

SERMON OCTOBER 11, 2015: "ALREADY BROKEN" (EXODUS 32:1-6)

NEW HOPE CHURCH – PASTOR JONATHAN FISCHER

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him."

² Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." ³ So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, ^y Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."

⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD." ⁶ So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. (NIV 2011)

INTRODUCTION

Think of a child waiting to be picked up from school by her parents. She may start out patient, then bored, then worried, and finally might try to take things into her own hands—trying to walk home on her own. (See Enns, 569, for a similar example.)

What do we do when God doesn't fit our timetable, or isn't accessible in the way we want, or doesn't make sense to us? In this story, we see how the Israelites take things into their own hands and make their own powerless gods.

Of course, all analogies break down...Parents make mistakes; parents forget; parents might even do something that's not for our good. But God can always be counted on. So when we do things our own way if He doesn't show up when we want, it's not good.

In your life, are there ways God isn't fitting into your timetable or ideas? Are you feeling disappointed by God or disconnected from Him? When we pray and wait and pray some more, but feel that He's still distant and not leading you anywhere?

We're in a sermon series on the Ten Commandments. In these last couple weeks we will see what happens after God gives Israel the law. Once they learn how to live, are they set?

This morning, we'll see that when God doesn't fit our expectations, it's easy to make our own "gods". That tendency shows the condition of our hearts apart from God. So as we recognize that tendency, whose faithfulness can we rely on?

SITUATION

Verse 1: "When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain...."

Back in chapter 20, the people had felt overwhelmed by God speaking to them as He gave the Ten Commandments, so they had asked Moses to approach God instead. But now Moses has been gone for forty days—almost a month and a half. The Israelites could only contact God through Moses (see Enns 568), and where is he now?

I probably would have been worried too. Where is our leader? Where is God? Like the child wondering where her parent is.

Sometimes, we pray for things that we later recognize are selfish. But sometimes, we just pray for God to show up. It looks like He's distant and absent, and we want His guidance. We wait, and still don't see any answers. He doesn't fit into our timetable, our schedule, our ideas of what God should be like.

RESPONSE

And when God doesn't fit into Israel's timetable, we see their response:

Verses 1-4: "...they gathered around Aaron and said, 'Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.'² Aaron answered them, 'Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.'³ So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, 'These are your gods,^y Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.'"

They go to Aaron—Moses' brother—and ask him to make gods for them. Something they can see, touch, and carry with them. That guy Moses has vanished, so it's time to take things into their own hands.

And Aaron agrees. It could be that he did this out of fear—all the people coming to him, and if he refuses, what then? So he makes them an idol shaped like a bull.

It's not clear what the bull's significance is. A bull could have been the "symbol of strength and reproductive power..." (Cole 214), and might have represented Baal, the false god worshipped in Canaan. Perhaps the people are reverting to false religion with its promise of more control and human power?

What they end up with is a cheap imitation of the truth God's giving them from Mount Sinai. They're trying to nail God down and worship Him in their own way, instead of receiving what HE says about Himself. When God didn't fit their expectations, they make their own version of "God"—a god who fits their ideas and schedule. They worship their idea of God, instead of waiting for, seeking, and wrestling with the one true God.

I think we all do this. It's all too easy to demand that God fit my timetable for "my" life. I want Him to build my kingdom when I want, instead of saying "Your kingdom come".

So soon after God gives the law to His people, they break their relationship with Him. God rescued them from Egypt, but in a sense they're still living as slaves to false, man-made religion. You'd hope that once they learned how to live, they could begin to do the right thing. But they'd heard God tell them no other gods, and no idols—and still they do this. Rules can't change their hearts or our hearts—no matter how good and true they are.

RESCUING RELIGION

Verses 5-6: ⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, 'Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD.' ⁶So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry."

Aaron seems to try to cover up idolatry with more religion. And it's easy to try to corral unbelief and try to contain it within Christianity, rather than to call it what it is and renounce it. Aaron tries to dress up the people's home-made "god" in Christian clothes, but that's never enough.

Ultimately, our cheap substitutes for God always fall short. The bull symbolizes reproductive power and strength, but it can't move—much less reproduce. Anything we come up with in place of God, anything else we place our trust in or center our life around, is ultimately powerless.

So even though God had rescued the Israelites from slavery, they went right back to slavery to a false god. They thought they would be better off with a "god" they can wrap their minds around, and who conforms to their timetable. But really, idolatry destroys. Tim Keller says about idolatry (anything except God that we center our lives around—like the golden calf, or work, or the applause of others, or a self-created image of God we make up), that an idol is something that will never satisfy us if we attain it, and never forgive us if we fail it.

Only the one true God—who will not fit into our timetable or ideas because He's so much bigger, and calls us into His timetable and kingdom—can satisfy us as we seek Him, and forgive us when we fail Him.

But will God do this for the Israelites when they fail Him here? He is under no obligation to do so.

GOD'S JUDGMENT

Just after this, the scene in Exodus 32 shifts to God as He's speaking to Moses on the mountain. He knows what the Israelites have done—making an idol and rejecting Him right after He rescued them.

Verses 9-10: ⁹“I have seen these people,” the LORD said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.”

It would have been completely just for God to wipe the Israelites off the face of the earth. They've rejected Him, the one true God, by making their own cheap imitation. They want a god whom they can make with their hands, instead of being held in the hand of the true God.

So God tells Moses that He will give Israel what they deserve, and make a new nation from Moses. Quite the offer for Moses. What will he choose?

We'll leave the story for now and come back next week, to see how Moses responds, and what God does. But for now, I want to take the last couple minutes to see what we can take away from this passage.

APPLICATION

First, we see here our tendency to try to make our own (impotent) versions of God. The Israelites think God is late, so they do things their own way instead of trusting Him. Similarly, when God disappoints us, it's so easy to go our own way and take things into our own hands.

So this story is a warning against centering our life around anything other than the one true God. 1 Cor. 10: ⁶“Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. ⁷Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: “The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.”) 1 Corinthians and Hebrews give heavy warnings against idolatry and against turning away from Jesus. It leads only to judgment unless there's repentance and faith.

Second, we see here that rules can't truly change anyone. Even though the Israelites had just been told not to make idols, they still did it here. They went right back to idolatry as soon as they began to worry about where Moses was and God was. Similarly, if Christianity were just a set of really good rules (such as “Love God and love others”), it could never change our desires or motivations. No matter how good family rules are, they don't guarantee that children will grow up well. No matter how much you read and memorize the Bible, that alone will NOT change you. We need GOD to change our identity and desires from the inside. Only as we trust and respond to HIS work will our lives change.

I tried for so long to try to fix areas in my life by making more and more rules for myself. It doesn't work. I'm beginning to recognize that self-discipline is good, but if I ever rely on my discipline or rules instead of God, I'm fooling myself.

And recognizing that rules can't change us, we also see from this passage that our confidence as Christians can't be in OUR ability to obey God. God's faithfulness has to be our hope and confidence.

So we see from this story that we need a Savior who is powerful enough to change us from the inside, and also that we need a Savior who can keep us in relationship with God because we can't do that on our own. And we need a Savior who will bring us into relationship with the one true God—instead of all the cheap substitutes we make when God doesn't fit our expectations.

We'll leave this story at its cliffhanger for now: God telling Moses that He will destroy Israel and make a great nation out of Moses instead. Next week we'll see what happens, but for now, we recognize how similar we are to the Israelites when God doesn't fit our timetable.

So what now? That's a pretty depressing place to end a sermon.

The first answer is to give up on ourselves. As long as we think we can fix ourselves—fix our lack of love for God, fix our inability to truly love or forgive others, fix our life, then we'll just fail again and again.

The only hope is when we begin to give up on ourselves and begin to trust in the one true God who is bigger than our expectations and timetable. Only He can make us new.

And as a preview of next week, let's skip ahead to Romans 12 for a glimpse of the hope we have in GOD—not in ourselves or our own man-made conceptions of "god": "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. ³ For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering.

The law—even the best and most true system of laws—could not save the Israelites, or us. Only God can do what rules cannot. Only He can give salvation, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Next week, we'll see more of how God did this, and how that's previewed in this event in Exodus.

INVITATION

God will not fit into our expectations or timetable. But as we yield to Him and trust Him even when He doesn't fit into our ideas, we will see His power.

So if you feel like the child waiting to be picked up from school whose parent is late, or if you feel like God isn't showing up in your timetable, don't take things into your own hands. That never ultimately works. Seek Him in prayer, in the Bible, and in the context of a solid church community. Bring even your disappointment before the true God, alongside other mature, trustworthy Christians. Psalm 13 gives a way to pray in those times when Moses seems so long in coming down the mountain:

¹ How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? ² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? ³ Look on me and answer, LORD my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death, ⁴ and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice

when I fall. ⁵ But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. ⁶ I will sing the LORD's praise, for he has been good to me. (NIV)

And remember that God doesn't help those who help themselves, or Exodus 32 would have been the end of nearly all the Israelites. We need the God who saves sinners—even us! We need a God who is far bigger than our idols, who blows our expectations out of the water, who doesn't fit our timetable because He is merciful and wants all to come to repentance and has a far bigger plan than we do, who rescues us and transforms even us.