

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH  
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OCTOBER 9, 2011

TEXT: EXODUS 32:1-6  
SERMON: A LOT OF BULL!

“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.”

I have to start with a disclaimer! This sermon about people sacrificing to a golden calf has nothing whatsoever to do certain people sacrificing a burnt orange bull, yesterday. That ritual slaughter was completely coincidental.

### INTRODUCTION

I love a good story, don't you?

- × Gone with the Wind
- × The Lord of the Rings
- × The Year of Living Biblically
- × The Harry Potter series
- × And of course, there are some excellent Bible stories

One of the great stories in the Bible is the story of God's sending Moses down to Egypt to bring the people back to God and the Promised Land. It is a story with lots of drama and plot twists.

Today we concern ourselves with just one chapter, so to speak, of the larger story; the chapter we call The Golden Calf. You can read all about it in your Bible but for now, let me tell it to you my way: the Burton Paraphrase.

A long, long time ago in a strange land there lived a free people.

- From torture and bondage in Egypt they had fled.
- From sword and chariot they had escaped.

Their leader was a man of God whose name was Moses.

- A man who had compelled the Pharaoh to "let his people go."
- A man who had raised up his arms and the Red Sea had parted.
- A man who had lowered his arms and the Red Sea had come crashing down to drown mighty Pharaoh's army.
- A man who walked with the fiery pillar of God.
- A man who spoke to God, and to whom God spoke.

Scarcely had the cried of the drowning charioteers died and the turbulence of the Red Sea calmed when God sent word to Moses to have the people move on, to leave behind that place of death and move out into the purifying wilderness.

Life was brutally hard there. They had been saved, but not for leisure and plenty! It was so hot there that mosquitoes curled up and died. So hot that gold couldn't always buy water. Food was as scarce as mosquitoes in January in Iceland. My best guess is that gasoline was going for \$4/gallon. Outrageous!

So it came to pass that when some of them remembered Egypt they thought not of slavery and whips and beatings but of cool waters and sure meals and the homes their parents had built. And they soon cried out to Moses, "Why have you led us into this land of death? Were there not enough graves already without your bringing us here to die. Let us go back to Egypt! It is better to be slaves in Egypt that to die here with you..."

Hearing this fainthearted lament, Moses called upon God. God gave the people water from stones, manna from heaven, and quail from the skies to eat. Again and again the people cried out to Moses to take them back to Egypt lest they die. Again and again God provided miraculously for the people's needs. In the vastness of the wilderness God was crying out to the people, "I am the source of your life! Look to me! Even in the desolation I will save you!"

After many months of traveling across the desert they finally came to their intermediate destination, the mountain called Sinai. God had Moses camp the people in a valley in the shadow of the mountain, and warn them that no one should climb the Holy Mountain lest they see the Face of God and die.

When the camp was set and instructions were given, Moses was called to come up the mountain, alone. And when he had gone up, a great cloud descended and covered the top of the mountain.

The people were awed. Their leader had been called up to speak with God! And it seemed that God had a lot to say, since God's cloud and Moses stayed. Eventually some people began to recall that he had not taken any food with him and began to wonder just how long he could last without food and water.

- Ten days passed -- time for Moses to take in his belt!
- Twenty days passed – Moses was going to fit into the jeans he wore in High School!
- Thirty days passed – They wondered -- was Moses still strong enough to climb down the mountain?
- Forty days passed -- though the cloud was still up the mountain, they knew....no one could live for 40 days without food and water.....Moses must be dead.

Moses' brother, Aaron, wasn't just a priest, he was also a politician. When he saw which way the winds were blowing he changed course quickly, as any "effective, (I did not say "good") politician would do.

Moses was the Prophet -- Aaron was the High Priest. Moses was the one who spoke to God and received God's Word, Aaron was the one who carried out Moses' (God's) instructions. So when Moses was pronounced dead, Aaron felt cut off from God's Word and had only the people to give him direction. At that moment Aaron became the leader of a "civil religion", a religion divorced from the guiding Word of God and married to the wants of the people. Whatever they wanted he saw himself as duly obligated to provide.

So when the people asked him to make for them a new god, Aaron said "How big do ya want him?" Then Aaron ordered all the people to give him their golden coins and jewelry. He cast them into a pot over a blazing fire, and up from this bubbling vat of gold, up from this gurgling cauldron of human desires, arose a bull -- standing on short, squat thighs, flaying its horns, thrashing its tail, and

bellowing its cry of power, of virility, of fertility. Up from the cauldron came the new God of Israel. The Bull. And the people rose up to celebrate a "Feast to the Lord." It was the sort of party that would make seasoned Mardi Gras partiers blush and head for the doors!

WE would never do anything like that...would we?

Even as we recoil from such an abomination, the creation of an idol, let us understand that the people were spiritually "children". What they knew about God was dwarfed by their ignorance. They had lost touch with their faith while in Egypt and had not been with God for long. They had a lot to learn!

The God Moses had revealed had been hard for them to grasp; a God who would not be seen or touched and was shrouded in mystery. They wanted to know God in the way the Egyptians had known their gods: by Idols they could see and touch and whose actions they could predict and manipulate.

They fixed their new and improved understanding of God in the form of a Bull. The Bull described not only their God but what they felt about themselves. A stud. They were a young, growing people who were grasping for power. The Bull stood for the people's power as a people, for the mystery of their existence, for the joy of their present, and for their hope for the future. The Bull is for the people -- a god that understands them and in whom they can understand themselves. A god who commands the people to do what they already desire to do! It is truly the people who stand on short, squat thighs, the people who flay their horns, thrash their tails, the people that bellow their cry of power, of virility, of fertility.

This Bull had one recognizable advantage over the God of Moses. The Bull was a possession. The God of Moses had always been a free spirit, coming and going unexpectedly, leading them in directions they would not have chosen, even daring to punish the people. Not the Bull. The Bull could not leave them, but they could leave it, if necessary. The Bull could not lead -- it could only follow after. And the Bull could not punish, unless the people desired to be punished (as if that was ever going to happen!)

If one is going to make a God, surely this is a palatable one, what a sensible person would choose. No more popping up in burning bushes. No more destroying perfectly good Sodom and Gomorrahs. No more dropping out of sight when the

people want milk and honey. No more banning baby back ribs and lobster Newburg. Indeed, the Bull appears to be a worthy god, designed to meet the people's needs.

At this point very little thought is given to Moses. Certainly they would have given him a glorious funeral if they found his body, but they did not desire to have him come back alive, with his understanding of God. Moses and his "YAHWEH" were no longer indispensable.

The burning question in my mind is, "Didn't anyone recognized how stupid and dangerous this was? And did they really expect to get away with it?"

Sadly this type of stupidity is not just ancient history. Think of: Bernie Madoff. Warren Jeffs. Jimmie Swaggard. Osama Bin Laden. The list could be endless!

I once read: "Absence diminishes little passions and increases great ones, just like the wind blows out a candle and fans a bonfire."

Just how passionate were the Israelites about their God?

Well, they thought God and Moses hung the moon when they left Egypt but when things got tough in the desert they craved a deity which they could see, here, touch, and one which they could manipulate into giving them what they wanted! Then Moses left and in his void they created the Golden Calf!

In short, they loved whoever gave them ice cream cones. Once the cones stopped they started looking for another provider.

At this point we know there is going to be a bad ending. This is the part of the story where Rhett tells Scarlett, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

On cue, Moses walked out of the darkness, thin and dirty, but surrounded by the aura of God and carrying the Ten Commandments. Right into the middle of the great party for the golden calf. And Moses saw....red! His voice rang with thunder as he condemned the people for their abominations. He cast down in their midst the Ten Commandments, of which they were no longer worthy. And then Moses took the Golden Bull, destroyed it, powdered it and made all the partiers eat of the bitterness of their great abomination. Finally, Moses had all the instigators of the abomination killed.

It was a hard lesson! Obviously a memorable one!

1. Faith should always be in God, not in one of God's servants. Servants come and go and one's faith in God should not be compromised by
2. Idolatry, the placing of anything or anyone above God, is going to end badly. Very badly. It doesn't matter what you put on the pedestal - health, money, happiness, power, security, a spouse, a child, an ideal, or a political ideology. If you put that ahead of God then you can expect God to interrupt your little party with such righteous indignation that only God could carry it off.

When it comes to our love and faith - our God truly is a jealous God - and when two-timed, God has a long history of acting-out like a jilted loved with a baseball bat.

It wouldn't be pretty - don't chance it. Be faithful!