

Sermon: God's There-Ness
Scripture Exodus 32:1-14
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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We continue to follow the Israelites through the wilderness in our Exodus reading this morning. Moses led them out of their enslavement in Egypt and they began wandering in the wilderness. Days turned into weeks and weeks to months and months turned into years with not even a glimpse of the Promised Land, which Moses had sworn they would find. So it is not surprising that we read about the Israelites behaving badly. They were tired, hungry, impatient and they wandering with no apparent point or purpose to it. So one day when Moses goes up on top of Mount Sinai for his communication time with God they decide they need to do something different. They ask their second in command, Aaron, to make for them gods, something visible and tangible from which they can gain some comfort and have some clearer connection “cause,” they said “as for this Moses fellow (they’ve only been following him for a couple decades now!) who brought us out of Egypt, we don’t even know what has happened to him!”

And so Aaron collected all the gold, melted it in the fire and made a golden calf out of it and the Israelites said “behold THESE are our gods who brought us up out of Egypt! Hooray!” And somehow it just made them feel better and they had a party and got wild with no thought for the morrow. Meanwhile up on the mountain, God’s anger was kindled against the stiff-necked people acting all crazy down there and if it hadn’t been for Moses talking him out of it, God would have destroyed the lot of them. So the story goes.

But this is not unfamiliar to us, is it, this struggle of the Israelites? Isn’t this one of our greatest struggles in our faith journeys - the very secret, hidden, intangibility of God and the very real difficulty relating to such an ungraspable presence. The truth is, we are kind of caught between a rock and a hard place as people of the Christian faith. Our tradition teaches that God is not simply the amorphous impersonal life energy of the universe, a great oceanic-ness in all things, but rather God is an other who created existence itself and to whom we can relate. But the trick is relating to the presence of this Primary Other, God, is not like relating to anything else because everything else is

contingent while God is Source, thus not like anything in existence. So as the theologian James Alison suggests God is much more like nothing than God is like something. Relating to God is like relating to no thing at all more than like relating to some thing. One of the great spiritual masters of old Meister Eckhart said “there is nothing so like God as silence”. BUT God is still, we hold out, a presence we can relate to even though God is more like no presence than the kind of presences we are used to knowing with our 5 senses. God is there but not there like anything else we would normally say is there. There is no there-ness to God since God is the source of all there-ness and all there-ness is contingent upon God. All things that are “there” displace other things in order to be there, but for God to be “there” nothing is displaced at all, it’s another dimension of there-ness out of which all things that are here or there arise. Got it?!

We as Christians though say that God entered there-ness and here-ness once for a very short period of time to give us a little more to go on, but the sheer weight of God’s being here as we are here was too much for us humans to handle, so far off had our culture and even our religious practices meant to hold us into relationship with God become from the real truth of God that we chose to execute God instead of face the reality of God. We chose our safer and more malleable golden calves over the dangerous and infinitely uncontainable reality of God that seemed in some imprecise way to be making us malleable. But even then in the time Jesus walked upon the earth, people were mostly only seeing him in the dimension that they could handle him – that “through a mirror darkly” that Paul refers to. We see throughout the gospels that everyone was not really seeing him fully, for who he was or getting what he was about, which kept him visible and able to be perceived. It was only after his death, when those surrounding him were visited by him again and their eyes opened to who he really was and his connection to God that he disappeared from their sense again. Remember Emmaus? He broke bread with them their eyes were truly opened and his appearance became illusive to them, of course, because that is the nature of God. “Do not hold on to me for I have not ascended”. The reality and presence of God is finally ungraspable, un-hold-on-able, un-perceivable, un-get-able.

And I don’t know about you, but this is very frustrating to me as it was to the Israelite some 3000 years ago. I too want something more definite, more tangible, more

get-able than God often seems to allow. I've read volumes of spiritual teachings and theological explanations and spent many hours in meditation and prayer to try and get God and there are times when I feel close, like I can sense something of the deeper dimension of there-ness beyond here and there but like Jesus breaking the bread with the disciples there is some disappearance that happens the minute I begin getting close it seems. It's almost like one has to glimpse it out of the corner of one's eye, so to speak. The minute we turn to face it, it's not there...of course cause God is not there, there, God's there-ness – as I mentioned - is of a different order.

And so one temptation is to scoff at the whole project and decide because of it's illusiveness it must not be real. We can't know it so why go there. But then the temptation of Christians themselves in the face of God' hiddenness seems to me to be of two kinds – one, is in the face of such illusiveness to the mind and the touch and yet still knowing on some level the very true reality of God, is to create something that is quite concrete, whether that's a cathedral or certain concrete doctrines and dogmas – this is what you must believe because this is who God is and what God is about. This would be the temptation of the more conservative side of Christianity. On the other hand though the more liberal-side of Christianity is tempted to look at such narrow confining of the immense expanse of God and balk at it, assume that human reason is way out of its depth – which it is – and leave it as a more personal endeavor – believe whatever you believe, I believe what I believe, there are many paths to God, it's all good! And the liberal mistake is to believe that in leaving it alone the problem is solved.

However, what our scriptures make plain for us this morning is that the human being is a contingent being, it's being is dependent upon other being...but more than that, since time immemorial the human has not only been conscious that it's own there-ness has been contingent upon a deeper there-ness but built into its very being is this need to bow down, to lower our heads, to kneel, to prostrate ourselves and worship an Other. Thus if we don't make the effort to formulate some words and concepts and rituals and approaches to the otherli-ness of the Illusive One then we will, whether consciously or not, make something else the object of our devotion and worship. We as human beings are built to be devotees of the One Who Made Us and so we will turn our devotion to something more accessible and concrete if we are not very careful. This is what the

Israelites were doing but they were no different from us. We too fashion our golden calves. Some of us become devotees of ourselves, that where our devotion goes. Some of us bow prostrate before the invisible hand of the market. Some of us become devotees of our families or worship institutions and their buildings. Some of us become devotees of our country, or bow our heads before science or are worshippers of nature. For we are built to worship some other-ness upon whom we are dependent.

But the catch is that we are only whole and complete or drawn into a higher state of being and consciousness, we are only who we are made to be, when we bow to the One Who Created Us; this illusive, secret, hidden, reality behind all being. If we bow to a golden calf, an inanimate object, then we get ourselves nowhere, because it is a thing without a consciousness. If we bow to our dog or our cat we will become lesser than who we were meant to be, of course, because they are conscious but of a lower consciousness! If we bow to other humans or even a human system of thought or economics we will not grow into our becoming. Only when we worship God and we sit still within the maddening unknown of that presence will we find ourselves coming to life in new ways and finally flourishing.