

False Images of the True God

Acts 17:29, Exodus 32:1-14

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La Verne Church of the Brethren

Susan Boyer

The Bible is alive for me these days in a way I have never quite experienced before. Images leap off its pages and confront me with new understandings. Stories like the workers in the vineyard; many of the texts that come from the time of exile; calls for togetherness in the midst of conflict...all these seem to preach themselves right now. I just have to step out of the way. I felt that again this week when I was looking at the Exodus text. This isn't a little-known story in our Bibles. People who have never cracked a Bible in their lifetime have heard the story of the Golden Calf. It is our go-to metaphor when we want to address idolatry...the creation of false gods like money, power, consumption – those things from which we derive our worth or we worship above God.

But I think there is an even more nuanced truth in this scripture text. So, I invite you join me as we crawl more deeply inside this story. Moses has gone up the mountain for an executive session with God. The Israelites are relieved...at first...because they had witnessed God's voice before and it frightened them so much that they suggested to Moses, "Why don't you just go talk to God and then come back and share the highlights with us, in a softer way?"

So, Moses hiked up mountain to meet with God and hear more about God's commandments. It says that God, with his own finger, wrote these commandments onto two stone tablets for Moses to carry back down the mountain. This wasn't a quick process. God had lots to say. Moses was up there for 40 days and 40 nights.

When Moses didn't return right away the Israelites, who had begged Moses to be their emissary to God, began to worry. Was Moses coming back? What would they do if he didn't? He was their leader after all. They had trusted him enough to follow him, at great peril to themselves. And where are they now? In the middle of the wilderness with no promised land in sight and their fearless leader is gone.

So, they confront Moses' right hand man, his brother Aaron. "You've got to do something! Moses hasn't returned and we are getting really anxious. Now who is going to lead us out of this mess. Aaron, can you make us a god that can lead us out of here?" Aaron puts up no counter argument. Instead he comes up with a plan to meet their demand. Aaron has them bring all their gold jewelry to him. He melts all the gold rings in a fire and then shapes the gold into a calf. Then he says, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt. I declare tomorrow a festival to Yahweh."

Here is the nuanced part. We think of this as a story about idolatry...about false gods... about those things we worship above God, like money, career, security, fame, power. But that isn't what Aaron was doing. He created the golden calf as an image of the true

God. He fashioned this precious metal into a statue and named it Yahweh. This is the One who brought them out of Egypt,” he said. He tried to get it right while he was getting it wrong. He had good intentions. They were scared out here in the middle of the wilderness and he wanted to make them feel safe. He could tell they were making Moses into their savior and he wanted to move their focus back on Yahweh. So, Aaron fashioned a tangible god for them to look at and said, “Here, see this pretty thing I made. This is Yahweh and he is actually the one who led you out of Egypt and he is here....right in the midst of you.”

Aaron built an altar to Yahweh in front of this golden calf and declared the next day a festival the one true God. People brought gifts to the altar. Then they sat down to eat and drink and rose up into some serious “reveling”. I’m guessing that Aaron stood off on the side watching this debacle and thinking, “Where did I go wrong?” I think it went wrong when Aaron’s answer was to make a false image of the true God.

We human beings do it all the time. We come at it from different angles depending on what we think we need or what we want God to be. The followers of the Prosperity Gospel believe that our health and financial wealth are the will of God and those things will be yours if we have faith, positivity and make donations to religious organizations. Proponents of the Prosperity Gospel have a contractual relationship with the benefactor God. I do the following things and God will bless me with financial stability and a long life by which to enjoy my riches.

There is the Westboro Baptist Church that worships the punishing God who kills people for the sins (well the things they designate as sins) of their fellow citizens. The members of this church show up to gay pride parades, funerals and public events across our nation carrying signs that say things like “God caused 9/11” and “Thank God for dead soldiers”.

Some see God as a micromanager directing our every move. Others define God as energy. There are those who believe that God is a Democrat and those who think God is a Republican. In this understanding God becomes a political entity. I remember in the church of my youth that a member stood up during the sharing time and expounded on some proposition on the ballot and said, “If you are a Christian there is only one right way you can vote in this election.” I think we all have a piece of this division in us. We believe that God ends up on the same side of the issues as we do. Anne Lamott quotes a friend of hers when she writes: “You can safely assume that you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”

We do this same thing to Jesus also. I had an interchange once with a man who said to me, “I don’t follow your liberal, hippie Jesus.” I retorted with, “I don’t follow your Jesus who stands at the pearly gates turning away those who make your uncomfortable.” Do a study of how Jesus has been portrayed in art through the centuries. We bring our own needs, wants and contexts to our understanding of God and Jesus.

Now I am quite aware that just talking about this whole idea of false images of God pushes me back in the same corner in which Aaron found himself. Aaron wanted to calm the anxiety of his people....make them feel safe...give them some tangible way to focus their attention on God...and so he gave them an image with which he was comfortable and, in doing so, he limited their ability to experience God. He reduced God to something small enough for them to see.

In the Hebrew Bible, God is not seen. God is experienced in the storm, in the whirlwind, in the still small voice, in a burning bush. It is at the burning bush that Moses receives the call from God to help free his people from oppression. Moses feels like he needs something tangible to give the people to prove that this message is from God. "What shall I tell them is your name?" God's response can be translated several possible ways:

- I Am who I Am
- I Am that I Am
- I will become what I choose to become
- I create whatever I create
- I will be what I will be

Whatever way you translate God's answer to Moses it isn't anywhere close to the tangible, anthropomorphic image we hear so much of in our culture. This divine name comes from the Hebrew verb "to be" and is related to the name Yahweh – YHWH – written with only consonants. In Jewish tradition God's name was considered so holy it was not to be spoken in prayer or worship. God refuses our attempts to be shoved into the box of blue state or red state god. This isn't the liberal hippie or the bearded man on a throne. This is the One beyond our comprehension...the vast, undefinable God whom we can only attempt to describe in the expanding language of poetry. We often use the language of love when we talk about God for like love God is not definable...but like love you know when you experience it.

Friends, we are in a time in history when everyone is vying to be the one to define God for you. If anyone, me included, tries to limit God to a political party or gender or ideology or gold statue refuse the smallness. God will not be limited. When we attempt to reduce God to a false or lesser image, we harm ourselves for we limit our own access and experience of the immeasurable, limitless God...the great I Am...the one who is beyond our comprehension.

When someone claims to be on God's side or when you find yourself tempted to see God as hating the people you hate or anytime an attempt is made to make God fit inside our small boxes, maybe it would help you to say to yourself, "I will not make a false image of God. I will not limit my experience of the One who is limitless. I will not define the One who is beyond my definition. I will worship the One whose ways are higher than my ways...the One who, thankfully, is beyond my imaginings." Amen.