

Gotta Serve Somebody. A sermon preached on
September 24, 2017 at St. Giles' Presbyterian
Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder

Texts: EXODUS 32:1-14
JOHN 4:23-25

The central event of the Old Testament,
The event to which writers return again and again,
Remains the Exodus of God's people out of slavery
in Egypt and into a new land – a Promised Land.

To read the New Testament, one realizes that
the Exodus and its themes of slavery to freedom
remains a theme picked up not only by the letter
writers like Paul and John,
But by Jesus' himself.

The Exodus is a grand story with themes and
actions that once read are not forgotten,
Even by people who are not regular readers of the
Bible.

Many of these themes in fact have made their
way into popular literature and culture
The burning bush incident where God speaks to
Moses,
The plagues that finally tip Pharaoh's hand to "let
the people go"
The parting of the Red Sea
The quails, manna and water –God's provision of
enough

The grumbling and whining of the Israelites who have incredibly selective memories about their captivity and enslavement in Egypt.

And certainly there is the story that Karenza read moments ago – the making of the golden calf

The golden calf – a universal symbol for idolatry that still exists in popular culture.

It is an unsettling story.

Obviously the Israelites have not absorbed the truth that the life of faith is often a life spent learning to wait.

Aaron is a nonstarter as a leader of the people

If anything, he encourages Israelite bad worship behavior.

The fickleness and gullibility of the people – many of whom had first person knowledge of God's provision and deliverance from horrible servitude.

I wonder --How could they be so obtuse.

Clear example of that hymn phrase from

Robert Robinson's Come thou font of every blessing

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,

Prone to leave the God I love.

Indeed...wander they have!

A high price shall be paid for such wandering

It is really an upstairs/downstairs story

Upstairs (on the mountain) in the silent calm and hidden by the clouds.

Moses listens to God

Downstairs (in the valley) –frenzy, cacophony of noise and events of the worst kind of religiosity.

The people after just 40 days are convinced Moses is gone forever.

They reason, he has either been devoured by the fiery divine presence OR

Some wild creature

Or he's fallen off one of the mountain's many cliffs.

To counter this seeming non presence of Moses or God for that matter,

There surfaces in the peoples' minds

Something of the' remembrances of Egypt's' many idols

To Aaron they charge, **come make us gods who will go before us**

Aaron – bit of a real woose here calls the people to bring to him their gold earrings and bracelets

These are melted down and the molten gold is case in the form of a golden calf

The people then declare **These are your gods O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt (vs.4)**

This is followed the next day with a feast and festival – a Biblical rave!

Shift to upstairs – God can see what is happening downstairs and in fury considers another Noah let's begin all over again action.

Moses though is strong enough to persuade God to restrain God from this action.

God is some angry and rightly so – for the Israelites have entered by free choice into a covenant relationship with God

Now, they are claiming this piece of gold brought them out of Egypt!!

This morning's reading ends with Moses heading down the mountain for a reckoning with Aaron and the people.

And a reckoning it is...for the people have blatantly reneged on their promise to God

Well, what has this great story got to do with our worship here at St. Giles or in any other community of faith?

There are no golden calves around the building\

but the presence and beguiling voices of the world continue to try to take our focus off God in worship and onto something or someone else.

In genuine worship, *God must remain both subject and object*

Nothing can be the centre except for God.

The point of worship is to recognize that 'God alone matters.'

In making the golden calf, the people want to dictate to God the terms upon which they will obey Him.

Genuine worship does not allow for that option.

Though there are not golden calves present here or in any other place of worship I have ever visited,

Golden calfism – idolatry still exists.

God's people can still slip and often without realizing it move into a mindset and attitude where God is no longer front and centre of worship and of life!

When this happens in worship, worship becomes limpid, flaccid and full of sound and fury but having no significant impact on its participants.

What are some of the idols today that can tickle our ears and distract us from genuine worship?

Worship where God is front and centre

Worship where God is both subject and object.

Well, unchecked nostalgia can morph into an idol.

A longing for the good old days can easily turn into stagnation in any community of faith.

Look at the Israelites – they selectively remember the leeks and garlic of Egypt, but forget how brutal the Egyptians were to them.

We have all heard the seven last words of a dying faith community – we've never done it that way before.

There is nothing inherently wrong with history or tradition.

I've been a member and a servant of a denomination that is anchored and deeply respectful of both.

However,

Tradition and history must never ignore the truth that change is part of life

The free working of the Holy Spirit is part of life

I remember many years ago travelling in Upper New York State and visiting historic – Revolutionary era churches.

Learning that so and so worshipped there.

Their family sat in that boxed pew.

See here's the plaque marking where the family sat.

Looking around one particular church and running my finger over the woodwork, I wondered whether anyone since had worshipped in this place. The beautiful stone baptism font was curtained off and had broken pieces of wooden chairs around it and in it.

In more than one church we went into it felt more like a museum,

Dare I say mausoleum than an active community of faith.

As I heard the stories of the church, read their booklets on the churches' history

Nostalgia,

The tried and true

The old ways had prevailed at an important point in the congregation's life and all that was really left were memories of the good old days.

How so very sad....

Our old friend *money can also become a golden calf in today's church.*

We know that money has a light and a dark side. Jesus called it 'mammon' reminding his listeners that money is a power – it is not morally neutral. How can money morph into an idol in worship?

Often when communities of faith get into ongoing deficit issues,

The suggestions come from someone – let's make our worship more 'attractive'

Or popular.

That will bring in more people. More people=larger offerings

Let's have nothing to say about laments or difficulties in life – that will drive people away

Let's make certain to find ways where people feel good about themselves.

Let's think about how we might wow a crowd

Let's no longer call it Sunday morning worship.

Let's say to people "come to experience Sunday"

That will bring people in –more bums on the pews.

Problem with money driven worship is that the real purpose of worship is lost.

We become too preoccupied with head counts.
And less with care of souls.

Deficits in the church, however they are
caused are never really resolved by just changing
worship.

Long term and every growing deficit are like the
19th canaries in the mind shafts – they are warnings
that something spiritual is out of whack!

Today, one of the most strident idols is that of
meism.

*This unchecked and often uncontrolled perspective and
attitude to life that says and believes "it's all about ME*

In worship this takes the form of -what's in
worship for me?

What will I get out of it?

Is it worth my time and energy to engage in?

Such people,

If and when they come to church to worship see
themselves as a part of an audience.

To them, worship is performance.

They would readily concur with the little boy who
one Sunday was even more fidgety than usual.

AT some point during a worship service, he leaned
over to his mother and in a stage whisper,

"Mommy, let's pay the man. I want to go home>
I'm bored!!

Reality check – worship *is not performance*
where you are a gathering of just spectators

More conditioned to watch than to participate.

Years ago, I was given a description of worship that has stayed with me and that I visualize every time I lead or attend worship

The traditional, but wrong perspective on worship runs something like this

The platform people are the dramatists, story tellers and musicians,

You as a congregation are the audience for which we are performing Sunday by Sunday

And God – well – he’s somewhere out there!!!

Genuine worship is very different

The platform people are the prompters,

Or coaches or stage managers

Or choral conductors or first violins,

But LL OF US are the actors, and ALL our worship is directed to God

HE’s the audience

We are gathering in worship in order to give everything to God

It is not about us – it’s about God

Further, we can only be actors, because He acted first!

The golden calf of Exodus 32 was meism on steroids

Come. Make gods for US. Who shall go before us (vs. 1)

There is also the *idol of efficiency*.

Now hear me, as a serving minister in a denomination known for doing things ‘decently and in order’

I respect things being handled with dispatch and competently.

However when the main goal of faith community becomes efficiency – an idol

Where everything and everyone must be dealt with efficiently, there can be some nasty consequences.

How so?

First, God’s grace is rarely part of worldly efficiency.

And a church or faith community that ceases to operate under God’s grace – ceases to be a church as scripture defines community of believers

Without God’s grace, we may be really efficient, but we become no different than any corporation, company or small business.

Second, efficiency at all costs does not line up with the truism that most of the Christian life is spent learning to wait.

Sometimes plans, projects, schedules have to be adjusted owing to bigger needs and realities

Third, rigid to the book efficiency does not allow for the free operation of the Holy Spirit in the life of the community and in the lives of those who are part of the community.

The idol of glitz and spectacle.

It is not surprising that the church as a body would be tempted to buy into this idol,
For it is all around us and very persuasive.

This idol believes that unless worship is exciting and dynamic with lots of technological glitz and coffee bars following with Christian baristas
Then somehow Jesus' Great Commission is not being fulfilled.

My experience is though, that spectacle like worship will not hold people over the long haul.
Why? One reason is that this style of worship does not often take seriously or handle well the whole counsel of God.

It does the exciting and uplifting parts of the Bible quite well,

But what about the need to repent, to lament, to cry out for hope in the troubles of life?

What about the increasingly necessary time for quiet today

Quiet time to just think, pause and draw breath.
Glitz and spectacle is rarely quiet!

Glitz and spectacle also often turns the platform people back into performers – and we most certainly are not!!

The technology is with us, but always, always we must ensure it does not detract from God as subject and object of worship.

Singer and song writer and Nobel Prize winner Bob Dylan is certainly no theological heavy hitter.

But the chorus from his song Gotta Serve Somebody is tremendously insightful on the human condition

*But you gonna have to serve somebody, yes,
Indeed you're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, if may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.*

The question is as we worship God.
As we live out each day NOT whether we will serve somebody. The question is WHO? Choose wisely.
AMEN