

Bling: Seduction of the Golden Calf

October 9, 2011

Exodus 32

Last Sunday we reviewed the Ten Commandments. Up on Mount Sinai, God gave the law to Moses. This encounter between the leader of Israel and their Liberator God came during the forty years that Israel wandered in the wilderness, after their slavery in Egypt and before their eventual march back into the promised land of Canaan. We characterized the law as the tent poles that gave shape and support to the tent, the promises of God to the chosen people who wandered in the wilderness on their long way home. Today's Old Testament lesson takes us to another scene from that same moment in time, what was happening down below when God and Moses were up on Mount Sinai together.

Just in case there was any question as to why the Commandments should begin as they do, Moses' audience prepares for his return from the mountain by breaking the first two commandments. The chosen people of God rather blatantly demonstrated that the god who brought them out of the land of Egypt was not worth waiting for. Just to prove that they were not so much obliged to this god, they asked Moses' brother Aaron to make them an idol, a false god, something tangible that they could see and worship right now, a graven image, melted down from the jewelry of the Egyptians that they had taken on their way out.... a false, graven image idol of a god made of gold, specifically, a calf, a golden calf.

Perhaps this week you have seen images of the great bull statue that symbolizes New York city's Wall Street. He is not made of gold, but he surely represents that bullish character that we hope will drive our stock exchanges into the profit-making fuel for our investments, sustaining our pensions and lifting our economy. It just so happens that the most popular god of Canaan was Baal, often represented by the statue of a bull. Why a bull? Because Baal was in charge of the seasons and fertility. It may be that even before Israel got to the promised land, they knew the brand of that place's dominant religion. The bull, cow or calf symbolized the sacred in many ancient religions. Cattle represented power and wealth, just as they continue to do in many cultures today, whether to burger and steak ranchers in Texas or to vegetarian Hindus in India. The world has always been full of sacred cows.

Now you might wonder if I am going to urge you all to pack up and move to New York to join the occupation of Wall Street, for what has been called the tea party of the Left. I thought about that as a confirmation outing for this week, but then I thought again, wanting to remain employed here for a few more years. But don't you think there are some similarities between that Wall Street bull and the biblical golden calf and some cautionary lessons to be learned in these similarities?

The thing about our God is that Yahweh is the pillar of fire by night and cloud by day that led Israel out of Egypt. Yahweh God is the great wind who parted the Red Sea waters and made a safe path for the freed Hebrew slaves. Yahweh God is the covenant promise made with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, and long before that, the rainbow covenant made after the Great Flood. The biblical god is known through the mighty deeds in history which have saved God's people—from flood, from slavery, from overwhelming military superiority, from all manner of self-destructive religious devotion. Christians believe that the mightiest of God's mighty deeds is the incarnation: Yahweh God comes to us as Jesus of Nazareth, born of Mary, a human being who lived exactly the life that we know, and suffered and was crucified under the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

You can't adequately "sum up" or equate this god with pillars of fire and cloud, sea-parting winds and rainbows, but you can say that Jesus is as close as we get to God. We say Jesus was Immanuel, God with us, the Word made flesh. Any other representation of God is unworthy of our worship. Any other image of God is idolatry, a violation of the second commandment. Our God does not want to be reduced to a statue, a picture, a thing to be bowed down to, nor reduced to a few rules or principles or even great ideas.

Jesus said we cannot worship God and Mammon. Mammon may be the closest New Testament thing to the bull of Baal and the golden calf of the Old Testament. Mammon is not just wealth. It is the economic system. It is our treasury, our banks, our markets, the whole complex web of assets, funds and money in which we place our trust. Mammon is the whole enterprise of getting and spending, selling and having and holding wealth. It is something that we can trust in instead of God, according to Jesus. Jesus said that where our treasures are there our hearts will be. He knows that economic issues drive devotion, and not the other way around. (Marx did not come up with that idea first!)

Where our treasures are, our hearts will follow. I think about Jesus and these words whenever I see the bull of Wall Street. I wonder if part of the psychology of our difficult economic times is not just that we have lost jobs and benefits and value in our real estate, stock portfolios and pensions, but that we feel betrayed by a god that we thought was going to see us through, take care of us when we are older or sick, in other words, save us. The whole sacred system has let us down!

I sometimes wonder if the Wall Street bull is a contemporary Baal and Mammon Golden Calf that calls for as much allegiance as the flag of our nation. Given the kinds of political debates that we have had in recent months, it seems that Old Glory flies at half staff while the bull flies at the top of the staff of the ship of state. We talk a lot about the Constitution and our democratic form of government, but it is our economic system that has taken on the aura of the sacred. It is popular now to minimize the role of government and laud the role of the economy. Main Street jokes about Washington but holds Wall Street and the CEOs of the Fortune 500 in awe. The late Steve Jobs has no counterpart among political leaders. How often do we speak in hushed reverential tones of the engines of the economy and their drivers! Even Democrats, who have more confidence in government than do Republicans, agree that the economy comes first: it drives what government can and cannot do. Government cannot do what needs to be done if the economy is in the tank and tax revenues are not flowing in to Washington. From the Republican point of view, government is the problem and an unregulated market is the solution. Let the economy alone, they say, cut back on the role of government, and there will be plenty of wealth to go around, including tax revenues for a slimmer government operation. What are these points of view if not a religious devotion, a matter of heartfelt trust? Both sides of the nation's political divide need to be reminded of the first two commandments. Only one god is worthy of our worship, and idolatry remains a problem for politics and economics as well as religion.

Perhaps we need to put Baal and Mammon together in another way to understand them. I like the rap word "bling." It refers to shiny and showy jewelry, golden and flashy signs of wealth, ostentatious displays of goods that just shout out that the wearer has more than enough. But bling has also come to mean wealth in general. Isn't that interesting? One word that can mean just treasure or money but also implies plenty and more than enough. That's why Jesus used the word Mammon, I think, because it means wealth or riches and also implies

excess. But we don't know Mammon any more, and the golden calf of Baal is even more ancient and obscure, so maybe we should translate them as bling. We cannot serve God and bling. Whatever flashy thing that gets in the way of our devotion to the one true God, the God who led Israel out of slavery and who raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead, any such bling is an idol, a golden calf, Mammon.

We once had a cat, Maggie, whose breed was Turkish Vann. This kind of cat was fond of water, yes getting completely soaked in the shower and swimming, and was attracted to shiny things. Whenever an earring was missing, it was likely that Maggie had carried it off to one of her hiding places. She was a sucker for bling.

We acknowledge that competition is good in the market place, but the first commandments says that God abides no competition in the market place of spiritual devotion. You don't have to read far in Old or New Testaments to see that religion is a highly competitive business. The Canaanite god Baal is actually a composite of dozens if not hundreds of rival, local deities. The Israelites used the word Baal to lump together all the competition to Yahweh. We are ostriches if we think the competition ended with Elijah and John the Baptist. Bacchus continues to seduce us to happiness through self-indulgence. Eros demands that we bow down to fulfillment through sexual encounter. Mars is doing quite well these days in devotion to power and war. The list of addictions to various self-destructive behaviors keeps growing, along with their accompanying therapies and support groups.

In our lesson today, the first half is about the golden calf and the idolatry of the chosen people of God. But there is more. The second half of the story is God telling Moses that his wrath burns even hotter than the flames that it took to melt down the people's bling to make the golden calf. God wants to destroy his own people for succumbing to the competition. But there is more. There is good news. The third half of the story is Moses standing between God and the shameless, idolatrous people of Israel. Moses reminds God of the covenant, a eternal bargain with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. Moses begs for mercy and God repents. God's mind is changed in the direction of forgiveness and the people are spared.

This is not the first time this has happened in the Bible. Generations before Moses, Abraham stood between God and the sinful people of Sodom and Gomorrah. God changes his mind even before the people acknowledge their sin

and repent. Nor is the Moses story the last time there is such wholesale mercy and forgiveness in the ongoing drama of salvation history.

Jesus represents that saving grace on the global scale of the cross. Jesus is our savior, not any golden calf or Mammon or bling. Jesus shows us how merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love our God is. Even when pushed to the limit, our God is susceptible to pleas for pardon, just as susceptible as we are to the seductions of bling. God forgives and heals and makes new, even before we recognize that we have screwed up. Ours is a great god. Greater than all others. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Not even that tempting golden calf, not even that hypnotic Mammon, not even that seductive bling. As a hymn puts it,

Jesus shines brighter, Jesus shines purer

than all the angels heaven can boast,

Thanks be to God.