

Will the Real GOD Please Stand Up
Pentecost 19A
PPC
11 October 2020

Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23
Exodus 32:1-14

I don't know about you but I totally get what those Israelites, feeling abandoned at the base of Mt. Sinai, are experiencing. Moses has left. He said he'd be back but he's been up on that mountain for a long while. There they all are, at the base camp, worried sick because their lives are not going along so well. Moses said he was going to talk to this God, but what proof do they have? They're tired of wandering around, not being able to build their own homes and feeling safe. Who is this God, anyhow? This God has not brought them to the land of milk and honey yet; they are still searching and wandering, hoping for a place to call home. All of this God talk hasn't gotten them where they want to be. Where is the tangible proof that this God even cares?

Out of their fear and anxiety, they gather around Aaron. "We need some other gods, Aaron. Gods that will bring us what we want. You are Moses' brother; you must have some idea of what direction to go in. You get us, Aaron. You recognize that our needs and desires are not being met."

I'm sure it's rather flattering to have the crowd surrounding you and treating you like the leader. What's wrong with the desire of the people for a change in leadership? What's a brother to do? Moses is always talking about some YHWH God whom he claims is leading the people in their wandering. True, there is that pillar of cloud and smoke but what has this God really done for any of them? What blessings has this God given to these homeless people? What kind of God can't work the miracles that the

people really want - not just some boring manna and quail? Where is this God in their longing for more? Why can't this God bring prosperity to all? Lead them all to lovely new homes, making expensive cars available for all. And while we're on the subject, God, couldn't you just cure all cancer, not let people die of the coronavirus, and bring back the jobs? Really, when you come to think of it, this God of Moses just isn't working anymore; this God has not given us what we want. We want to feel safe in this world, sure that the crops will be good and in retirement we will be able to still travel. Where are you, God?

There are some parallels here to our current situation. For now, the people want to go with the man who can make Israel great again. Aaron instructs the Hebrews to take off all their gold - rings, earrings, necklaces, bracelets - and they'll build a golden calf. A golden calf that they can all see and worship. That is where security lies. That is the only way to feel safe. What matters in life if not our gold? That is the only way to feel safe. We'll make sure the stock market is doing well - if it continues to do so, we'll be able to live off of our retirement savings. Some people will accumulate billions but we'll know that there is the possibility of that happening to any of us. With this power, we'll make sure that everyone worships the Baal of the golden calf. For those who have doubts, we'll implant fear in the hearts of the people and convince them that the only way to feel loved and secure is to accumulate wealth. After all, isn't prosperity the sign of a God who cares about us?

Maybe Baal is a more powerful God than YHWH God, anyhow. If YHWH God kept the promises we think we deserve and that we believe have been given to us, there wouldn't be anymore mental illness in the world; no one would die of disease, we

would all have enough to eat and a roof over our heads. Baal will be the god who punishes those who aren't following our rules. Life will be good.

Jim Wallis writes in his book, *Agenda for Biblical People*, "The worship of idols takes many forms, some direct and unmistakable, some far more deceptive and subtle. In our own times, we witness people, relationships, institutions, ideologies, movements, and nations caught in the grip of contemporary idolatries."¹ Some of those contemporary idols that we worship are familiar realities: money, possessions, power, race, class, sex, nation, status, success, work, violence, religion, ideology, causes and so on. I'm sure you can come up with your own list.

I do understand how those Israelites felt, though. I can feel the wind of hope blow through that crowd as they offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices to lay before this golden calf. Finally, we've done something, they're thinking. We've taken the bull by the horns - excuse the pun - and we can get this show on the road. Now, life will start going the way we want it to.

How often in the church do we think "we just need to DO something." These days in the church I think we all feel very much like those Hebrews waiting at the base of Mt. Sinai. Scared and full of anxiety, we wonder what will happen to us. Maybe if we could only get the committees back up and running, if we just get the Sunday school running, if we can worship together again in the sanctuary, if we just DO something, then we can turn the tide and find success as a church. This week on retreat with pastors across the nation, I was shocked to hear of the number of churches who are worshiping in their sanctuary. One church even had their choir singing again. Without

¹ Jim Wallis, *Agenda for Biblical People* (London: Triangle, 1986), pp. 38-39

wearing masks! How tempting it is to do this, though. We're ready to build a golden calf to any new idea that will alleviate our anxiety. What will become of us? Instead of waiting patiently for Moses to descend the mountain, we want to take matters into our hands and build a golden calf.

We worry about finances. We worry about the building. We want our church life to go on as it has before this pandemic. But which god will we trust to lead us safely to the Promised Land? Our church has a Saviour and it's not the pastor or the amount of money we have.

Understanding what Biblical idolatry is may help us in the process as we journey together through the unknown. Idolatry originates in the human decision to seek life and salvation apart from the source of life, YHWH God. Idolatry denies the place of God as the giver of life and dehumanizes people by making them pay homage to objects not worthy of our worship.

Personally, I struggle with this every day of my life. I am someone who has experienced much loss in my life. Loss of marriage, loss of home, loss of financial stability are all part of my history. And while I won't lie to you and say that I don't worry about these things, I do know that those things that money can buy are not life giving. What is life giving is knowing that you won't be denied good health care when you need it and if you lose your job you won't lose your health care. It's knowing that your housing is secure and you aren't in danger of being evicted so that you and your children are living on the streets. It's our systems that are inherently unjust and as people of faith we must work to make the systemic changes that are so desperately

needed. YHWH God will be with us to walk beside us and comfort us when we are frightened.

Which god will we worship? Where does your treasure lie? “From everyone to whom much has been given,” writes Luke, “much will be required” (Luke 12:48).

We need people who are willing to care for the people of this congregation, people who are willing to govern us well, to see that our children feel well loved, to organize different events. Can you give of your time? Do you believe that what we do here is important enough to give your time and talents? Are you hungry enough for the word of God that you are willing to commit monetary resources so that the Word will continue to be proclaimed on this corner in the city of Providence? We need to take care of the mundane tasks of maintaining our home even when we aren't able to worship in it. How important is this to you? These are questions we must face together.

“A growing church is a dying church,” writes J. Barrett Lee in his blog. “It has to be. It cannot be otherwise. The way to Easter Sunday goes through Good Friday. The way to the empty tomb goes through Golgotha. The way to resurrection goes through crucifixion. When Jesus told you to take up the cross and follow, did you expect it to lead anywhere else? What Jesus told us about himself is also true of churches. *Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it bears no fruit.*”

Moses descends Mt. Sinai because YHWH God sees what the people at the base camp are doing. YHWH God tells Moses “your people” are a “stiff-necked” people. Will we be easily drawn to the golden calf and forget the Giver of Life?

The remarkable part of this story is that Moses reminds YHWH God of who these Hebrews are and God changes the Divine Mind and forgives the people their

actions. YHWH God may get angry at the people of God, but it seems that forgiveness is never far behind.

Are we capable of waiting until Moses returns with instructions on how to make our lives more meaningful by living by the Commandments? Will we learn to discern the difference between our idols and the Giver of All Life? Are we those people who will keep a torch burning so that others who tire of waiting for Moses to come back down the mountain or Jesus to return as he said he would can find their way in the dark to a safe place, a place to call home? When our group is large enough we can set about bringing justice to this world so no one will need a golden calf.

AMEN.