

Sunday, October 11, 2020
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 23 (Year A)

Exodus 32.1-14; Matthew 22.1-14

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/258696418851690>

(Sermon begins at about 16:00)

“Keep Calm and Carry On”

I’m sure most of us have seen signs and memes that say “Keep Calm and . . .” something or other. Keep Calm and Drink Tea. Keep Calm and Go Shopping. Keep Calm and Eat Bacon. You know what I’m talking about. Well, all of this stems from the original “Keep Calm and Carry On,” which was part of a series of signs created by the British Ministry of Information in 1939 to “rally and reassure [the] populace as World War II ramped up.”¹ Perhaps the Hebrews wandering in the wilderness following their escape from Egypt could have used some of those signs.

In today’s Old Testament reading, we find the Hebrews in an absolute tizzy. Moses has once again gone up Mount Sinai to spend a little quality time with God. The Hebrews came to Mount Sinai about three months after their escape from Egypt, and Moses has already made a series of trips up the mountain to talk with God and to receive the Ten Commandments and other laws that God wanted his people to start living by. You’d think the people would be used to Moses’ periodic absences by now. In fact, this was his fifth such trip up the mountain. But unlike the other trips, this one was of a longer duration. While God had already given Moses the Ten Commandments, which Moses in turn conveyed to the people, on this trip God would actually write them on stone tablets. Not only that, he would provide a bunch of other laws and instruction, primarily concerning liturgical matters. Forty days into the trip, the people are starting to get concerned. More than concerned. They are getting fearful. They are thinking that Moses has abandoned them. Not only that. Moses was God’s spokesman. So, they are not only feeling that Moses has abandoned them, they are also feeling that God has abandoned them. And they are starting to panic. They are literally out in the middle of nowhere, and the only person, and the only deity, who knew where they were going, were missing. They are desperate for someone to lead them through the unknown in which they find themselves. Sound familiar? They are desperate for something to hold on to in the midst of the unknown in which they find themselves. Sound familiar?

They know they can’t go back to Egypt. Their only choice is to continue on their way. But they need someone to lead them. Someone who knew more than Aaron, who Moses left in charge in his absence. So, the people go to Aaron: “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us” (Ex 32.1). Never mind the fact that Moses had just given them the Ten Commandments about a month before. What part of “you shall have no other gods before me” (Gen 20.3) did they not understand? What part of “you shall not make for yourself an idol” (Gen 20.4) did they not understand?

At any rate, Aaron is all too eager to comply with their request. Why he didn't exercise real leadership but rather gave in so easily to their demands, we don't know. Perhaps he was afraid of what they might do. They were, after all, fearful, panicked, even desperate. So, Aaron takes their gold jewelry, melts it down and casts an image of a calf—a young bull. Probably chosen because the bull symbolized strength, leadership, and fertility, and was a common image for pagan deities in the ancient Near East.² An image that would have been known to the people. The next day, they have a festival to their new god, complete with sacrifices and burnt offerings, eating and drinking, and reveling, which I leave to your imagination.

Naturally, when God—the true God, not AWOL but busy at work on Mount Sinai—sees what is going on, he is more than a little upset. I love what he says to Moses: “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I have commanded them” (Gen 32.7). When they are obeying God, they are God's people. But when they are misbehaving, they are Moses' people. God is furious. Not only have they broken two commandments. They have given this idol, this false god, credit for liberating them from Egypt. God is so done with these people and is all set to completely wipe them off the face of the earth.

But Moses intercedes and convinces God to relent. He essentially tells God that it would be bad PR to destroy the people after all that God went through to convince the Egyptians to let them go. After all that God went through to get them out alive. Not only that, there was the matter of the covenant God had made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That God would make of them a great nation. Wipe out the Hebrews, and there is no way to fulfill that covenant. Then where would God be? So “the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people” (Gen 32.14).

Even though these events took place roughly 3,200 years ago, some of the themes occurring at that time under those circumstances similarly manifest themselves and resonate with us in our own time. A period of uncertainty in our own history. Events and circumstances that result in fear, even desperation. A time when faith in our leadership is called into question. Only it hasn't been just 40 days. For us, it's been over 200 days. Yet, like the Hebrews in the wilderness, there is no end in sight. And as a result, there continues to be uncertainty, concern, fear, even desperation.

It's easy for us to look at the ancient Hebrews and think that they were too simplistic in their faith, too quick and too willing to replace God with an idol. At least in our current crisis we didn't entertain the notion that our God had abandoned us. At least not seriously. Or for very long. But given our own circumstances, are we that different? The Hebrews looked for something to give them a sense of hope, a sense of normalcy, a sense that there was a future, that all was not lost. And they did it by creating an idol. Something they could look to, hold on to, to give them security. Isn't that what we did? Sure, our idol was not crafted out of gold or in the shape of a calf. No, our idol was in the form of toilet paper and paper towels. It was in the form of hand sanitizer. It was in the form of Clorox wipes. I wonder what the ancient Hebrews would have thought of our choice of idols.

And while we did not look to these idols to lead us or to pray to or to offer sacrifices to, they still became for us what the idol of a golden calf became for the Hebrews. An obsession. Even something that created division among one another. While division is not evident in the story of the Hebrews, later in this same chapter, it does become apparent that not all the Hebrews bought into this plan to replace God with an idol.

But these are just the outwardly visible, more public idols that we made for ourselves. What about the more private idols we might have set up as something to hold on to? As something to give us comfort during these chaotic and uncertain times? Because unlike the Hebrews, we could not come together in solidarity to create a common idol. Other than the aforementioned paper and cleaning products. So being isolated from one another, we each were left to our own devices to find those things that would become idols for us, to help us get through. Maybe it was something tangible like food or some other substance. Maybe it was latching onto ideas put forth by your media outlet of choice. Maybe it was a particular activity or cause that allowed you to focus on something outside of self and the COVID-19 crisis. Whatever those idols are, they are as individual as we are. I leave you to answer for yourself. Regardless of your idol of choice, we need to recognize they have the potential to be just as dangerous as the golden calf worshiped by the Hebrews. I'm not saying your particular idols are as dangerous. Just that they have the potential to be dangerous. Because idols, no matter what they are, have the potential to separate us from what is truly important. To separate us from, to diminish our focus on, God.

While not readily apparent, that is precisely what is going on in our Gospel reading for today. Allowing our own desires and attitudes to separate us from God. Jesus tells the parable of the wedding banquet as a way of describing our relationship with and reliance upon God. This was originally intended as a scathing commentary on how the religious authorities had disregarded God's intentions—setting up their own doctrinal idols, if you will. As generally happens, Jesus uses hyperbole to make his point. Only this parable is in a class by itself, using hyperbole heaped upon hyperbole. Perhaps because he wanted people to really take notice and pay attention to the intended message.

In the parable, a king—meant to represent God—gives a wedding banquet for his son. Those originally invited—the Jews—make all sorts of lame excuses why they cannot attend. Even though they had already accepted the invitation. They were more concerned with their own affairs and disregarded the invitation. They even abused the messengers—representing the prophets. So, the king, enraged, wipes out those originally invited.

There's still a wedding banquet to be had. So, the king has his servants go out and invite people in off the streets. Everyone is welcomed. This represents a radical departure from the old ways. Now everyone, regardless of who they are—Jew or Gentile, righteous or sinner, good or evil—are welcomed to attend. All are given an opportunity to participate in the feast—to participate in God's kingdom—if they so desire. And providing they adhere to certain expectations.

With the banquet hall now filled with guests, the party can commence. But the king notices one of the guests is not wearing a wedding robe. When asked why he was not wearing the required garment, the guest has no answer. So, the king has him thrown out. Now to our sensibilities,

this seems a harsh reaction. If the king was so gracious as to open the banquet to any and all comers, what difference did it make what they were wearing? Those invited off the streets may not have had time to go home and change. For that matter, some of them may not have even owned the requisite garments.

This is not about what types of clothing you wear to church. (As some of you sit there in your pajamas or sweats.) This is really about honor and respect for the king. As often happens with parables, our 21st century Western minds do not grasp the nuances of first century Near Eastern customs and practices. What we need to understand is that some of our assessment is valid. Some people would not have owned wedding robes. Some of those invited off the streets, even if they owned such garments, would not have had the opportunity to go home and change. The ancients took these realities into account and made provisions for them. A wealthy person such as a king would have had a rack of wedding garments that would be loaned to guests who did not have one. This way, everyone at the banquet would be dressed in appropriate, festive attire befitting such a grand event.

In not wearing the wedding robes provided by his host, the offending guest would have been as remiss as those originally invited but who refused to attend. They disregarded his invitation and thereby disrespected the king. Even though the inappropriately clad guest accepted the invitation, he did so in a way that disrespected the king. He did not adhere to standard practices. He was more interested in doing things his own way. Now we don't know why someone would agree to come but not agree to wear the garment offered to him. But the implication is that in not doing so, he was not willing to humble himself before the king. He was not showing respect for the authority of the king. He was not obedient to the king.

This parable is about humbling ourselves before our King, and respecting and being obedient to him. Regardless of our own feelings or issues or concerns. To fail to do so, we are, like the Hebrews, replacing God with an idol. Only in this case, the idol is us. Our own sense of self-importance. Our own sense of self-reliance.

While we are all important and while we know we need to rely on ourselves to some extent, we also need to remember that no matter what happens, no matter what is going on, we cannot allow our own stuff to get in the way of the one relationship that is above all others, that is more important than all others. Our relationship with our God. If we stay focused on that, we are assured that we can weather any wilderness situation we find ourselves in. Because, by relying on God, we can indeed Keep Calm and Carry On.

¹ <https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/keep-calm-and-carry-on/>

² *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 131.