

ON THE HOLY ROLLER-COASTER

Texts on Sunday, October 12, 2008

Exodus 32: 1-14; Philippians 4: 1-13

At the point that the wilderness wanderers of Exodus beg Aaron to make them gods, they have been on an awesome emotional roller coaster ride. Some months back, they are slaves, “oppressed so hard they could not stand.” Then they’re on the run by night, pursued by the world’s mightiest army. Next they’re safe. Then they’re starving. Next they’re receiving the law of the Lord God. Now they’ve had no leader for a long time, so they turn to idol worship.

Maybe we have been taught that idol worship is a primitive superstition. *How could anyone believe that a metal statue has divine powers?* we might say in amazement. But let’s go a little deeper. You want to have some control over how your life turns out, right? That’s a normal desire. But consider how that desire for control can morph into a monster.

You try out a method or a system to increase your welfare. The method seems to work, so you do a little more, and you get a little happier, you think. But then, you want a little more of this good feeling, so you work the system a little harder. Soon, your whole definition of what is to be happy—even what is to be human!—comes down to getting more and more of the pleasure your system is supposed to deliver. Why, you’ll even lie to yourself that the method is working when it’s not. That is what idol worship is—a system for getting happy when you have forgotten how deep you are. Have you ever seen somebody get strung up like this with gambling or the bottle or the needle or sex or shopping or their bank account? Then you have seen idol worship. Isn’t all this mortgage mess made from people pushing a little system for getting to happiness? Idol worship. Different times, different statues, that’s all.

Now, what’s the actual problem with idol worship? I mean, why is God so *hot* about this behavior? Is it that God doesn’t like competition? That makes him pretty small. Let’s go deeper. If we humans could really get to the top of happiness by getting more stuff, well, we would be just like all the other animals. The strong ones win while the weak ones lose. The strong ones control more territory, have more food, mate more, and have more offspring. Maybe they even get to sleep more, if their rivals don’t scare them. We know we need stuff—food, shelter, companionship, strength to work and support our children. But if *all* our happiness leaned on having physical things, then whoever gets there first with the most is surely the best. If that’s so, the motto of man should be: We know this truth to be self-evident, all men are created inferior to the best men. The whole goal of humanity would be to win out over others in the ordinary animal power struggle.

But something has been planted in your soul, telling you that somehow—no matter how low you have fallen, no matter how high you have climbed—the witness who is watching from within you is wondrous, invaluable, beautiful, dignified, whole, a gift of grace, eternal from God. And this voice of wonder and praise for the gift of your being tells you this, too: Everyone else is as precious as you. Since ancient times, the core meaning of being human has depended on the extraordinary idea that all people are created equal. I would say this idea is not self-evident at all; it is a heavenly gift of an idea, strange, blessed, exquisite.

But sometimes, we hate this highest idea. We regress. We contract into ourselves. We go back to Egypt. We just want to focus on our own pain and drowning it out with our own pleasure, everyone else be damned. One way or another, we say, *Come, let us make gods for ourselves; as for this Moses—the one who is revealing to us how high and how deep we are—we do not know what has become of him.* What is the actual problem with idol worship? This belief, that your real happiness depends on getting the stuff you want, is the beginning of the destruction of your humanity. In the Bible stories, when God

is really angry, it's because the people are believing and behaving in ways that lead to the destruction of their humanity. God hates this so much, the stories say, that he is hot to hurry up and be done with the damage already—drown them, burn them, send them into captivity.

You don't have to believe these stories are literally true to understand why telling them has mattered to millions for ages. They tell this about us: soon after the lid is off on selfish concern, destruction comes down on everybody. Call it God's wrath, call it the rise and fall of empires—it's real. And there's a second part: somebody who's got a cool head—Moses, *anybody* who has a cool head and warm heart for people in spite of their ignorance and selfishness—needs to step up and slow down the self-system, to help the people to get a new heart of wisdom.

And there's a third part. Sometimes, the religious remember this is what their love of God is for, to help themselves and others regain a right mind. Sometimes, the preachers and the people step away from power, away from wealth, away from addiction to false promises of happiness. Sometimes they take the road down into humility and humbleness, no longer worried about winning, and they discover that they are lifted up. They say, *Rejoice in the Lord! Again, I say rejoice!* They feel the rare pleasures of gentleness, thanksgiving, truthfulness, honor, justice, purity, favor, an end to anxiety—all of these sweet fruits of the Spirit and more. We really can know, as Paul says, what it is to be abased and what it is to abound; to be well fed or to be hungry, to have plenty or to be in need, to be humbled and to be high and lifted up. This is what I call the holy roller coaster. To know the gift of going up and going down on the pains and pleasures that track our lives, yet never to lose feeling for our core nature, precious and beloved of God—and not just you and yours, but everyone, even them you hate or fear.

Have you got a ticket for this holy roller coaster ride? You know, you don't even have to pay for it yourself. It's a gift, but you've got to want it. Christians have a funny phrase for the source of their strength for rolling live like this. We say, *Not I, but Christ in me*. Other religions make great affirmations like this in their own ways, but that's not our concern today. We say, *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*. You don't need to have a theory for how Christ works in you for those words to bless you, to reset the compass needle of your soul from fear to faith, for these are words sung by creatures to their Creator. They set the relationship right. They humanize us.

Now, judging from the news, it looks as if our nation, indeed the whole Commonwealth of Nations, is going for a roller coaster ride. We're headed down. For an awful lot of people, this is going to be a hellish ride, not a holy one. An awful lot of people who think of themselves as religious will behave as if they had no faith, no trust in God at all, but only in that little green paper with the bizarre little lie on it: "In God We Trust." An awful lot of people are going to be begging someone, "Come, make gods for us!" Do you think maybe Abrams tanks and stealth bombers and warships work as golden idols, when the people have turned from faith to fear?

In a few weeks, our whole nation is headed into the election booths to identify the most powerful man in the world. There's no getting around this: Christians who are serious about putting idolatry to death in themselves and for those in their care—that includes all your fellow citizens—need to recognize that the main moral question God gives, both personally and publicly is, How can our narrow self interest be loosened and expanded so that we see more of the human family as our precious equal. I will be blunt with you: We have just come through eight years of the most idolatrous, fear-mongering, golden-calf-worshiping, hate-filled mis-leadership America has ever known. Tragically, like those wilderness wanderers clamoring to go back to Egypt, it is our own addictions, our own faithlessness, our unwillingness to "learn the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need" that has brought calamity upon us. But you are holy roller coaster riders. You will take your holy hopes into the voting booth. We are not looking for salvation through politics or perfection in

politicians, but justice does matter. It matters to have leaders who raise the people's eyes from their personal problems and welfare to peace and prosperity seen for all God's children. Consider:

Healthcare. Is it a right or a privilege? An idolatrous nation will let the false god of the free market choose whom to heal and whom to turn away from, like the Levite and the priest in Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan. The leader of a spiritually healing nation will find a way to turn to every sick person, asking not whether they can afford it, and "bandage their wounds and bring them to the inn, and take care of them."

Taxes: Paying taxes is the only way that a nation literally works together on goals we share. Trashing taxes as bad appeals to our childish, selfish, small minded nature. Of course taxes can be too high—or too low—so wisdom is needed. But patriotism and paying taxes are just two ways of thinking about the same mature attitude. Look to a leader who will not pander to selfish pride, but lift the nation's eyes from the golden calf to the golden rule.

Torture. Our leaders thought that we could push powerless prisoners under water without drowning our own humanity and national purpose at every terrified pulsing of a wretched man's heart. We are in the midst of a tragedy. In the nation's next servant, holy roller coaster riders are looking and listening for signs of a soul with a sense for what it means to love your enemy.

Immigration. The presidential candidates are saying nothing on the subject of 12 million undocumented workers living in our midst. It's too hot politically—which is shorthand for saying that emotions are too much in control for people to deal with reality. The reality is that, though it is reasonable to work hard to control a border, that's no longer the issue for the ones who are already here. We have drawn them here to work in our homes and fields on jobs and at wages the rest of us will not accept. We are responsible for them; in a sense, they are like our children now: weak, hoping to please, slowly learning the language. The Israelites called such "sojourners" and their laws warned against treating them like dogs. As our own fortunes fail, the faithless will cry out to punish these humble servants. We need leaders who know, deep in their hearts, that a solution that lies in a vision for peace and prosperity shared beyond our borders.

We could go on in like manner with many other issues, but the point is not for you to hear me on these subjects. Rather, it is for you to work them out yourselves, noticing the voices clamoring inside you for small, selfish solutions; and noticing the great mind, the mind of Christ, who visits you with faith and confidence that we can keep our eye on the prize of liberty and justice for all. That's what loving your neighbor as yourself looks like, when expressed as public policy. It starts when you are willing to ask God to take you on the holy roller coaster ride.

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