

“GOLD OR STONE?”
Exodus 32:1-14
19th Sunday after Pentecost; October 11, 2020

What a year of violence, vengeance, virus, and vortexes. This quadfecta has come both from the state of nature and from the hands of humans.

Because over 210,000 American deaths from COVID-19 are already so mind-numbing, people tend to overlook the other stuff. With 25 named storms, 2020 is the second most active Atlantic hurricane season on record, behind only the 2005 Atlantic hurricane



season. The whirling vortexes of hurricanes are not negotiable. They are the natural forces of wind and weather. But the fact that there has been 486 multiple-victim shootings in the United States so far this year — and that most people are clueless about that because such incidents were already “normal” in our society before COVID — is to me so absurd. The vortex of these events aren’t made of wind and water but of a barrage of pain and suffering, of unanswered questions mainly from those who are still tuned-in enough to ask the questions. We continue to

long for a “why” that might give some meaning to these self-inflicted national, not natural, tragedies.

How can seemingly average, everyday people suddenly become so monstrous, so unable to connect to their community, to their families, to their neighbors, to the world? Obviously, this is a terrible 21st century disease of the soul. Or maybe not.

In the Old Testament book of Exodus we hear a horrible story of stunning betrayal and evil behavior — all in the name of God. This Exodus text is the tale of the faithlessness and failure of the people of Israel, even as they were living out a life of promise, a life made possible by God’s divine intervention in their life story.

Perhaps you remember the background: the Hebrews had escaped from slavery in Egypt. They followed Moses’ lead and were guided through the wilderness by the divinely appointed pillars of smoke by day



and fire at night. At Mount Sinai the Lord God descended upon the mountaintop, proclaimed the great commandments, and then called Moses to a private audience upon that mountaintop. The

people waited with baited-breath down below. God had always spoken to them through Moses. Now they stood and anticipated yet more words from the leader of their liberation — the man whom they experienced as the mouthpiece of God.

They waited and they waited — and, well, they waited some more. Moses disappeared into the smoke and mist that surrounded the top of Mount Sinai. The people heard nothing for weeks and they had no internet. It would be 40 long days before Moses would eventually reappear. But the Hebrews couldn't wait that long. They had a meltdown.

The Hebrews got out of Egypt by trusting Moses' leadership. He seemed like a sincere fellow who always tried to keep them in contact with God throughout their arduous journey. Now Moses was nowhere to be seen. "Where was Moses?" they wondered. More critically, "Where was God?" Without Moses, and without the Lord God's vocal presence within their midst, the people felt abandoned. Moses had abandoned them. God had abandoned them. Their power grid to the presence of God had been shut down. There was no longer any acoustic imprint of

the divine in their life. In desperation the people sought to re-boot their connection to the divine through some other way, through a pagan way. And why not? It seemed that both God and his designated man Moses were gone.

So what did these impatient, desperate people do? They get in Aaron's face and demand that he "make gods for us, who shall go before us." After all, we "do not know what has become" of Moses.

Think about this and be stunned by such arrogance and audacity. These people aren't really telling Aaron to create some man-made totem pole to substitute for the presence of God in their lives. No. They are insisting on something far ominous than that, far more dangerous, much more idolatrous.

Aaron creates what we imagine to be "the golden calf." But the word "Egel" in Hebrew is a young ox or bull. This creature was a symbol of authority, might, vitality, and fertility. Is this why when the stock market performs well, we call it a "bull-market"? The bull, for these Hebrews at least, was most strongly represented as a steed, a



pedestal upon which the greatest god would stand and so be elevated above the people, revealing this God's omnipotent strength and summons to worship.

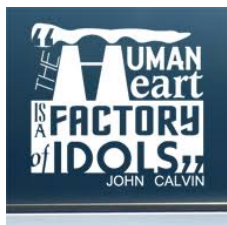
Did you catch that distinction? The “calf” or “bull” that Aaron molded wasn't itself a “god.” It was, rather, a podium upon which God could stand — an invisible, almighty presence among the people summoning them to worship and obedience. It was that invisible presence, now given a physical place of honor, which the people could turn to in worship during Moses' absence.

Along with that explanation, we can at least give the Hebrews a small credit. They weren't actually worshipping a hunca-munca molten gold-shaped cow. They were using that graven image to “help” them imagine the presence of the God who had delivered them — delivered them surely — but with a twist. God did it while riding high upon the back of a golden bull. (YEE-HAH!)

So this is definitely a small credit, if even we could call it that. What these wandering, ex-slaves do is typical of bewildered people — they try to take the path to salvation into their own hands. Instead of

trusting in God’s providence and promises, the Hebrews decide they would be better-off devising an alternative plan, a human-devised scheme, to better position themselves in God’s line of sight. Instead of trusting in God, instead of putting their present, their future, their entire life story in God’s hands, they choose human-molded, molten gold over the ongoing promises of God. God, in-and-of the divine self, was apparently not enough for them — so they decided to make God into a consumer product. This incident is what Saint Paul was referring to in 1 Corinthians 10:7 while admonishing the fledging church to not become idolators as they did, “as it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink, and the rose up to play.’”

But that was then and God’s people today don’t play those kinds of shenanigans, do we? Among the things that John Calvin got right was a skepticism about human progress. As noted in his classic theological



tome, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (first written in 1536), “the human heart is a perpetual factory of idols.”

Sadly, that seems to be the one “perpetual-motion machine” that human ingenuity has managed get better and better at. We

might not still be in the business of melting down our earrings to make golden calves, but we're still more than willing to melt down other facets of our lives in order to attract the attention and good-will of a power we perceive as all-powerful and life-changing.

What are we busy making as our golden idols today? Violence . . . “golden gloves.” Celebrity . . . “golden Oscars.” Sports “gold medals.” Notoriety . . . “golden media moments.” Education . . . “golden keys.” Success . . . “golden ticket.” Retirement . . . “golden years.” Gold is the standard that most people want — in pretty much everything, I guess — except perhaps the “golden rule.” Jesus says, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12). So eliminate those unrealistic words of Jesus and maybe it just comes down to a plain old lust for “gold” — mammon for mammon's sake.

Whatever idol we choose, they are all golden calves. And just like that first golden calf forged-out in the desert from the Hebrews' life savings squirreled out of Egypt. There's no deity, no great universal

power, riding on its back. It's just a hunk of cold, hard metal. It's just an empty promise, a hollow tomb, a purposeless pile of possessions.

Yet despite our inexhaustibly creative bad behavior — we have a true God, a loving God, who keeps offering us the ring of true gold. When news of the golden-calf fiasco drifts up the smoking mountain, God confronts Moses with an accusation. At first God declares, “Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely [perversely — that’s rough talk]; 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!’”

Given this blatant disobedience, God gets fed-up, telling Moses, “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.”

You probably know how it is. When your child does something bad, you confront your spouse with the invective, “Look what YOUR kid did!” But Moses pushes back: “O Lord, why does your wrath burn

hot against YOUR people, whom YOU brought out of the of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?” Moses doesn’t hesitate to remind God of the great investment God has already made in “Your people.” He’s bold to ask the One who has led him thus far to “change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people.”

Moses, the leader on the mountain, is also the humble servant Moses on his knees before the Almighty. He doesn’t trust anything or anyone — not even himself completely — except God and God’s compassion for his people. He trusts that God will listen to his plea to change God’s mind. “And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.” One voice of faith made a difference. It made all the difference in the world. And it saved the day for the Hebrew people.

I could go deep into my own speculative questions regarding the mystery of prayer, such as whether there are things that God cannot or will not do unless God’s people pray. If anybody can give a satisfying answer to that question, I would be much obliged. Regardless, I’m grateful for the prayers of the saints throughout the millennia. What

would this world be like without such prayer? My hunch is that it would be a whole lot worse.

As we struggle to come to some sort of understanding for the vortexes of violence and vengeance, both natural and man-made, that have swept over us in the Year of our Lord 2020, there are plenty of poignant examples other than the golden calf fiasco we might learn from if we are to be wise.

Yehuda Bacon is a Hasidic Jew born in Czechoslovakia in 1929.



In 1942, at the age of 13, he and his family were arrested by the Gestapo and transported to various prison camps.

Eventually Yehuda and his father ended up in Auschwitz, where his father was sent to the gas chambers and then the body to the crematorium. Yehuda knew the day when his father was sent to his death. Already a gifted artist, Yehuda drew a haunting image of the crematorium chimney exuding a smoke stack that held his father's face.

Later, as one of the “selected” Jewish children, Yehuda was forced to gather the ashes of the cremated and scatter them on the icy roads going in and out of Auschwitz. He heard the cries of the dead being scattered on the ice. Yehuda Bacon’s image of his father is now housed in the Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem, entitled “In Memory of the Czech Transport.”

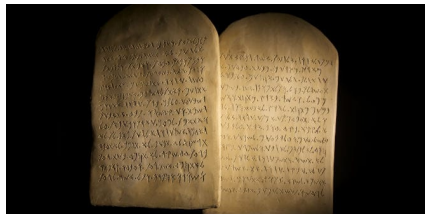


Yehuda Bacon is now 91 years-old and living in Jerusalem: “I am asked how it’s possible to have faith after the Holocaust. And I have faith, but that’s already a question of what ‘faith’ really is. And I do believe there’s such a thing. We don’t possess it, but we can relate to it and it can have an impact and give us hope and the answer that life does have meaning, but sometimes we just don’t understand it.”

Yehuda is concerned that as his generation dies there will be (other than academics) very few people educated and not many wise enough to carry the memory of survivors forward. The Nazis worshiped a horrible idol — a metallurgy of hate and blame, a golden-calf religion of fear and

fascism, of racial and ideological totalitarianism. They gilded a golden monster of hatred that attracted millions and destroyed millions.

But that horrid idol didn't last. Hitler promised it would stand for a 1,000 years, but it only lasted 11. Somehow, some way, it was broken apart by those who refused to capitulate by focusing on the “stone standard” instead of the “gold standard.” All that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai — other than another good story to tell — were a couple of stone tablets. No staged media event. No gold in sight. Those



otherwise unimpressive stones held the promises of God, the heart of God's intentions for all humanity, and the compassionate commitment of the Creator to creation.

Which will it be? The world's gold standard or God's stone standard? Tacky glitz and a bunch of bull or cloud by day and fire at night? Human hot air or God's promises? Whatever that golden calf may be — it has to go.

That's according to the stone standard by which we choose to either live or die. Amen.