

“ReLent: Idols”

Exodus 32:1-8

March 7, 2021

I’ve probably been asked at least a dozen times since the seventeenth of February. Sometimes the question is posed out of pure curiosity, sometimes the asker is eager to share their own answer, sometimes it feels more like a veiled test of the pastor’s personal piety. “What are you giving up for Lent this year?”

The honest answer is that I haven’t yet decided. I know what you’re thinking. This is the third Sunday in Lent, which means we are nearing the midway point of this sacred season. It’s a little late to be deciding what to give up. In previous years, I’ve tried a variety of approaches. One year, I fasted on Wednesdays. Another year, I left my car radio off throughout Lent. I’ve tried giving up desserts or sodas. Many of my friends have given up social media for Lent; I’m not ready for that. And after all, the world needs more pictures of my sons, right?

It was the third Sunday in Lent last year when I preached for the first time in an empty sanctuary. I remember reflecting on how appropriate it was that our theme for Lent was “A Clearing Season.” I remember the light-hearted notes from some of our members suggesting we had taken that theme a little too far...quite a bit of clearing in those early pandemic days. I remember staff discussions about how this time of spiritual discipline and deep reflection could be a Lenten gift, even as we canceled programs and scrambled to shift online. I also remember being sure this season of separation and social distance would end in time for Easter, dreaming of a packed sanctuary and the triumphant sounds of resurrection glory in song and speech. Nearly a year has passed. It’s Lent again. We’d be forgiven, I think, for forgetting it was ever any other season. We seem stuck in a kind of liturgical Groundhog Day syndrome and, if I’m

honest, I’d like to give up Lent for Lent this year. I’d like to have reason to shout Hallelujah and skip the somber season altogether this year. Lent has lasted too long already.

If you are feeling at all like that, then I’d suggest that you have something in common with the description of God’s people in our story this morning.

Picture this. A father, maybe a preacher father, sends his three-year-old son up to get his pajamas. A couple of minutes later, an anxious little voice calls down the stairs, “Dad! Come up here! I’m alone!” Dad responds, “Don’t worry, I’ll be up in a minute.” The boy waits all of ten seconds before repeating his request, to which the preacher/father offers these reassuring words, “Son, you aren’t by yourself...just think about God being with you.” A pause, and then that little voice from upstairs, “But Daddy, I can’t see God.” Neither can we—and sometimes, the absence of God overwhelms us. We need more.

So did they. The passage takes place simultaneously in two locations. In scene one, Moses is up on the mountain in the literal presence of God. It is one of the holiest and most awe-inspiring moments in the story of God’s people. Moses is receiving the Ten Commandments directly from God. But this takes a while, forty days and forty nights to be exact—where have we heard that before? In scene two, the people waiting on the flatland grow anxious, weary, fearful, and (you’ve got to admit) creative. They are all by themselves. Now, please bear in mind—by this point in the story, the Hebrew people have been released from captivity in Egypt, eaten their fill of miraculous manna in the wilderness, and followed God in a cloudy pillar and flame. And yet. Their fear of abandonment and need

for more proof of divine power is limitless. They cannot see God and it's been such a long time. And so, in dramatic acts of tragic irony, before Moses can return from the summit of Sinai, the people below break the first two commandments, melting golden objects into the form of a calf, worshipping them with eerily familiar words, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

We contemporary believers might read this story and claim the spiritual high ground over our ancestors in faith. We have never bowed down to a pile of melted gold. Even the idea is unthinkable. Well...I wonder if it's a bit more complex than that. Can we not, especially this year, recognize ourselves in their feelings? And in their actions? It doesn't take too much imagination for me to be right there with them. We too grow impatient with an invisible God—we want answers and action. Unimpressed with the responsiveness of the God we have, we create and construct replacements. It's what happens to the Israelites when Moses and God are nowhere to be seen. It's what happens to us when we are anxious and afraid—when God seems distant from our lives or aloof from our suffering. We are prone to wander, drawn to shiny gods who offer a certain concreteness that the Holy One lacks.

The idols we craft and the ones we worship are as diverse as the community drawn together virtually this morning (after all, there are as many choices as there are dispositions of our minds), but I do think there are some common elements that characterize our idols.

Idols offer the reassurance we need. They do it quickly. They perform on command. Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor has written, "Only an idol always answers."¹ Think of that. Our idols offer short-term certainty, security, pleasure, or comfort. They are often tangible—easy to touch and see. Sometimes they come in the form of a bottle or a bank account, sometimes through promises of our own ability or independence, sometimes in the promises of a preacher, a politician, an ideology, or a

doctrine. Idols assure us that we are in control. And so, even our faith itself can become an idol when it reduces God to the size of our minds or the limits of our perspective.

I've been thinking of how this extended Lent—far more than forty days and forty nights—has allowed (or compelled) us to face our idols, and perhaps release them as well. Like all spiritual disciplines of letting go, it's been painful at times. I've long found truth in this line from David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest*, a phrase from a poster on the wall of a recovery house: "Everything I've ever let go of has claw marks on it." Early in pandemic times, I was forced to let go of my idolatry of metrics of success. After all, what does success mean when the chaos has you cornered? Speaking of chaos, more idols fell in the weeks and months that followed—my desire for order and control, my need for affirmation, my sturdy routines, and even my regimented schedule. Long-range plans cast aside in favor of nightly check-ins—what do you have tomorrow that you must do? What can be let go of? The possibility of perfection? The unrealistic expectations? The myth of pure independence? As the idols were unmasked I felt a combination of anger, fear, and resentment. Buildings, budgets, institutions, and investments. One after another, we stripped away the gilded exterior until we were left exposed and vulnerable—our idols lay before us powerless to change the circumstances of our lives. It was then that I remembered prophetic words spoken by Deana, a twenty-year-old inmate at the Metro State Women's Prison in Atlanta, to a new seminary graduate and chaplain intern. "When God is all you have, you realize that God is all you need." This lengthy Lent has required much relenting.

I wonder if it might also offer the invitation to revelation, to a new understanding of God? It is God's sovereign love, God's holiness, that sets the Divine apart from our carefully constructed idols. Our temptation is to whittle God down to a more manageable size and predictable behavior.

The human impulse is to carry God around in a box or lead God by a leash, demanding compliance, enlisting this deity to justify our opinions or denigrate our enemies. If the one we worship never challenges us, what we have is an idol. Or as author Anne Lamott writes, “You can safely assume that you have created God in your image when it turns out God hates all the same people you do.”ⁱⁱ

The complexity and ubiquity of human brokenness and suffering unnerve us and so we set fallible figures on pedestals of power; we worship simplistic slogans, “I’m right, you’re wrong. I’m good, you’re evil.” The first commandment quickly broken, engenders, evokes, requires, a certain humility on our part. In having no other gods, we confess that we are not gods and that our human minds are incapable of ascending to the heights of divinity. The gods and lords competing for our devotion are legion. Idolatry of self, of superficial religiosity, of polarized ideology, the list is endless. All of them have this in common—they cannot keep the promises they make. They cannot satisfy our deepest longings or meet our greatest needs. They will never provide the fullness of joy that we can find in the worship of God.

We can spend our whole lives trying to mold and craft more sophisticated and beautiful golden calves, but they will never moo. They have no life. We cannot create the Creator in our image—but here is the good news for us who are prone to idol worship: we are created in the image of God. The invitation offered to us in worship is to relent from our ceaseless searching for better gods and instead to commit our lives to the one God who holds us and all the world in powerful, vulnerable love.

In my experience, this is a daily decision. And so, perhaps I have decided what I’m giving up for Lent. Idols. I’m going to try to resist the inclination to create my own gods or to reduce the Holy One

to a vending machine that dispenses answers on command. I’m going to try to center my life in the God whose faithfulness makes my own possible. I’m going to stop expecting God to fit the mold I’ve constructed and seek instead to mold myself to God’s expectations of me.

There’s still time in this sacred season. Still time to give up the search for more convenient gods and turn our hearts to the One who walks the wilderness with us. Still time to relent. Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *When God is Silent*, Cowley Publications, 1998. p. 80.

ⁱⁱ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. Anchor Books, 1994. p. 22.