with unmet needs, or when we need to do the hard work of healing and growth, icons can inspire and sustain us, connecting us to God and to wonder and to hope.