



First United Church of Oak Park

Things Always Change

Exodus 32: 1-6

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The people of God had been in the wilderness for months. They had already passed through hard trials and dangers. In the wilderness they would find that it was very hard to find food, or water; there were dangerous wild animals, enemy nations attacking stragglers. Times were bad, very bad. But then they arrived at Mt. Sinai, the place they had been promised they would meet and know the God of their deliverance.

Their leader, Moses, went up onto the mountain to speak directly with God, and would then come back down and deliver the message to the whole people. Moses went up the mountain and ... didn't come back. A day went by. Two days. Ten days. Three weeks. Six weeks go by and Moses has not come back down. And the people, they don't know what to do.

They felt like this was just going to go on and on without end. Something had to change! And so they demanded that new gods be made, new gods that would go before them. They melted down all their gold. Cast the gold into the figure of a calf, and begin to worship the golden calf. Before this episode comes to a close things get much worse — the people are divided, violence breaks out among the people with zealots killing one another in the public eye to prove where their loyalties lie, and a plague breaks out and sweeps through the people.

Say what you will about the Bible, but it is honest. The Bible cannot be accused of papering over this embarrassing episode. Over the course of many centuries, one might imagine that there was a certain editorial instinct to cast the people of God in a positive light. Portray the ancestors in a flattering way, highlight the triumphs, downplay the defeats, that sort of thing. And as far as humiliating episodes go, the golden calf ranks right at the top — the people fashioning golden idols while Moses is literally talking to God? It's not good. And yet, here it is, still told and retold by the people of God.

What lesson are we to learn from this? What hope or light or strength for the journey might be found from this story? Why is this in the Bible at all?

It's in the Bible because this is what life can feel like. This is what living through bad times is like. There the people of God were, in the wilderness, danger all around — no food, water, enemies always ready to attack. Violence among the people. Add to that, a total absence of leadership. Oh, and a plague! The people of God were living through bad times, and in the depths of bad times it feels like things are never going to change. In the depths of darkness, it feels like there will never be a return of light. And when it feels as if bad times will never pass, people do desperate things.

But learn this from the story of the golden calf. Things always change. Times always change. Even the worst of times will not last forever. What a blessing this story is, the story of the golden calf. Over the millennia people of faith have looked back upon this story, able to say if they were able to get through that, then surely we can get through this. If they were able to get through that, then surely we can get through this.

The circumstances of the world today are legitimately bad. Times are bad and it feels as if the pace of chaos is quickening, barreling toward some uncertain conclusion. There is violence on the streets with zealots killing people to prove where their loyalties lie. Justice is denied and due consideration of weighty matters is discarded in favor of partisan fisticuffs. Crises are not resolved or dealt with so much as supplanted in public consciousness by new and more pressing crises making what has passed seem not so bad, or at least not so new. Leadership is totally absent. Oh, and a plague! Lest we forget or be snookered into acting as if up is down and peril is protection.

But there are lessons we can learn from the story of the golden calf. There is hope and light and strength for the journey.

The first lesson is that the story of the golden calf has still been told, year after year, even though it is embarrassing and hard. We must tell the truth. In years to come, when we look back on these times we are living, we must tell the truth about how bad things are. There is always a temptation to cast one's own people, one's own nation, in a positive light — highlight the triumphs, downplay the defeats, that sort of thing. And as far as humiliating episodes go, these days rank near the top. The first lesson of the story of the golden calf is to tell the truth, especially if it is hard.

We must tell the truth because of the second lesson of the golden calf — things always change. One of the strangest things about these days is, although I know that it isn't how things have always been, it feels in my gut like this is how things are always going to be. It feels like this is just how things are now. It feels like these bad times will last forever. But it's not true. Bad times come, and when they come they feel like they will last forever. But it's not true. Bad times are not forever.

What a blessing this story is, the story of the golden calf. Over the millennia people of faith have looked back upon this story, able to say if they were able to get through that, then surely we can get through this. And people of future generations, children and grandchildren, will look back on this time and say — if they could get through that, then surely we can get through this. The lessons of the story of the golden calf, the blessings of the story of the golden calf. We must remember to be honest, may God help us. And we must remember that things always change, thanks be to God.