

“PRAISEWORTHY AND TRUSTWORTHY”

Exodus 32:1-14; Philippians 4:1-9

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Woodbury UMC

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Today’s reading from the Book of Exodus reports one of the most notorious events in all of Scripture. It is a grim chapter in the saga of the children of Israel as they wander through the Sinai wilderness. They grow impatient with their leader Moses, who has seemingly gone AWOL on the mountain above them. They also grow impatient with Moses’ God Yahweh, who is hidden from their sight and has made promises to them that remain unfulfilled. The restless crowd deals with their anxiety by fashioning a god they can actually see and easily worship – a golden calf made out of their discarded jewelry. All in all, it’s not a pretty picture.

You and I read this story with dismay, in part because of its timing. God has delivered the people of Israel from captivity in Egypt, and the people have just agreed to bind themselves in covenant with this God. But when they keep encountering difficulties out in the wilderness, they default on their agreement. Earlier on, they had murmured and complained about needs both real and imagined. But now, they do something far worse: they turn away from the one true God by fashioning and worshiping false gods. Even more astonishing, they credit these counterfeit deities for securing their deliverance from Egypt!

At the very least, the Israelites have a faulty memory and are guilty of ingratitude. They say in effect to Yahweh, “What have you done for me lately?” and create other gods to satisfy their immediate longings. But their sin is more fundamental than this: they violate the first and second commandments of the Law – to have no other gods before Yahweh (Exodus 20:3), and not to make or worship idols (20:4-6). In one dramatic scene, Israel’s covenant with God is ruptured, perhaps beyond repair.

I confess that reading this story used to make me feel better about myself, to feel smug and self-righteous, to feel superior to other people who call themselves “religious” but practice their religion in primitive ways. I, of all people, know better than to commit the sin of idolatry. There will be no graven images in the house where I live or the sanctuary where I worship. After all, I’m a good Protestant, and most Protestants have an aversion to statues and other visual objects that might tempt us to worship a symbol rather than the reality to which the symbol points.

This is why the rebellious children of Israel used to be my favorite whipping boys, a prime example of pagans who practice distorted and misguided worship, a people guilty of a gross infidelity which I have never committed or even thought about committing – until I realized once again that it’s “not my brother, not my sister, but it’s me, O Lord, standin’ in the need of prayer.” Upon closer inspection, I too am capable of idolatry, of worshiping and following false gods. Why? Because my real god is not always the God I profess.

Martin Luther once wrote: “A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with all our heart . . . That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your god.”

One of Luther's theological descendants, Paul Tillich, put it in a similar way. Tillich said that our real god is the object of our "ultimate concern." You and I may pay lip service to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; but we need to ask ourselves, is this God really the center of our attention, the object of our highest desire, the primary shaper of our values, attitudes, and actions? What portion of our time and energy do we actually spend focused on God in comparison to our other objects of devotion? In practice, almost anything can be our ultimate concern, from building a fortune to enhancing our reputation to feeding an addiction.

In his book *Addiction and Grace*, Gerald May claims that all humans commit idolatry because we are all addicted to something earthly and tangible – more likely, to many things at once. An addiction, May says, is an "attachment" to a substance or behavior that makes a promise it cannot deliver. An addiction promises pleasure, peace of mind, and connection to something or someone outside ourselves. It appears to fulfill this promise, but it does so only partially and temporarily. An addiction is like cotton candy – it tastes sweet and satisfying, but it disappears on the tongue and has no nutritional value. Gerald May maintains that the only attachment which truly satisfies is an attachment to the one true God; but in our desperation to feel better we are content to settle for inferior, unhealthy attachments.

We must acknowledge that the Church also has this vulnerability – to profess faith in the one true God, but then construct and revere lesser gods who are more attractive and enticing. The book of Genesis tells us that humans are created in the image of God. The book of Exodus, in the story of the creation of the golden calf, tells us that God's chosen people attempt to return the favor! And we keep doing it in every generation. We keep making God over into our own image. Maybe you think we have at last progressed to the point where tasteless idolatry is impossible for people like us. But think again. We still have a tendency to get confused about the object of our worship, an ever-present desire to fashion gods more to our own liking.

Idolatry, it seems, takes many forms. For the ancient Israelites, it was a golden calf. For contemporary Christians, it may be a formless spirituality without substance or ethical demand. I once went to a worship event where the leader started out by saying, "We are just here to praise the Lord." Just? The last time I checked, it is no easy thing to praise the true Lord of the universe. Praise appears to come quite naturally to us human beings. You and I seem to be made for worship, and worship we will. Whether or not we will worship the true God, well, that's another matter.

The Bible keeps telling us that there are gods and then there is God. The question is not "Will we worship?" but rather "Who is the God we worship?" The golden calf is the sort of god who asks for little but wine, food, and a good time. "Let's just praise our little golden god," Aaron says as the praise service begins. But Moses is up on the mountain being confronted by a God who says in effect, "You want to worship me? Fine. Write this down on these tablets. You will not worship other gods, because I'm jealous for you. I paid for you, risked for you; so I want you, all of you. Therefore, you will not steal, you will not kill; you will not covet your neighbor's partner or property."

"What kind of worship is this?" Moses surely asks himself. Well, this God has a peculiar idea of praise, a weird notion of worship. This God wants a holy people whose obedience and holiness serve as a light to all the world's people. This God is not so much into praise as into ethics; this God is less impressed by revelry than by righteousness. The great test for our worship on Sunday is not "Do I like this hymn?" or "Did I find the sermon easy to understand?" or "Do I

feel better by the end of the service?” The great test is a biblical test. Does this service praise the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Jesus, Peter, and Paul? That’s the test. Jesus says that not everyone who cries “Lord, Lord,” will be with him at the end. Something more than just praise is required. What is required is to praise this God in the way that this God means to be praised.

A Methodist church held a hymn sing on a Sunday evening. After a wonderful hour of singing some old, familiar, and beloved hymns, one of the participants said to the pastor, “That was great singing those old hymns. But I got to thinking while we were singing that all those hymns tell about how Jesus loves us, cares for us, comforts us, and keeps us. They never say a word about taking up a cross, or losing our lives, or giving money.” The worshiper’s point is well taken. You and I need to think, while we sing or pray, while we praise God: who is the God we are praising? Is the God whom we praise the same God who meets us in Scripture?

It has become popular in many churches to institute “seeker services” that hope to attract unchurched people through lively music, short sermons, a minimum of Scripture, no hassles, no judgment, no demands. But is the product being offered to these seekers the Christian faith? How do you move from no Scripture, no expectations, and no challenge to the status quo toward anything that resembles the faith of Jesus? Walter Brueggemann calls this form of worship “praise for nothing.” There is no recounting of God’s mighty acts of love toward humanity, no reference to the love of God and neighbor that God expects from us in return; there is just praise.

In true worship, we speak to God, but God is also speaking to us. We are being formed in our worship, so it makes all the difference who we are praising. We are here to praise the living God who is more than a projection of our collective needs, more than some vague feeling we have within our hearts. In the act of worship, this God comes to us, speaks to us, demands of us, has plans for us. So let’s make sure that the God whom we praise is the God who is worthy of our praise.

However, along with this word of caution comes a word of assurance, and I don’t want us to miss it. As the story in the book of Exodus plays out, we discover a God who is praiseworthy because this God is also trustworthy. You and I easily break our covenant with God; the question is, can God be trusted to keep God’s covenant with us? Is God’s faithfulness to us dependent on our faithfulness to God?

We get a definitive answer in the dialogue between Moses and Yahweh on Mt. Sinai. God sees the rampant idolatry at the base of the mountain, is filled with righteous anger, and announces to Moses that he will judge his people harshly. Then a remarkable thing happens. Moses acts as a mediator between the people and God. He identifies with the people, the same ones who have grumbled about his leadership so many times. As he pleads and argues with the Almighty, he neither makes excuses for the people nor insists that they deserve forgiveness. Rather, he appeals to the faithfulness and mercy of God. Then an even more remarkable thing happens. In the words of the writer of Exodus, God “changes his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people” (32:14). As another translation puts it, God “repents” of his wrath and decides to forgive and preserve his people.

What a strange picture of God this is! We think of God as being unchanging, but here God changes his mind on a life-or-death matter. We think of God as going in one consistent direction,

but here God repents, which literally means that God turns around and moves in the opposite direction. The writer of Exodus speaks of the divine in very human terms, but he is telling us something important about the divine. The one true God truly listens to the prayers of God's people, and this God has the capacity and willingness to change course in his quest to redeem us. God's righteous will does not change, but God's response to our will can and does change.

This is why, in today's Epistle reading, the apostle Paul tells the Philippians: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7). What we have here is the foundation for the prayer of intercession, an invitation to come boldly before the throne of grace to ask for God's mercy and healing for ourselves and for others – with every expectation that God will hear and respond to our requests according to our needs.

Friends, a God who is praiseworthy must also be trustworthy. And our God is trustworthy because God is faithful to God's covenant with us even when we are not faithful. Yes, God may be displeased when we flirt with false gods, but God loves us with a love that will not let us go. This is the kind of God we are called to praise and trust, and praise and trust this God we will. How could we respond otherwise?