

-ish

Exodus 32:1-14 (Philippians 4:1-9)

Mark Schloneger

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Then God spoke all of these words:

I am the Lord your God,

who brought you out of the land of Egypt,
out of the house of slavery;
you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol,

whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above,
or that is on the earth beneath,
or that is in the water under the earth.

You shall not bow down and worship them . . .

You shall not make alongside me

gods of silver or gold for yourselves. (Exodus 20:1-4, 23)

You recognize these words.

These are the from first two of the Ten Commandments and the law that followed.

The first two – remember that.

Exodus 24 tells us that, after Moses came down the mountain,

he told these and other laws to the people.

And the people, they answered with one voice,

“All the words that the LORD has spoken, we will do,
we will be obedient.”

And then they entered into a covenant with God, sealed in blood.

This covenant gave them and marked them as a people –

a people with a new, distinct identity – the people of God.

God and Israel, betrothed.

God then told Moses to come back up the mountain

to receive the stone tablets with the law and commandments.

Preparing for his absence, Moses appointed Aaron and another leader

to settle disputes among the people.

Then Moses entered a cloud that had descended on Mount Sinai,

and, for forty days and nights, he was neither seen nor heard.

Now, I'll read, Exodus 32, verses 1 to 14, reading from the Common English Bible.

*The people saw that Moses was taking a long time
to come down from the mountain.*

They gathered around Aaron and said to him,

“Come on! Make us gods who can lead us.

As for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt,

we don't have a clue what has happened to him.”

*Aaron said to them, "All right, take out the gold rings
from the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters,
and bring them to me."*

*So all the people took out the gold rings from their ears
and brought them to Aaron.*

He collected them and tied them up in a cloth.

*Then he made a metal image of a bull calf,
and the people declared, "These are your gods, Israel,
who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"*

When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf.

Then Aaron announced,

"Tomorrow will be a festival to the Lord!"

*They got up early the next day and offered up
entirely burned offerings and brought well-being sacrifices.*

The people sat down to eat and drink and then got up to celebrate.

The Lord spoke to Moses: "Hurry up and go down!

*Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt,
are ruining everything!*

They've already abandoned the path that I commanded.

They have made a metal bull calf for themselves.

*They've bowed down to it and offered sacrifices to it and declared,
'These are your gods, Israel,
who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'"*

*The Lord said to Moses, "I've been watching these people,
and I've seen how stubborn they are.*

Now leave me alone! Let my fury burn and devour them.

Then I'll make a great nation out of you."

But Moses pleaded with the Lord his God,

*"Lord, why does your fury burn against your own people,
whom you brought out of the land of Egypt
with great power and amazing force?*

Why should the Egyptians say,

*'He had an evil plan to take the people out
and kill them in the mountains and so wipe them off the earth'?*

Calm down your fierce anger.

Change your mind about doing terrible things to your own people.

*Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants,
whom you yourself promised,*

'I'll make your descendants as many as the stars in the sky.

*And I've promised to give your descendants
this whole land to possess for all time.'"*

Then the Lord changed his mind

about the terrible things he said he would do to his people. (Exodus 32:1-14, CEB)

Why did they do it? Why did they worship the golden calf?

I mean, this isn't even a gray area,

one where they could make the case

that, arguably what they were doing might fit within the spirit of the law.

Why did they turn their backs on Moses, on God,

a little over a month after being sprinkled with the blood of the covenant?

You know, I think the thing that gets me, that strikes me,

is the gold from which the golden calf was made.

In my thoughts, the thing that I keep coming back to . . . is the earrings.

In Exodus, chapter 12,

when the Egyptians were plagued out so much

that they urged the Israelites to leave,

they gave them clothing and jewelry of silver and gold.

The sons and daughters of Israel wore on their bodies the tokens of an economy of slavery.

When they crossed the Red Sea, when they walked in the wilderness,

when they came to Mount Sinai,

they wore on their bodies reminders both of where they had come from

and the evidence of God's liberation.

And yet, in Moses' delay, in God's absence, they turned to those very things

and worshipped them with the rites and rituals of a festival to the LORD.

In other words, just in case Moses and God weren't coming back,

they added an object made from and symbolizing

the strength and prosperity of Egypt,

and Aaron made it into a calf,

an image of an Egyptian god who brings strength and prosperity.

And they worshipped this golden calf

with the very rites and rituals that were to be given to God.

And they were the people-of-God-ish -- kinda ,to an extent.

But as God's commandments explicitly make clear,

God has no room for that "-ish."

I get it, though.

They hadn't seen or heard from God or Moses for forty days.

They wanted a god that they could touch, they could see.

They were led through the wilderness by pillars of fire by night

and pillars of cloud by day.

But fire defies touch, and clouds obscure vision.

And, as for Moses, the one who linked them to the God who eluded their senses,

well, the people said,

"we don't have a clue what has happened to him."

They wanted someone, something they could see, they could touch.

They wanted someone, something, to lead them forward.

And so they took the gold of Egypt from their bodies, the signs of God's liberation,

and Aaron turned it into an object for their worship,
an object which, in its substance and its image, symbolized their captivity.

We could shake our heads at those fickle Israelites, at their -ish,
but we are not immune.

The church is not immune.

It's so easy to take the sign of the cross,
the sign of both our captivity and our liberation,
and use it to advance our own agendas, to satisfy our own desires, to fill our own needs.

That's the -ish I'm talking about.

When Christians sing praises to the God from whom all blessings flow
while grasping to accumulate the power and wealth of the United States,
--that's the -ish.

When Christians read scriptures of God's care and protection of immigrants
while supporting or turning a blind eye to immigration policies
that separate children from their families
and result in horrifying abuses rising to the level of torture,
--that's the -ish.

When Christians march the streets to exercise and secure their individual rights
while paying little attention to how they trample or ignore
the needs of the most vulnerable in our community,
--that's the -ish.

When Christians cry for law and order and preach respect for the rulers and authorities
as they perpetuate centuries of racial injustice,
--that's the -ish.

When Christians pick up their cross with one hand as they point a gun with the other,
-- that's the ish.

You know, I know that I'm preaching to the choir here.

The words that I just said might be offensive in some Christian circles,
but not here, not really.

Yet, it's so easy to point our fingers at some other group,
some other part of the church,
while at the same time, ignoring or denying the -ish in us.

When we protest and march for the world's justice,
while leaving behind the one who reconciles us
for the right relationships that are central to justice,
-- that's the -ish in us.

When we proclaim the inclusiveness of our welcome
while abandoning the life and the joy in Christ's call to discipleship,
-- that's the -ish in us.

When we are more comfortable in prophetic talk on the streets and social media,
than we are in saying the name of Jesus and our need for repentance,
-- that's the -ish in us.

When most of our attention and energy is focused on what is wrong

with this country and this president,
than it is on the good, good news of Christ Jesus,
who liberates us from our captivity
and delivers us to life in and for community
-- well, that's the -ish in us.

All of these things are the -ish
because, to the extent that they reflect us,
they signify that we have made something else
and put it in the center of our lives alongside Christ.

And we've done this to please our senses, to ease our discomfort, to calm our fears
or to satisfy our desires to be relevant, powerful, or prosperous.
They are signs that we need to repent.

This story of the golden calf is often cited to represent Israel's rebellion,
and, by extension, our rebellion against God.

But we should not miss what it says about God.

God's anger burned at what happened,
and God was set to carry out in judgment
with the terrible consequences of Israel's sin.

But Moses intercedes.

He reminds God of the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

He tells God how the Egyptians would understand God's judgment of the ex-slaves.

He pleads with God for mercy,

and then we get to the simple but astonishing verse 14:

"And the Lord changed his mind
about the disaster he planned to bring on his people." (Exodus 32:14)

The Lord had a change of mind.

You know, for a long time, when I read the Old Testament,

I often imagined God sounding like James Earl Jones:

a deep baritone, a voice that is powerful, unshakeable, immovable, unchangeable.

Certainly, it is true that God is all of those things.

But that's an incomplete truth, at least without further explanation.

That's because God also listens.

God doesn't just hear.

God listens.

And, as hard as it is to comprehend, listening, true listening,
means that God sometimes responds to what we say
by speaking something new, something different.

It's good news that our God's power, God's unchanging nature

includes God's capacity to listen, to respond,

to have a change of mind based on our relationship together.

It's good news because, otherwise, we'd be lost.

God's heart is not hard, it's soft.

God listens, God responds.

When we intercede for each other in prayer,

we can take comfort in that knowledge that our God is not a distant, unmoved mover.

Our God is a God of relationship.

Both in our national life, and in the life our church,

God asks us to turn away from our preoccupations with ourselves

and to turn toward God alone as our hope and our salvation.

In Philippians, the Apostle Paul urged the church to stand firm in the Lord.

It's almost as if his message was written to those Israelites waiting for Moses' return

and to people like us,

people who feel like God is distant, the future is uncertain,

and the way forward is unclear.

Listen to what he says:

. . . stand firm in the Lord.

Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad!

Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people.

The Lord is near.

Don't be anxious about anything;

*rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions,
along with giving thanks.*

Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding

will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

From now on, brothers and sisters,

if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable,

focus your thoughts on these things:

All that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure,

all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise.

Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us.

The God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:1, 4-9, CEB)

How will you live these words today and the days to come?