

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, Virginia
October 9, 2011

Exodus 32:1–14

AT LEAST WE DIDN'T MAKE A ...

No truer story has ever been written to describe the human condition, has it? There they are, waiting, with doubts creeping in and fears overtaking them. They are waiting at the base of a mountain and Moses has been gone one day too many. They are afraid to be obedient.

And how often are we also driven by our fears into ridiculous distortions of what we know God wants? Both in the church and in our secular lives, we know there are times when we completely ignore what God has commanded. The story of Aaron and the people waiting for Moses to come down is about the difference between remaking faith so it's not too demanding and about being truly righteous. It's the lukewarm religion that we read about in the New Testament—the life where faith doesn't infringe upon all the convenience that we can give ourselves. Now admittedly, there's blame to go around. Their soon-to-be priest, Aaron, is part of the problem. He wants to make everyone happy. How often do we in the church strain to keep everybody happy, and at what cost? The real issue is that Aaron compromised his spiritual integrity.

We read the Ten Commandments last Sunday, and they were very clear: “You are not to make any images to represent me.” This God who insisted on being not only invisible, but also having an unpronounceable name: *I Am who I Am*—this God was unequivocal in his instructions: ten words, ten matters, ten commands. And now, we are at the end of the twelve chapters of instructions on how to worship God every day, day in and day out: stuff that happens between the Sabbaths, how to live in a manner that truly pleases God, a reminder that there really is no life that is secular in the purest sense—everything is infused with God's providence and faith, a reminder that this scene of the people and their leaders indulging in non-spiritual anti-religious practices is always that same scene, hollow and empty. Aaron helped turn their fear into rebellion. Aaron helped them take their doubts to the next level—to a complete rejection of their relationship to God.

If you look closely at the details in this story, all the mistrust becomes full-blown rebellion and even an embracing of evil. And isn't that what happens with us? We see something that is filled with partial truth, and we know there's not a complete rendering of what God wants, but we accept it anyway because it's easier. You know, you see an ad-

vertisement and you say, “Yes, that’s true and that’s true.” But then the conclusion doesn’t follow. You realize something has been left out.

This scene with the Israelites has those same elements. It becomes a symbol of what will happen time and again when they turn away from relying on God. For the rest of their time in the wilderness they will make this same mistake over and over, but not to the same extent. And I wonder if Moses hears later on when they are unfaithful, when they are brought back into conformity with God’s plan, the excuse from them, “Well, at least we didn’t make a golden calf. You know, we didn’t go that far. At least we didn’t do a complete U-turn. We just kind of veered off.”

Every time the Israelites put themselves first, everything goes off track, doesn’t it? Every time they relegate God and God’s care to last position, their disobedience is compounded. I love to read Aaron’s explanation to Moses about how this all took place. If you look down at verse 24, it’s really quite amazing: “So I said to them, whoever has gold, take it off. So they gave it to me and I threw it in the fire and out came this calf.” Poof! Isn’t it amazing—Aaron isn’t guilty at all! It was the fire, or maybe the gold, or a combination of the two. *I just put the stuff in and this calf popped out* - such a huge self-deception. And it all began with the little things: anointing their fears until they became big sins, unchecking their doubts, relinquishing his role as the priest so they end up here in full-blown rebellion, risking everything just so their fear won’t overtake them.

The Ten Commandments—the ten imperatives that we live by—still caution us against making idols out of our own existence: idols out of progress and technology, idolizing individuals and their status, science, even idolizing our opinions and the very fashionable practice of idolizing youth. I wonder if one of the biggest troubles we face is acting and dressing our age. We can’t always be teenagers. We can’t always look like we are in our twenties.

Even when we do understand, when we are at peace in our own skin, we can make our understanding of God into an idol. It’s my way or no way. How do we avoid setting our rules as better than anyone else’s and yet at the same time remaining faithful, believing that God has a word for us, an answer to our fears? In the children’s message, if we are willing to look back to Christ who intercedes for us in the same way that Moses intercedes for the Israelites, we’ll see the checks—the course corrections we need to make. When Jesus says, “Forgive seventy times seven,” he really means there can be no end to your forgiveness because there is no end to God’s forgiveness of you. When we hear him imploring them to pray for their enemies and those who persecute them, then love is rendered into that which is tangible, and we can see the difference between living righteously and just keeping the festival. When we hear Jesus say, “Give to Caesar

what is Caesar's and to God what is God's," we know we have far to go. We know we can't fall for half-truths. We know when we listen to Jesus say, "I love you, and I want to be first in your life," we can't live the same, or talk the same, or use the same defense mechanism to save our lives. In fact, saving your life is the very way to lose it.

Losing your life in Christ is the only way you can ever be secure. If we are willing to offer ourselves—surrender—as we will sing in the last stanza of the last hymn today, we can have life abundant. We can know for ourselves and for our children what it means to take up a cross and be a disciple. We can understand that in dying-to-self, we are always raised to new life in Christ, the words of our baptismal sacrament. But if we shrink back from our calling, if we let our fears overtake us, if we live in doubt of the power of the body of Christ to transform us, then we will indeed find ourselves in a desert, worshiping a lifeless deity.

But life can be different. The golden calf, if you will allow me the liberty, as well as sacred cows can be seen for what they really are. And in the end, whatever sacrifice we make, whatever course correction we work hard to allow the Holy Spirit to guide us into, none of that will be able to compare to the blessings that God has already prepared for us in his son, Christ.

I wonder how long Aaron tried to keep up the pretense. I wonder when he finally recognized that God was at work in Moses and in that community in ways that he was yet to concede.

May God hear us today, may our hearts be transformed, and our relationships made whole, in the name of Christ, Amen.