

A Golden Calf and A Second Chance
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
Date: October 9, 2011

00:00

When I was in high school, I took four years of Latin. I was never that great at the language itself, but I loved studying the history, culture, and Greek and Roman mythology. Greek and Roman gods and goddesses were made unapologetically in the human image, which I always found fascinating.

The gods and goddesses behaved like a bunch of ridiculous soap opera stars it seemed—they were fickle and dramatic and lustful and full of wrath and envy. Edith Hamilton, the author who led us through this wonderful world of mythology, said that the miracle of Greek mythology is simply, "A humanized world, men freed from the paralyzing fear of an omnipotent Unknown."^[1]

It was comforting for people to explain how the world works, why things happen, why people act the way we do and relate big mythological events to concrete places on earth. The gods and goddesses act ridiculous sometimes, so it's no wonder that we do too—that was part of the mindset.

Of course the Hebrew worldview was different. Just last week, we heard the 10 Commandments, rules that God handed down to humanity. And what was the second Commandment Moses brought from God to the people of God? "Don't make any images, carved or otherwise, of God or any other deity that you decide to worship."

The Israelites separated themselves from their ancient contemporaries, their religion was different. God wasn't totally anthropomorphized like those Greek and Roman gods—God was more so that omnipotent Unknown being. Humanity and God were a bit more separate, though God certainly has instances even in today's passage where it seems that real human emotions are displayed. And God had a real and powerful relationship with God's people and a very special relationship with Moses who communicates up close and personally with God.

But God is rarely mistaken for a human being in the Old Testament. God is God, people are people, and the story of the Golden Calf is just one more instance of the people disobeying God. What's new?

So we look at this passage today and we think, "What were these people thinking? How faithless are they? What a bunch of idiots, Moses leaves for two seconds and they make an idol to worship?"

Scholars disagree about whether the Golden Calf incident was actually the people creating and worshipping an idol or if the people were just trying to make an image of God and they made God into the image of a calf, cast in gold. So it really was a representation of the Divine they were worshipping. And maybe that's still a sin, maybe they still broke a commandment, but maybe it's not as bad as we originally thought. There's some disagreement here.

For me, I can understand the people, why they did what they did. It's not always easy to be different. There are certain times in your life when being different from everybody else feels awful. You want to fit in and be liked; you don't want to be ostracized because you are strange or weird. We have to remember that the Israelites were just in Egypt, where gods were represented by having statues and images all over the place.

And for what it's worth, in Greece, according to Edith Hamilton, "People were preoccupied with the visible; they were finding the satisfaction of their desires in what was actually in the world

around them. The sculptor watched the athletes contending in the games and he felt that nothing he could imagine would be as beautiful as those strong young bodies. So he made his statue of Apollo." [2] What all of this points to is that the people of the Old Testament knew that they were different from their neighbors and it was probably sometimes a struggle to be that unique, to worship a God so different from those other gods and goddesses around.

The Old Testament is full of this struggle—their monotheistic religion was so different from the religions of their neighbors, their diet was different, they had a completely different way they lived their life and worshiped their God. So maybe the Golden Calf incident is one of those times when the Israelites think they can be a bit more like their neighbors, and that maybe they won't stand out so much. This is certainly one take on the story and presents the people in a better light.

Maybe that's giving them way too much credit, maybe we should just go with the description that they created an idol and they worshiped that idol, they're hard hearted, and stiff-necked, they have no faith and don't listen to directions. As soon as Moses is delayed from coming down the mountain, the people rebel as people have a habit of doing . . .

It is telling that the people are given an explicit and concrete set of rules and guidelines to follow and they immediately break them. It's like you tell your spouse, I asked you to do one thing, just one thing, and you didn't do it! Most of us probably have habits of breaking the rules, of pushing the limits. And there's lots of instances of this trying to be explained in all world religions. Why do we do bad or stupid things when we know we're not supposed to?

It reminds me of one of my favorite Greek myths—the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. In a nutshell, Orpheus is the son of a Muse and this fantastic lyre player, the best mortal around. At one point, he saves the whole crew of the Argo by drowning out the song of the Sirens who are trying to shipwreck the boat.

Basically, no one could match Orpheus' lyre playing skills. So he meets this beautiful maiden, Eurydice, and woos her with the beauty of his songs. They get married and are about to live happily ever after . . . except Eurydice gets bitten by a viper right after the wedding and dies.

Poor Orpheus is inconsolable, he is so sad, and he plays his lyre with such melancholy that everyone around him gets depressed too. He decides that he'll go into the Underworld and rescue his bride; it just isn't fair that she gets taken from him on the day of their wedding.

So he goes into the Underworld and faces Hades, the god of the dead himself, and even brings Hades to tears with his song. Hades gives him the soul of Eurydice and says that Orpheus can take her back into the world on just one condition; Orpheus can't look back as the soul of Eurydice follows behind him until he reaches the world again and she is back on earth too.

Orpheus climbs back up from the Underworld and he begins to see light at the end of the tunnel. He steps out into the day and he turns to embrace Eurydice, but he turns too soon and she's still in the cavern. The soul of Eurydice slips back into the darkness, lost to Orpheus forever.

I didn't say it was a happy story—it's a tragic love story! A little depressing, though it has inspired countless works of art because it's just haunting. But the point for our purposes today is that Orpheus was given one direction, one thing to do. Don't look back until you're both in the world again, you just have to trust that she's behind you. And he fails—poor Orpheus doesn't get a second chance either, he really does lose her forever in this Greek tragedy.

So here's what's interesting about our story of the Golden Calf in comparison to the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. God does give the people a second chance, God does forgive even though the people broke the promises they made to God. When God is interacting with Moses on the mountain as all of this Golden Calf business is going on down below God says, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely."

Moses responds, "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?" Moses won't claim the people for himself. He reminds God that this fickle, sinful, sorry lot are in fact God's people, whether God wants them to be or not. They belong to God and God needs to give them a second chance to prove their faithfulness and live up to the covenant.

To God's credit, Moses doesn't have to convince God for long to take them back and forgive them. After Moses' plea the next verses says, "And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people." The people are indeed God's again, and God decides that maybe they shouldn't be destroyed after all. God gives them a second chance.

The lectionary passage for today ends here; of course we don't see how Moses reacts to the people. Moses storms down the mountain, throws the two tablets of the covenant on the ground and breaks them, he takes the Golden Calf and burns it to ashes, he grinds up the remainder of the burned up Golden Calf into powder, he scatters the powder into water, and then he forces the Israelites to drink the water. That's how the passage of the Golden Calf ends. God forgives. Moses destroys the tablets and the Golden Calf. And the people are forced to drink a ground up Golden Calf concoction.

All in all, it's a rather strange story but it highlights so many unique aspects of the way our ancestors attempted to understand the world and their place in it. God, even this more distant and mysterious God in comparison to the gods and goddesses of the Greek and Roman pantheon, is a loving and merciful God. Quick to anger maybe at times, but also quick to forgive. God gives the people a second chance.

God doesn't just destroy them even when God had the chance and was probably justified to do so—the God of the Israelites, the God of Jesus Christ—our God, in some ways was like nothing anyone had ever seen or experienced before. And God seems to constantly remember that even though God's own people can be frustrating and just plain ridiculous, God really does love us, always. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*, 17.

[2] Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*, 16.