

Today's text comes out of one of the most important salvation narratives of the Old Testament: The Exodus.

The Jewish people, enslaved by the Egyptian empire, have cried out to God in their misery and oppression.

God has heard their cry, and through the unexpected and initially reluctant person of Moses, demonstrated the power and justice of the one true God, first through a series of plagues, and then through the parting of the Red Sea.

The Egyptians are swept away by the closing waters, and Israel emerges on the other side, free at last to shape and govern themselves as they see fit, so that they might be a reflection of the love and power of the one true God.

And then things start to fall apart.

We all know this story.

We shake our heads at the foolishness of worshiping a golden calf. This is obviously a shortcoming of a superstitious and ignorant people from a pre-modern era.

*We* are not susceptible to such things, but we nod our heads at the basic lesson: worship God, not things.

Yet to dismiss this story in such a way is to miss a chain of human and divine actions and reactions that are not as simple as they seem, and perhaps contain relevance to the ways we both act and react as a people of faith today.

I want to trace that chain of reactions: from the Israelites, to Aaron, to God, to Moses, and then back to God.

The Israelites have been through quite a bit the last few months. The adrenaline from the fear, confusion and wonder at the inexplicable divine actions has worn off.

Though free, they are no longer in a predictable and familiar environment, They are in the wilderness, running low on food, with no discernable plan, and the person who has been the living link to the elusive God that brought them to the middle of nowhere was last seen going up a mountain 40 days ago.

Imagine if we get to late November and nobody's heard anything from Jon or Barb.

So out of that fear and insecurity, Israel acts. They tell Aaron, Moses' second in command, to make them gods that will go before them, because Moses is probably dead and visual representations of the divine are reassuring, and probably powerful, given all the graven images they had seen in mighty Egypt.

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Now Aaron, who is most often remembered in this story for his complete lack of a backbone, is perhaps in a tougher predicament than we give him credit for.

The people are restless, perhaps on the verge of insurrection, Aaron doesn't know if Moses is coming back either, there is likely food scarcity, and everything should at least be tried before dying in the wilderness.

Some scholars speculate that Aaron was not intending on creating "other" gods, but instead was creating a tribute to the one true God that Israel could draw their attention back to. Ancient gods rode on bulls after all, why not Yahweh?

Even if this is true however, this pragmatic and calculated decision Aaron is making is arguably *more* offensive to God than creating a calf in another god's image.

Meghan Good, pastor at Trinity Mennonite in Arizona, writes that  
*“The original idolatry of the Israelites was not an idolatry of replacement but of representation.*

*What the Israelites shaped from their molten-gold dreams was not an alternative to God but a distortion of God.*

*Contrary to popular belief, idolatry is not the sin of the unreligious but the sin of the super-religious. It's the trap of those who, in times of fear and uncertainty, go looking for the god they want and inevitably find him.*

*Divinely delivered from the corruptive wealth and coercive power of Egypt, the Israelites have simply repurposed Egypt and mounted Yahweh on it. Far from obviously stupid, this is idolatry at its most diabolically subtle. Aaron calls the people together for the worship of Yahweh, seemingly without even recognizing Yahweh's image has been co-opted.”*

That's a bombshell perspective that should draw our attention.

We would never claim to replace God (have you ever heard a leader or politician make that claim?), but have we ever, driven by the base human needs of security, comfort and reassurance, gradually created God in the image of what we want?

The danger of our golden calf is that we don't even recognize it as a golden calf.

“I have seen these people,” the LORD said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.”

The response from God is immediate, one of fierce anger. Or maybe if we look deeper, one of hurt feelings. Betrayal that after doing so much for his people, they would fall away so quickly and seek something else.

In the story of the Exodus, God is very “anthropomorphized,” described with human reactions and emotions.

You may find this kind of depiction of God to be unsettling, almost as though God is insecure or unstable.

You may find this kind of depiction of God makes God more relatable, reminding us that God desires to be in relationship with us, and is affected by our decisions to pull away or to pledge allegiance to something other than our Creator.

The portrayal of God in the book of Exodus is a God who is personally engaged and involved.

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And within that personal conversation with Moses, there is an intercession on behalf of God’s people.

But it is not God interceding, or God advocating, but rather Moses, the very man who tried to tell God at the burning bush that he was not qualified for the job, nor was he good with words!

Moses reminds *God* of the covenant promise made with Israel and how bad it would look if God led the people out of Egypt only to wipe them off the face of the earth in a fit of rage weeks later.

Is God just not thinking clearly? Is God just testing Moses to see if Moses knows the right answer, the same way Solomon threatened to cut the baby in half just to see which woman was the rightful mother?

I don't know.

But Karla Suomala writes that:

“Moses’ radical advocacy for the Israelites, his taking their side, is depicted positively by the biblical narrator. He has done the right thing. At the end of

Deuteronomy, in a summing up of Moses’ life and career, we learn that “never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.” This text provides some powerful guidelines for taking sides with the people, especially those who have no other defenders. God can take care of himself.”

Moses’ response to God is noteworthy, but so is God’s response to Moses:  
**Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.**

Did Moses change God’s mind?

Certainly not. God is unchanging. Yesterday, today and forever.

Right?

Benjamin Corey reflected on this question in an article in *Anabaptist World* and it is so good I want to quote a section of it:

*When we say that God is unchanging, we are referring to God’s essence — and the Bible tells us the essence of God is love.*

*And here’s the paradox: while God is unchanging in his essence of love, the nature of love itself is to always be adapting and evolving, depending on the real-world variables one is working within.*

*Love is not static. Love, in essence, is constantly changing.  
Love adapts in order to give the object of love what they need on any given  
day. What is most loving today might not be what is most loving tomorrow,  
depending on the variables the object of your love is experiencing.*

*Sometimes love pulls close.*

*Sometimes love gives space.*

*Sometimes love provides safe boundaries.*

*Sometimes love erases those boundaries.*

*Sometimes love circles back.*

*Sometimes love quietly waits it all out.*

*Sometimes love professes itself from a mountaintop.*

*Sometimes love screams itself with silence.*

*Love cannot be static when the object of love is not static. Even when the object  
of love needs the opposite of what they may have needed yesterday, love adapts  
in order to constantly become more loving.*

*Love is always changing the ways it manifests itself — but it never ceases to  
be love.*

A chain of unique actions and reactions, and unique responses to those  
actions.

Israel calling out to Aaron for something tangible to worship, out of a place  
of anxiety and despair

Aaron's misguided response as he sought to appease the people,  
misunderstanding the twisted distortion of God that would make

The rawness of God's pained response,

Moses' surprising intercession on behalf of the people he has been called to lead.

And finally, and perhaps most importantly, God's change of heart.

As we seek to interact with and respond faithfully to our modern world, may we offer grace, remembering that everything interaction and situation is unique, deserving to be treated on its own merit.

May we advocate like Moses, listen like God, and be willing to change our minds and adapt our approach to embody a love that is flexible, but never changing in essence.