

Sermon, 10/15/2023, Exodus 32:1-14; Philippians 4:1-9

The story of the golden calf is a fun one to preach to the kids, mainly because of that spray painted cow that I pull out every three years but can't remember where it came from. Stories with a clear narrative arc make the children's sermon simple. Kids can easily understand that worshipping some statue is not something God likes. I generally skip the part about God's burning-hot wrath and Moses changing God's mind. Those concepts can be more upsetting and challenging.

It's also challenging to recognize what our golden calves are today. Our idols often come out of our fear. Have you noticed how often the Bible says, "Do not be afraid"? God says it to Abram and Hagar and Jacob and Moses. The angel says it to Zechariah and Mary. Jesus says it over and over, as well as "Do not worry." Paul says it in today's reading to the church in Philippi: "Do not worry about anything."

But "Moses delayed coming down the mountain." While fear is not expressly listed as the people's response to this delay, fear makes sense as a motivation. They told Aaron "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." They were worried. They were scared. They had left the life they knew and were now in the middle of the wilderness after seeing their enemies drowned in the Red Sea, and the man who had led them there went up a mountain but didn't come back down. At least not as fast as they thought he should have. They were afraid.

Aaron must have been afraid, too, because he sprang into action after the people asked him to make them gods because they didn't know what had happened to Moses. He melted down their gold and made an image of a calf, and then they worshipped it and had a party.

When I was a child, I was never tempted to melt down my jewelry, create a calf, and worship it, so I liked this story. It was easy to obey. I was a good girl because I was never tempted to worship golden calves. But I was also scared of all kinds of things when I was a kid. I was afraid of stepping on a crack on my walk to school because it might break my mother's back. I was afraid something would happen to my parents. I was scared of the dark and fire.

As an adult my fears just take different forms. I'm afraid something will happen to Gary. I'm afraid the fall pledge campaign won't bring in enough money to run our church. I'm afraid something will happen to me and Gary will be alone. I'm scared for everyone in the Holy Land right now. I cannot picture a positive ending to the current war. It's dark and terrifying.

Our fears make us susceptible to idols. If we spend all of our time worrying, we won't rejoice in the beauty that we are in the midst of. In today's epistle Paul instructs the church to rejoice in the Lord always: "again I will say rejoice." Paul writes these words from prison. Have you ever been in a prison? The ones around here are gray and imposing, with razor wire keeping people fenced inside multiple heavy gates that close with a distinctive dismal sound. I have been inside maximum-security prisons and I get so scared every time, wondering what will happen if I can't get out. I try to imagine what it would be like to live there, and my heart clenches up. I would be terrified.

Terror, fear, worry: these can lead us to put our faith in something other than God. Faith in money. In guns. In some sort of idol, if not a golden calf.

Paul may not have had the same sort of wire or gates in his prison, but his experience was no more pleasant. Even so, Paul writes not to worry, and to think about whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and praiseworthy. This beautiful passage can unfortunately lead to annoying theologies of toxic positivity. I am not going to pray cancer away. You are not going to change the war in the Holy Land by thinking about good things.

But we also cannot cure cancer or bring peace to the Holy Land by worrying. By fear.

Sometimes our fears can be nudges from the Holy Spirit. What scares you that you aren't doing? This doesn't have to be something dramatic like going on a mission trip to a country that frightens you. Maybe there's something smaller that you are avoiding, like a difficult conversation with someone you've wronged. Maybe something bad has happened to you or your family and you fear what's next. Do you believe that God will be with you? Or are you like these Israelites, who stopped seeing God because Moses was a little late coming down the mountain?