

American Idol

Time and time again, the LORD revealed himself to the wandering people of Israel. The list of the LORD's mighty acts is astounding. Plagues in Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the pillars of cloud and fire. When they were hungry, they received the Bread of Angels and a bounty of quails. When they were thirsty, they received supernatural water flowing from a rock. They even saw the presence of the LORD manifest as a powerful storm. I mean, really...what more did they need to be convinced that the LORD who led them from slavery is indeed the true God, the Mighty One, the One who called creation into being, the One who knew them all by name...the One who desired to lead them to the Promised Land? What more did they need than what they had already seen and experienced? Well, apparently, they still needed something more, and they just weren't getting their fix from the Lord. They were addicted, it seems, to doubt, and couldn't maintain faithfulness to the LORD.

You see, that's how addiction works. It takes your ability to be rational and logical and twists it, convinces you that true reality is a farce, and that the farce, that illogical and nonsensical behavior...that's what is real. And once you've become accustomed to that new reality, that farce covered over by a thin veneer of truth...once you've become accustomed to it, you cease to be free, no matter how hard you try to convince yourself that you are indeed free. You become enslaved, and in a truly ironic turn, you seem to be the only one who can't see that the thing that you love the most is really a set of chains holding you down.

Make no mistake. The Israelite's construct, this beautiful Golden Calf...this symbol of power and virility, of strength and life...it's just another form of slavery, golden chains masquerading as an idol of release, tying them right back to their time in Egypt. *"When the*

*people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, 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." Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord." They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel."*

After tiring of waiting on Moses and the LORD, the Israelites began to crave something else. "Make us gods we can see," they said. "Make us gods we can touch with our own hands, even if it is our hands that have to fashion them." And so Aaron did just that. He made them something to worship. And once made, they prepared for a feast. And feast they did. As the Scripture says, *"The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel."* They rose up to revel. But, in their reveling, they seemed to have forgotten one small detail. Their beautiful Golden Calf, that idol they were so proud of, wasn't made from gold they found at the base of Mt. Sinai. It was made from the golden rings that pierced their ears and noses, put there by the hands of their Egyptian slave masters. They danced, and sang, and reveled before a Golden Calf that was made from the markers of their slavery, of the very things that signified their status as property. In their idolatry, their desire to worship other gods, they remained defined by the

slavery of their past. Their new god, this Golden Calf, was powerless to deliver them from the wilderness, but it was powerful enough to keep them enslaved.

This Golden Calf, their new enslaver, was malleable. It was formed through their own labors, reflected their twisted desires, and led them down a darkened road bereft of light and life. And though it may have looked beautiful, attractive, seductive even...it was empty, and it led the people to the brink of destruction. *“The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.”* Their twisted desires, their addiction to infidelity as it were, put them at odds with the only One in the universe who could truly deliver them from their slavery. At the very moment the LORD revealed to Moses the beautiful truth that the Divine Presence was soon to dwell in the midst of the Israelites, the people lapsed, or should I say relapsed, into infidelity and idolatry. If they would have just waited a little longer, held on just a little tighter, trusting in the One who led them through the Red Sea...they would have known, with certainty, that the LORD was with them, was leading them. But they couldn't wait. And so, the relapse, the return to their addiction, and the desire of God to wipe them from the face of the world.

But divine retribution didn't win the day. Though it was within the LORD's power and right to do this, something happened. A lone voice, arguing with God, putting up a fight, begging for mercy. *“O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand...Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self...”* Moses, that flawed,

yet beautiful prophet of the LORD, argued the LORD back from the edge of reactivity. Divine retribution was cast into the wind, and a second chance for the people was given.

Stories like these fuel my ministry and give me a reason to keep on preaching. Here is a people unable to move past their past...to move beyond the slavery and the chains they became accustomed to...to move beyond the doubt they were addicted to. Here is the people of God, the Chosen People, bowing down before an idol made from the markers of their slavery, whoring themselves out in acts of misplaced affection. And it almost killed them. But the hand of the LORD was stayed through the prayer and intercession of a man who refused to let these mistakes define his sisters and brothers. And so that second chance was given, and the LORD found a way to renew the covenant with the people, even though they did nothing to deserve this grace...they were given a new lease on life.

We may not be bowing down to a Golden Calf, but all of us can think of times in our lives when something other than the LORD was what we loved the most...was what shaped us, formed us, perhaps even kept us in chains of a sort. Something that we turned to for solace and strength, something other than the grace and mercy of the LORD. I've been there, been down a road that led me to idolize the very thing that kept me bound and insane. But the LORD stayed his hand, picked me up, dusted me off, and gave me a new lease on life. And this is how the LORD has acted towards us for as long as there has been the human family. We race, and stumble, and fall, and crawl, and curse...but the LORD is waiting for us, ready to take the shattered shards of our life and make them into something beautiful. We serve a God of second chances, and I, for one, am thankful.