

The Golden Calves of Wall Street

While I was on Sabbatical, I spent a lot of time thinking and dreaming about where I thought God might be leading me and us upon my return. My intention was to think and dream with my spiritual ears wide open, in hopes that the ideas that came to me might be not simply generated by my own abundant imagination but rather might be guided by the whisperings of the Holy Spirit. How I did in this regard, I think, will not be determined for some time to come. The proof of the pudding, as they say, is in the eating. In addition to this very nebulous, some might say impractical process, I also spent some time journaling – something I've never been very good at. It was in this discipline that I came up with the topics for the sermons you've heard from me since my return. There are a couple of things I still intend to share with you from our journeys but I decided several weeks ago that after the initial five weeks of planned topics that I should break and look around, so to speak. I wanted to allow myself the freedom to react to whatever might be going on here at GSBC, whatever might be going on in the world around us, and to wherever the readings in the Revised Common Lectionary might be leading. I've generally found that particular tool to be incredibly useful in helping me to respond to the currents I feel both in our congregation and in the world.

When I did finally take the time to look at the lectionary for this week, I was surprised (or maybe just gratified) at how timely some of the readings seemed. In particular, I was attracted to both of the alternate Old Testament readings offered and by the Psalm portion for the day (Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23), which we read together at the beginning of the service. The topics of a particular brand of idolatry, of injustice and of hope for the future seemed to me to be very appropriate given the news of the day. Additionally, we are studying the Book of Isaiah in "Soup, Salad & Soul" this fall and the Exodus reading, in an interesting coincidence, falls just one chapter after the reading I used two weeks ago to talk about the sacred call of artists. Or is it a coincidence? You know, I've always liked the old saying that "Coincidence is just God's way of acting anonymously."

So, after our rather silly jaunt through the connections between Doctor Who and Holy Writ last week, I've got a more conventional sermon for you this week. We'll take a look at the passage from Exodus, with reference to the Psalm that refers to it, and at the passage from Isaiah to see what can be clarified in their messages by looking at their original contexts. We'll then consider how those messages continue to be relevant to the context of Good Shepherd Baptist Church in 2011 and how God may be calling us to respond as we seek to be the Body of Christ in this place and time, working together to bring the Beloved Community closer to fruition. Ready? Here goes!

The most obvious lesson from Exodus 32 has to do with idolatry but I want to defer that for a moment. In his blog, "a garden path," Rick Morley, rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Basking Ridge, New Jersey, writes, "The root of the problem in Exodus 32 isn't idolatry. It's patience." Or, actually, the lack thereof. As we join the Israelites in their camp at the foot of Mt. Sinai at the beginning of this story, they've been waiting for Moses to come back down from the mountain for forty days and forty nights – almost six weeks! Just because he's the guy who led them out of generations of captivity doesn't mean they're going to wait around for him forever! They get impatient and decide it's time that they made provision for their own spiritual future. It didn't matter that he'd already been up and down from the mountain top and brought them other messages from God. They were ready to move on. You know, I'm glad I'm not Moses. I was

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gone more than twice that long and I didn't come back to anywhere near the mess that he did! Anyway, I'll come back to the topic of impatience a bit later.

The obvious point of the story here is indeed about serving idols and let's not forget that one of the messages that Moses has already brought down from his meetings with God is what we call the Ten Commandments. You know, including the one that goes, "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them..." And, just in case we've forgotten, Exodus 24 relates, "Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do." ... Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." Their request to Aaron to make them an idol of gold was just six weeks after their sworn promise to uphold those commandments. Just six weeks without Moses to guide them and they were ready to go back to what they'd done in Egypt.

The decision to make the golden idol was no whim, either. It was a costly choice. When Aaron asked them for their golden rings in order to make the calf, he was essentially asking them for their entire wealth. Remember, these folks didn't have bank accounts waiting for them in Canaan. All they had for barter with other tribes was what they'd left Egypt with – some livestock, the clothes on their backs and the golden ornaments that the Egyptians had pressed upon them in their eagerness to get the Hebrews out of their country.

Why would the Children of Israel be so eager to sacrifice their wealth to create this idol? Well, remember, these people were primarily herders and what we might call truck farmers – tilling just enough land to feed their families. What they were really interested in was the promise of fertility for their flocks and crops, not all this high-sounding morality stuff that Moses was bringing down the mountain. In that part of the world at that time, the most popular fertility gods were often represented as young bulls. So they made themselves a bull-calf of gold, a fertility god of their own, and as Exodus relates, "rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel;" which is to say that they had a party, got drunk, and did what people did when they were celebrating a fertility rite by reminding the god just what it was that fertility looked like for humans.

God, observing all this as he dictated more of the Law to Moses on top of the mountain, was not amused. If you read more of the story in Exodus 32, you'll find that God offered to wipe out the whole ungrateful, disobedient, impatient lot of them and start all over with the descendents of Moses. But Moses demurred and suggested that God might want to give him the opportunity to knock some sense into some heads, which God agreed to do. Our Psalm this morning remembers the incident and reminds us that Moses, whom the Psalmist calls "the Chosen One," saved the people from destruction. It's a phrase that should have some resonance for us as followers of Jesus the Christ.

Let's shift now to the reading from Isaiah and again some context is useful. Since the time of Moses and the trek to the Promised Land, the Children of Israel have seen their fortunes rise and

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fall several times. The process of making Canaan their own was bloody and difficult, with initial but incomplete success under Joshua and generations of struggle against the Philistines and other tribes during the times of the Judges. But under their first kings, Saul, David and Solomon, the quarrelsome tribes of Israel had become a nation, even a mini-empire. But the good times did not last. After Solomon, the nation was divided by civil war into Israel in the north and Judah in the south. By the time of Isaiah's writing in chapter 25, the southern kingdom of Judah had been beset by their cousins in the north allied with the Kingdom of Aram. Pleading for help from the superpower of their day, Judah had seen the Assyrian come down upon their neighbors, in the words of the poet Byron, "like the wolf on the fold, / And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold; / And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea, / When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee." Israel was destroyed and Judah was left precariously balanced between the military giants of Assyria in the north and Egypt to the south.

Isaiah was clear with his Judean contemporaries about the cause of their plight. They had deeply offended God. In chapter one, which serves as an introduction to the themes of the rest of the book, we find these statements: "cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow... Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them." And in chapter 3, Yahweh is presented as a judge reading an indictment against Judah: "The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? says the Lord God of hosts." The beginning of chapter five tells of the situation poetically, comparing God's people to God's vineyard: "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!"

By the time we get to Isaiah 25, the prophet is holding out some hope in addition to the chastisement. In the future, he sees the enemies of Judah, the cities of the aliens, defeated and rejoices in the protection that God has given the poor even when the leaders of God's people have failed them. And he directs the listener to the ultimate promise for God's people – that everyone, down to the poorest among them, will have enough and not just enough but the best. Death and sorrow will be no more, he promises. The long-awaited Savior will come.

So, how do these passages connect with life in America in 2011? Well, you've probably heard from me enough by now to know that I find our consumer society to be idolatrous at heart. I don't think there's any doubt that many Americans, indeed all of us from time to time, have put finances and comfort ahead of the building of the Beloved Community. We make our bull-calf idols from gold and new clothes and cars and IRAs and all sorts of things that look important on the surface but that are ultimately empty of real meaning. I find it ironic that the symbol of Wall Street is the statue of a rampaging bull, located in Bowling Green Park in downtown Manhattan. Superstitious passers-by have rubbed the statue for good luck, especially the parts of the bull that most symbolize fertility, until the bronze gleams like gold. Like the Israelites, we are an impatient society, wanting what we want when we want it. It is now an accepted fact in the business world that no one is interested in hearing long-term strategies for growth but that management's success or failure is measured by quarter to quarter or even month to month

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results. Even responsible business people feel that they are pushed by investors to make as much as they can as fast as they can without consideration for the future of the enterprise, its employees or its customers.

Like the Judah of Isaiah's time, our leaders, our merchant princes and elected leaders, have not paid much attention to the poor in recent times. The tax burden in our country has shifted slowly away from the richest towards those with much, much less. Those bankers and mortgage brokers and investment traders whose speculations ruined our economy have been bailed out and rewarded with bonuses and raises but the small investors and homeowners who lost everything in the bubble are left without resources and without pity. Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain recently said to the Wall Street Journal in regards to the Occupy Wall Street protestors: "Don't blame Wall Street, don't blame the big banks, if you don't have a job and you're not rich, blame yourself!" In other words, we can't tax the rich because they are "Job Creators" but if they don't create enough jobs, that's not their fault but the fault of the unemployed, of whom there are more than at any time since the Great Depression, including one million U.S. military veterans, with another million veterans expected to be unemployed by 2016. My brothers and sisters, our leaders have failed us and they have failed God.

In case you think I am aiming too high, at problems I can't possibly understand, or being partisan, let me give you an example of leadership failure from right here in Lynnwood. Churches across our city and Edmonds are preparing once again this year to house homeless folks on nights with freezing weather. Cooperation from the City of Lynnwood has always been problematic but this year the situation has reached a new low. Three of our council members have worked long and hard to find a way to make the efforts of the churches legal for the long term rather than working year to year on waivers from the fire code. The three were one Democrat and two Republicans: Council President Mark Smith, council member Loren Simmonds and council member Jim Smith. But the Mayor believes that the ordinance that they and the Fire Department collaborated to design will open the council members up to individual legal liability in case of a tragedy and has said so in open meeting. The City Attorney has said that this is "probably" not the case but cannot guarantee that council members would not be liable. As a result, the proposed ordinance has already lost the support of one council member. Two members opposed the ordinance for their own reasons. That leaves us with a one-vote margin for the ordinance's passage tomorrow night. If one more council member flips their vote out of fear of litigation, regarding their own potential but improbable financial loss as more important than human life, then we will have to operate the shelters without City permission. I ask you, is this righteousness in leadership?

Now, I believe that the record of Good Shepherd Baptist in helping the poor is pretty strong: Half of your property given up freely for affordable housing; years of providing land for apartment dwellers to grow healthy food; years of buying Christmas presents and giving grocery vouchers and tons of food to the food bank and supplies for countless school children.. I've never seen a special offering request come up empty.

But let us not rest on our laurels but challenge each other and ourselves. There is always more we can do, if not in direct gifts to the poor, then in the way we use our own needed resources. Do we really need to continue to support the banks that nickel and dime us to death while their

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executives and officers live in high style? There are proven non-profit substitutes in the credit unions. Should those of us fortunate enough to have money to invest let our dollars be used willy-nilly by the same captains of finance who brought our economy to this state? A little research reveals that the fastest growing sector of the investment world are the new socially responsible mutual funds, which only invest in businesses that hold to the highest ethical standards. Or call Ryan Calkins, who grew up in this church and is now a leader in the world of microfinance, where loans that are tiny by our standards are given from invested money to struggling but talented folks in third world countries who almost inevitably both return the investment with reasonable interest and raise standards of living for themselves and their neighbors.

For those of us with little to no ability to invest money, there is always an investment of time to be made. I encourage you to find out more about Occupy Seattle, the local movement which echoes Occupy Wall Street. Not your style? Then call or write to your congressman, your senator, the governor, our state legislators and tell them that you are tired of waiting for taxes to be apportioned fairly, that you are tired of seeing the safety net for the poor disappear in state and federal budgets, that you are tired of seeing legislation and appointments held up that would help protect consumers from the princes who prey on the unwary and the helpless just as they did in Isaiah's time. Above all, come with me to the Lynnwood City Council meeting tomorrow night and make your voice heard in favor of the ordinance to authorize the Cold Weather Shelters. My friends, we have a voice and we have a calling. Let us heed the call of God to protect the poor and use our voices and our votes to push for response.

All of these troubling issues can seem overwhelming to us as individuals. But the reading from Isaiah points to an answer beyond fear, beyond resignation, beyond a sense of defeat. In a way that reminds me once again that God is the Lord of Time, Isaiah points to God's actions in the past and God's promise for the future. "O LORD," he says, "you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure... For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat... the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast... he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken." Ultimately, our Loving Creator will prevail and the Beloved Community will spread over all the earth. Ultimately, we as the Body of Christ will be a part of God's new creation, when death and sorrow are no more. But let us not wait; let us work together on behalf of those who cannot work or speak for themselves, so that all around us might see what we do and give glory to God and learn from us how to share and how to love. May God give us the strength and the courage and the wisdom for this endeavor. Amen.