North Shore Congregational Church
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

"Delivered: Misplaced Trust"

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Exodus 32: 1-8, 15-24

November 8, 2026

So, we skipped a few verses in that first portion of Exodus 32 that Jon read for us a few minutes ago. As much as anything, I skipped those verses because I don't want the readings to get so long that we start counting the panes in the windows, but there is this interesting exchange that takes place in those verses in which God seems ready to wipe the slate clean of all these faithless Israelites and start fresh with Moses. "Now let me alone," God says to Moses, "so that my wrath may burn hot against them [the Israelites] and I may consume them, and of you [Moses] I will make a great nation." Moses, however, implores God to relent. He calls upon the history of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He reminds God of the promises made to the ancestors of the Israelite people. And, verse 14 tells us that, in the wake of Moses' pleading, God "changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people." That, then, is when Moses headed down from the top of Mt. Sinai with those two tablets inscribed with by the very hand of God.

That's where we pick up the story in verse 16…

> *The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets. 17 When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, "There is a noise of war in the camp." 18 But he said, "It is not the sound made by victors or the sound made by losers; it is the sound of singing that I hear."*
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> *19 As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses's anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. 20 He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.*
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> *21 Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?" 22 And Aaron said, "Do not let the anger of my lord burn hot; you know the people, that they are wicked. 23 They said to me, 'Make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' 24 So I said to them, 'Whoever has gold, take it off'; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!"*

Suddenly, perhaps because he now saw first-hand what he'd only known second-hand while up on the mountain, Moses becomes furious and all that pleading forgiveness that he'd presented to

God is ignored when Aaron asks the same of him. What unfolds is a scene filled with blame, fury, and no small amount of death. What I really want to talk about, however, is why God, and then Moses, became so angry over this small statue of a cow.

It's easy, I think, to simply chalk the whole thing up to the first commandment – 'I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me.' It makes sense to lump all that together, but here's the challenge: the Israelites don't know those rules yet. As the reader, we know them from 12 chapters earlier when Moses first received the Ten Commandments from God, but in the story laid out in Exodus Moses hadn't yet come down to deliver those commandments to the people. That's what he was doing just now. Those were the tablets in his hand, just now.

Not only had they not yet heard those commandments, but the notion of turning from one god to the next was commonplace in the world in which the Israelites lived. Our Wednesday Bible Discussion group has heard me talk about this multiple times through this series. The very concept of monotheism – of grasping that there is one God and one God only – was a growing edge in the faith of the Israelites and one that would not fully take hold until centuries beyond this wilderness journey. Some faiths and cultures of the time worshipped many gods that had unique characteristic and roles, while others worshipped one god among many gods they believed to exist. Even for those that did focus on one god, however, the question was one of which god was better – more powerful, more faithful, more helpful, and so on. The monotheistic notion that there was only one God, however, was simply not part the worldview from which they came.

So, we can't simply reduce the anger of God and Moses to fury based on the Israelites' failure to adhere to that commandment because they didn't yet have that commandment. And we can't reduce it to their refusal to stay true to the one and only God because they didn't yet have a full understanding of the notion of there being just one God. When we consider the time and place of the people we see that there has to be something else at play, and I think to really grasp this moment of rage that we see first in God and later in Moses, we have to look back on the story that brought us to it.

Consider, if you will, the narrative that has brought us to this place.

- Exodus opened with the Israelites oppressed and in harsh servitude under the strict hand of an Egyptian king that was terrified of the growing community of Israelites among them.
- God took a stuttering orphan and made him into the leader that would stand up the Pharaoh and facilitate the deliverance of the people from their strife.
- God sent frogs, and gnats, and flies, and pestilence, and boils, and hail, and locust, and darkness and even death to bring forth their release.
- God led the Israelites out of Egypt and guided them through the waters on dry land to then swamp their enemies and drown them in the waters that returned.
- In a cloud by day and fire by night, God showed the Israelites the way for their journey.
- When the people were hungry, God brought manna from heavens to provide for their daily needs.
- When the people were thirsty, God instructed Moses to draw water from rock.

- When the Israelites were attacked by the Amalekites, the power of God shone through Moses lifting his staff in the air brought victory for God's people.

Again and again, one time after another, God rescued, God provided, God led the people out of oppression, through turmoil, amidst strife, against harm and then we come to this period in which Moses is on the mountaintop with God, and once a few weeks go by the Israelites cannot help themselves. Someone in our Wednesday group pointed out the humorous nonchalance of the way the Israelites express it: 'As for this guy Moses, we don't know what happened to him!' Again and again, one time after another, God rescued, God provided, God led the people out of oppression, through turmoil, amidst strife, against harm and then we come to this period in which Moses is on the mountaintop with God for a couple weeks and what do the Israelites do? They take it into their own hands and try to solve things on their time and in their own way. And, that's the rub. That's the tension. That, I suggest, is the deeper betrayal at the heart of the wrath of God and Moses in Exodus 32.

This isn't about some statue. God doesn't care about some bejeweled bovine resting in the middle of the camp. God cares about the reason it exists in the first place. God cares about why they made it. God cares about the motivation. God doesn't care that they cast a golden calf. God cares that they cast a golden calf because they didn't have the faith and trust to wait on God.

It is a recurring theme that we see play out throughout the book of Exodus – the faithfulness of God overlooked by the impatience of God's people. Delivered from oppression but trapped between their pursuers behind them and the sea before them, they decry the fact that they were brought out of Egypt just to die. Facing hunger and provided with manna, they were instructed to take just enough for a day and two days' worth before the Sabbath, but so many couldn't help but try to take more. Thirsty in the wilderness they say they would have rather lived as slaves in Egypt than suffer in the wilderness. And, as soon as Moses is gone for a couple weeks, they refuse to wait, take things into their own hands, and form that golden calf to take God's place as the one who led them in the past and assures their future.

The issue isn't the sculpture, it's what it represents. It's the fact that the Israelites didn't trust God enough to wait and, instead, insisted on taking matters into their own hands to try to do in their manner and time what they weren't willing to wait for God to do in his.

When we hear this story of the golden calf, I think our hearts and minds very quickly turn to modern-day gods that tend to absorb so much of our heart and attention in our lives of today. We don't have the same counter-cultural struggle with the notion of monotheism as did the Israelites – that's pretty well baked in for us at this point. We do, however, have an undeniable secular polytheism that plays a huge role in our day-to-day. Whether we are talking about the symbols of status that we try to obtain, the power and control we try to garner, the image that feeds our ego, the items (the phones) that fill our days, or our pride, our success, our control, our possessions, or any of a thousand other things, there is an undeniable tendency to give too much weight and attention to too many things in our days.

The problem, however, is not our phones. The problem is not our homes. The problem is not our careers, or our hobbies, or our exercise regimen or any of the many things that can teeter on

the brink of taking that 'godly' place in our lives. The problem is when they do. They problem is when these things become so central that they supplant the role of God in our lives. And the problem is when they become that which we are relying on to get us where we want to go in the time we want to get there because our human impatience has us unwilling to wait on God.

I am convinced that, in the end, it is a matter of trust. More directly, where we place it. Using our skills, and our gifts, and our opportunities, and our interests, and everything in between to make the most of this blessed life God has given us is wonderful.

- The problem is when we rely on things to bring us momentary bliss in lieu of waiting on God for lasting contentment and joy.
- The problem is when we turn to our own devices to try to reach our own ends in lieu of trusting in the promises of God that outstretch and outlast our frail efforts.
- The problem is when God's failure to meet our prescription and time leads us to turn to some golden calf of our own instead of resting our hope in him.

That's the challenge I suggest is before us today. In the latter portion of Exodus 32 there is a moment in which Moses calls out to the Israelites and asks who will return their trust to God. It is, in that moment, only the sons of Levi that respond to that call, and what unfolds for others is far less than pleasant. I offer, however, that same query for us today. More specifically, in what ways will we seek to re-place our trust in God? What human devices, talents, possessions, relationships, or whatever else are teetering on that brink of becoming that which we trust over and above God? What golden calves are we constructing in our hopes of putting our time and expectation above our willingness to wait on God?

Consider that question as we sing our hymn, then take a few moments to somehow note that on the paper provided. It can be words, letters, a picture… It doesn't matter. It's between you and God. But think about those things that might be on the verge of becoming, or perhaps already are, that golden calf in which you place your trust for tomorrow. Then, after our hymn, you will be invited to bring those papers forward and place them in the bowls beside our golden calf as a small gesture of our hope and intent of re-placing our trust in the God whose manner and time may not always match our wishes, but whose presence and providence have never failed.