

LOVE WINS OUT!¹
Exodus 32: 1-14
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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Given the recent events in the economy, this story of unregulated excess in the form of a golden calf could not come at a more appropriate time. This is an old story with a contemporary heartbeat. It is all about the necessary limits of human freedom and the perils of bowing down before the very money we pool in order to make a bull market.

I

One of the great surprises in this story is the primitive way of looking at God. Here is a picture of Moses and God up on a mountaintop arguing over who is responsible for the mess they see down in the valley! And if you look closely, you can see the subtle humor in the text, as both Moses and God seem intent on blaming the other:

*The Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! **Your** people, whom **you** brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely....² Then Moses, not willing to take full responsibility for the debacle, makes this bold reply: O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against **your** people, whom **you** brought out of the land of Egypt...?³*

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² Exodus 32: 7.

³ Exodus 32: 11.

It reminds me of a presidential debate! It's your side that is responsible for this debacle. You voted for the budget. You supported deregulation. You failed to give leadership and on and on from both sides.

But we can certainly relate to the exasperation of both God and Moses in this story. While the blame game goes on, the rest of the country is suffering. In this beautiful time of year, when many are normally focused on the baseball playoffs or the color of the leaves or leisurely weekends, they are focused instead on their shrinking resources and are grateful if they have a job, for who knows what's around the corner!

II

Meanwhile, down in the valley, we get another picture. Here we have a people who are frustrated with the amount of time Moses is taking with God, and they turn to Aaron, who himself seems a bit frustrated with his brother Moses. In fact, he seems perfectly willing to give up his assistant-to-Moses position and become a rival to his brother! He is easily persuaded by the people to take over the leadership and oversee the pooling of their gold and jewelry to make the golden calf. The golden calf, in other words, is a pooled investment fund. So these people, who had

been so enthusiastic about their freedom as they were led out of Egypt, now want more than freedom: they want license for unbridled excesses. The Bible describes it as a people who *rose up to revel*.⁴

That enigmatic phrase, *rose up to revel*, has been interpreted in many ways over the years. Some say it has a sexual innuendo, making it a kind of drunken sexual orgy around the golden calf. We do know that in ancient times the bull was the symbol of the Canaanite fertility religion, so the implications are obvious. The calf (or the bull) symbolizes a way to guarantee their own continuing existence without recourse to the ethical demands of God.

The people immediately respond to the calf with the affirmation, *These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt*.⁵ Aaron then affirmed their conclusion and consolidated their new theology by building an altar before the calf and constituting a full alternative liturgical practice. Their lame excuse for all of this is that Moses, who clearly is still on the mountain with God, has been forgotten: *We do not know what has become of him!*⁶ What a short memory!

⁴ Exodus 32: 6.

⁵ Exodus 32: 4.

⁶ Exodus 32: 1.

III

We don't have to be financial analysts to reflect on the implications of human freedom and its tendency toward self-indulgence at the expense of others. For years we have pooled our gold earrings and the like so that we might worship our own golden calf of consumptive excess. Greed became a virtue, and conspicuous consumption became the goal. We placed our faith in easy credit and assumed that we could borrow our way to health and happiness. We ignored warnings about the energy crisis and packed up our SUVs and drove across country with abandon.

But then came the last few weeks. It was the end of the party. Now the financial industry is losing fortunes and losing faith, and we are all paying attention. All of a sudden people stay awake at night worrying about retirement accounts and mortgages and the increasing number of households unable to pay for heat this winter. Homeless shelters are wondering how they will meet the desperate needs of the cold weather, and ordinary people are anxious about paying their bills.

It is to our shame that some in the religious community have tried to baptize our economic excesses with an appeal to the gospel, assuring us that God desires us to have both health and wealth. These evangelists of the gospel of wealth have flown in their private jets to city after city,

proclaiming that God has blessed them with wealth, and God will bless you too if only you will contribute to their ministries.

But behind the scenes and behind the television cameras, there have been faithful churches who have not given up on the covenant of God that Moses insisted was relevant then and is surely pertinent today. These churches have quietly gone about the business of doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with their God. They have bought into the first commandment, that *you shall have no other gods before me.*⁷

These churches have reached out to the poor, invested in community programs and agencies that enable those who have been knocked down by society to get up and stand on their own feet and make a life for themselves. They have cared for the sick and the aged and the down and out. They have loved each other and demonstrated that love by acts of mercy and kindness. They have created caring communities that ask the big questions, refused to discriminate by race or lifestyle or income, studied the scriptures with integrity, and have taken their faith as seriously on Monday as they do on Sunday.

These churches have valued the children and youth of the congregation and the community, and have provided for their growth and

⁷ Exodus 20: 3.

nurture. They have created a community of caring that prays for each other, visits those in trouble, and lends a helping hand where it is needed. They have laughed together and cried together, studied together and worked together, played together and prayed together.

In case you haven't noticed, you are in one of those churches now! There are spiritual values of our faith tradition, rooted deep in the history of this congregation and lived out daily in the life of this congregation, that form the foundation of what sustains us through these turbulent economic times. While we are all yearning for a Moses to lead us out of this economic wilderness, those stone tablets he carried are still with us. Sometimes those Ten Commandments, those universal guidelines for living, may seem contrary to our cultures bent toward unregulated ethics. But those "thou shalt not's" of communal responsibility are still a gift, and a gift to be treasured.

This biblical story, in its ancient and primitive way of understanding God, pictures an anthropomorphic God on top of a mountain venting his frustration and determining to destroy the people who have turned against him down in the valley. Moses is pictured as a kind of defense lawyer arguing in behalf of the people. Moses reminds God that these very people are God's people. His final argument implores God to change his mind:

*Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people!*⁸

This is an extraordinary moment in the story. We are held in desperate suspense, for the future of a nation is in the decision God will make. Finally, we are told that God repents! Which means that God's love and forgiveness wins out over God's wrath! The picture, primitive as it is, imagines God struggling over what to do, and finally love wins out!

IV

While our contemporary golden calf concerns us all, it is our attention to the great spiritual values, forged over time, which will be our sturdy foundation through this economic storm. In all the places where grace shines through, we will be reminded of another great text that sustains us:

*God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.*

.....

*Be still...and know that I am God!*⁹

⁸ Exodus 32: 12.

⁹ Psalm 46: 1-3, 10.