

The salvific quality of the Exodus story – the thing that offers each of us rescue, and reassurance, and newfound freedom in every generation – the salvific quality is this: God’s power, and God’s love, and God’s grace transcend any earthly power we can concoct.

Pharaoh is the most powerful human being imaginable, so powerful he claims to descend from the sun (S-U-N). And yet when pitted against YHWH, he is flummoxed at every turn: he is stubborn, unable to make decisions; his economy is ruined; his people are plundered; his army is tossed in the sea; his workforce is liberated; his reputation is ruined; his household even pays the mother of his usurper to nurse her own child!!! Pharaoh is utterly superable. And God, God just keeps on demonstrating consistent generosity to the Israelites: manna in the wilderness; safe passage across the sea; protection from the elements; presence in the form of fire and cloud; refuge at every turn.

But there is tension, Sardis, tension! This tension exists throughout the whole of scripture, and it permeates this morning’s text: In spite of all that YHWH demonstrates, the Israelites repeatedly abandon YHWH’s transcendence in exchange for this world’s obscurity.

God liberates us from a dependence on predictable, finite, fleeting power, and welcomes us into a world of new possibilities: enough resources, enough love, enough value, enough land, enough humanity, enough of God for everyone. But time and again, the lure of Pharaoh’s more distracts us from God’s enough. So we play the odds; we check off all of our boxes; we crave security not just from our Source, but from all the other sources, too.

God works to ease this tension. In today’s passage, Moses is up on Mt. Sinai receiving God’s law. I will grant you that this law, in too many instances, has been manipulated by the powerful. I will also grant you that too many verses in our canon willfully support such manipulation. But I do, I really do, earnestly believe that at some point in time, God’s spirit intended to help craft a tangible expression of God’s purpose. A covenant was established in order that the newly-liberated Hebrews might forge a community rooted in God’s love, not one that would mimic Pharaoh’s domination system. God purposed a community where even the most vulnerable, especially the most vulnerable might thrive. When we

read and interpret the text we have inherited, I believe that such original intent must be considered.

The text tells us that the people at the foot of the mountain became concerned, because Moses was up there a long time. To be honest, I think this concern is valid. Moses has been on the mountain for more than 17 pages in my study bible! (And he's gonna be up there for a few more!) But then again, I would imagine that even for the divine, crafting language and legislation for a new people is time-consuming. Maybe this passage gives us some empathy for our Congress?!? (Not much. But maybe a little!)

Anyway, the people become anxious, and despite a God who has delivered just what they need, just when they need it, in every circumstance, they demand something be done. So they take their gold, and they make a calf, and they build an idol and an altar.

"What's the big deal?" you ask. In the literal presence of the One who has offered unwavering protection, the antsy Israelites offer praise, offer trust, seek help from another source. The ink's not even dry on this covenant, and they already want to seek a new way. God offers relationship. The people respond with estrangement.

In the PG version of the film, God takes notice, and says to Moses, "Dude, are you kidding me?!?" I'll let you imagine the uncensored version for yourself.

Then, predictably, we get a threat of smiting. "You think Pharaoh can rage?!?" God says. "You ain't seen nothing yet!!! I'm gonna wipe 'em all out, and start all over again."

But there's a twist. Moses intervenes. Moses reminds God that smiting the people isn't very sensible.

"So...," Moses says, "You are gonna do all of this, wreak all of this havoc on both Egypt and the Hebrews? Really?!? At the end of the day, it just makes you look evil, and erratic, and cruel. It just makes you like every other power we know."

“Come on, dude, you are better than this,” Moses says. “You are YHWH, a God who keeps covenant in every generation, slow to anger, offering steadfast love to your people, even when they don’t reciprocate such love.”

And here’s what I think is remarkable. God pauses. God listens. God processes.

Imagine someone who has broken your heart. Imagine the candidate you weren’t pulling for on the debate stage. Imagine the person who cut you off in traffic. Imagine that presence. Imagine your wounds. Imagine your anger. Most importantly, imagine you had the power, and maybe even the right, to bring retribution to the offender in the exact moment of your rage.

Now imagine having the power, the humility, the grace, the presence, to take a deep breath. To be mindful of all you have created. To be in dialogue with your creation. To let the longevity of your purpose supersede the immediacy of your pain.

God doesn’t just liberate us from long-term dependence on military, economic, and political systems. God liberates us from an insistence on retribution and invites us into the possibilities of restoration.

When I was first exploring this passage, I found it audacious that Moses would tell God how to act. And of course, I always struggle with squaring a God of unlimited love and grace with one who also initiates annihilation on a whim. This is the same feeling I often have in reading many Hebrew Bible passages about violence carried out in God’s name. Are these accounts of what God actually decreed, or are these interpretations, and in many cases harmful interpretations, used to justify and align the actions of humanity with the will of God? This text certainly affords a subjective righteousness to Moses, and to the Mosaic tradition.

But despite this subjective tilt, and despite my initial apprehension, I do see brilliance in this narrative. What better way to juxtapose the differences between YHWH and Pharaoh than to have YHWH not only be in conversation with Her subject, but to also have Her heed the counsel of her subject? Pharaoh’s ways lead to destruction, not only of self, but for the whole community. YHWH offers

partnership. Love, and wisdom, and yes, forgiveness, forgiveness are all reciprocated between Creator and created!

So...what's this all mean for us today? Well...I think God's still up on that mountain. I think God is still inviting us to partner in the creation of a world, bound in covenant, that seeks to be a reflection of God's love. And I think, even though we know God is overseeing this process, and even though we have been recipients of manna and parted seas, we still stand at the foot of a mountain, wondering if we ought to create some idols of our own, anxious that we, too, need help from the little sources.

I think the most ironic thing is that we haven't made a golden calf; instead we've made an idol out of the law that God provided.

We worship a justice system; we call it infallible; we refuse to recognize that its blind spots harm our most vulnerable neighbors, the very ones God's laws were created to protect.

We cry out for liberation; the trouble is, we confuse privilege for freedom; we assert our God-given right to hoist steins of microbrew on sunny pub lawns, and to purchase leaf-blowers in person at the hardware store, and to remove the spit-guard from the buffet table over and above our God-given responsibility to consider the welfare of every neighbor. Can you imagine what would happen if we advocated for our marginalized neighbors with the same ferocity and passion we use to ensure our creature comforts? Can you imagine what would happen if we valued education, healthcare, the environment, and the faithful praise of our Creator with the same fervor we exhibit in dining out, watching professional sports, or receiving our Amazon packages?

We bow to the altar of partisanship; we associate a person's humanity with their politics; we forget that in Christ there is no east nor west; there is no left nor right.

We make God's law something to possess, something to be wielded for our own purposes; we forget that God's law doesn't close the circle of God's love, but rather, it expands that circle.

IDOL-ing
Bob Stillerman
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Exodus 32:1-14



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

It's time for us to stop IDOL-ing at the foot of the mountain, and it's time for us to start working toward a new peak: the living of God's covenant.

The climb is long, and perhaps arduous. The clouds still obstruct the view. But the peak is within reach.

For there is good news, Sardis Baptist Church: we belong to a partnering God. We belong to a God who invites us into a living covenant, where grace, and power, and love, and forgiveness, and even transcendence, are reciprocated by Creator and created alike.

We are children of God! Empowered to be children of God! Empowered to bring about God's world!

May God give us strength for the journey. And may such a journey begin today.

Amen.