



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
11 October 2020
Sermon: As the World Spurns
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Exodus 32:1-14

Exodus 32:1-14 (NRSV)

32 When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” ² Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” ³ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold,^[a] and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” ⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.” ⁶ They 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.

⁷ The Lord said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸ they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” ⁹ The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰ Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.”

¹¹ But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, “O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’” ¹⁴ And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

“The people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain.” Delayed. Like, when a global pandemic closes schools and businesses for two weeks in March, and that closure lasts through the next month. Then it turns into a semester. And now suddenly its mid-October, and you’re doing the best you can, balancing and stressing, worrying and grieving for your children, for your work, your vocation, your relationships, your elderly family. With signs and wonders and plagues brought down by the hand of God, Moses had led the people out of captivity in Egypt. Crossing the Red Sea, they wandered south through the wilderness of Sin for months before stopping along the foothills of Mount Sinai, where they waited on the word and promise of God. But “Moses delayed to come down from the mountain.” Like, when churches starting meeting online after fatal coronavirus outbreaks among congregations across the world. What started as a few Sundays in the spring turned into a new way for our congregation to gather on Sunday mornings. By the hand of God, we were led out of the church building and onto the web, meeting across YouTube channels and Zoom conferences rather than the sanctuary or the narthex, connecting across telephone lines, email inboxes, and, did I mention Zoom? Zoom, and more Zoom. Again, spring turned to summer, turned to fall, turning to winter. We connect, and yet, I admit, I long to see you face to face. What do you long for, as Moses delays coming down from the mountain?¹

In their impatience, the people felt forsaken by “the man who brought us out of the land of Egypt,” and so they petitioned his brother Aaron to make visible the invisible God who

¹ In this opening, I was influenced by a sermon I heard a few months ago by Rev. Dr. Donovan Drake at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Nashville, TN, who similarly wove contemporary concerns through the early life of Moses. See Westminster Presbyterian Nashville. “August 30th, 2020 | Westminster Presbyterian Church | “Who Are You?” | Donovan Drake preaching.” YouTube. September 2, 2020. <https://youtu.be/nPaojMbKTgM>.

they thought had abandoned them. They took signs of wealth and power, golden rings melted down and fashioned into a golden calf, a common sign of divinity in the ancient near east.

“They said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.’” In their longing, the people reached for something they could hold onto, something familiar, something that felt solid when everything they ever knew seemed to be slipping away, like sand inevitably falls out of fingers that try to hold it. In doing so they broke the second commandment, “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” (20:4). In making the calf and calling it God, they abandoned the real living Spirit who lead them out of Egypt. They traded the God who spoke and loved, who commanded mercy and justice for a golden image, inert and speechless, something they could manipulate, a thing they could grasp and control.²

What do you reach for, when things feel like they are slipping away from you? When things change so rapidly, that you cannot find a foothold, and the familiar is upended, and the reliable falls away?

At the All-Comers Reflective Zoom gathering for the Me and White Supremacy initiative last Sunday night I was reminded of my penchant for the golden calf in times of uncertainty. In small groups, we were asked to discuss the journal prompt for Day 20 of Layla F. Saad’s guide. The prompt is: “What have you felt, thought, said, or done when called out/in for problematic,

² Here I am paraphrasing Terence E. Fretheim. *Exodus*. (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1991), 280-281.

harmful, and oppressive behaviors?”³ As members of our small group reflected on such moments, I was transported back to Wake Forest School of Divinity where I was a visiting teacher some years back. Three and a half years, to be exact. It was the last day of class of the Spring semester; I started my position at GCPC the following month. It was a time of transition, of uncertainty, of waiting. But those words could characterize any of my experiences that year at Wake Forest. The class, like the divinity school itself, was made up of a wonderful combination of Black, white, Asian and Latinx students, all just a few years younger than me. The class also contained a diversity of politics and theologies, a mix of radical, and progressive, conservative, and evangelical, and remember this was the opening months of 2017, so those differences were especially stark. It was a class on race, gender, and ministry. You can imagine, our conversations were often contentious. As you can imagine, I learned more than I taught in that room. I often felt uncertain, sometimes inept.

“What have you felt, thought, said, or done when called out/in?” asks Layla F. Saad. On the last day of class, a Black woman spoke about her experience of the class. “You said, on the first day of class, that this was supposed to be a safe place,” she told me, along with the rest of the class. “But...” And that is as far as I let her get. Because you see, on the foothills of Mt. Sinai, I grew impatient, uncertain, unfaithful. I interrupted her. This white, male visiting professor, who, despite my feelings, held the power in that room, I wouldn’t stand to be misquoted for even a second, even to hear the real experiences, the heartache, the truth of someone

³ Layla F. Saad. *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor*. (Naperville, Illinois: Source Books, 2020), 162-168.

different from me. "I never said this was a safe place. I don't believe the classroom can be a safe place," I interrupted.

And my student, who tried to be authentic in the moment, to be real and fully engaged, she shut down, because I had shut her down. Three and a half years ago, I would not have admitted it to myself, but the truth is, I was afraid of what she had to say. Rather than risk relationship, I surrounded myself with the trappings of my position, my gender, my whiteness. I clung to the false god of needing to be right, needing to be dominant. "He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel.'" Of course, I stopped myself; I apologized, but only after I saw the look on the faces of the students of color in the room, and by that point it was already too late.

On the foothills of Mount Sinai, what graven images do you reach for? What have you clung to, instead of letting go into the uncertainty of relationship?

Meanwhile, up the mountain, the man Moses spoke face to face with God. On first reading, you might be overwhelmed reading of God's wrath: "Now let me alone," the Lord says to Moses, "so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them." Moses, in turn, reminds God of promises made, covenants to keep: "Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven.'" And the Lord turned from anger. The Lord showed mercy. Yes, on first glance, we might be preoccupied by the Lord's anger. Anger has a way of doing that. It begs for attention. But if we only focus on that, we might miss something so much more striking: the relationship, the love the Lord has for Moses. Notice God's anger does not

consume Moses. Notice, as incensed as God is with the people, God holds back. God listens and is persuaded by Moses.

The comparison cannot be more stark. The living God, the relational God, the Spirit who spoke to and heard the prayer of Moses, in contrast to the golden calf, solid and stable, but ultimately inert and lifeless. If you read on past our story to the next chapter, there's this beautiful passage about Moses meeting the Lord in a tent outside the Israelite camp. It says, "Thus, the Lord used to speak to Moses, face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (33:11). This is the God who calls you out of Egypt, who calls you to the mountain, who speaks and listens, who moves within us and gives us life, and who calls us to ever new places of openness and relationship, especially when things feel uncertain. This is the God who supports us when everything else seems to fall away.

When was the last time you spoke to God face to face? As you have been in the wilderness of this pandemic, of this diaspora from the church building, in the seemingly unending desert of systemic racist violence and white supremacy culture, have you called upon the living God, the one who calls us into new places, new ways of life, new ways of being in relationship? Or have you sat down, melted your golden rings, and worshipped idols, idols like, needing to be right or feigning innocence – "I didn't mean it that way." Idols like clinging to the familiar when the familiar has lost its use, because after all "That's just the way we've always done it." Have you shut your ears, when given the opportunity to learn a difficult truth about our complicity, or the harm we have done, or the places we need to grow, as individuals, as a community?

It is fitting, therefore, that our stewardship team this year has chosen “Keeping the faith” for our fall campaign. Because, Grace Covenant, we are at the foothills of Sinai this season, as fall turns to winter, as 2020 turns to 2021, and we ask who we are called to be as the church in its pandemic years. The calf remains a temptation – the temptation of staying in our comfort zones, of wishing life would just go back to normal, of withholding resources from our community or our community partners because things feel scarce and worry-some this year. These temptations are real. These fears are real. But, Grace Covenant, at these foothills of Sinai the God who spoke to Moses face to face is calling us in to new relationships like never before. Calling you to a deeper relationship with the GCPC community, reaching out to one another and supporting one another in some of the most grief stricken and perilous times of our lives. Calling you to more authentic relationship with our wider community, to learn from and partner with those in the greater Asheville area who work with communities directly impacted, by not just the pandemic but by decades and centuries of inequity in our town. Calling you to greater relationship within the divine Spirit herself, through faithful worship, life changing formation, and justice-seeking care in ever new and innovative ways. So keep the faith, risk relationship by putting your resources in this community, and be led by the Spirit of God who burns away idols and pulls us toward one another, even and especially as we are distanced. Moses may be delayed up the mountain, but there is work to be done along the foothills. Thanks be to God.