Seeking Comfort In The Wrong Places

Menno Mennonite Church
October 18, 2026

Purpose: To explore the human inclination to seek certainty in the midst of anxiety.

Message: God comes to us where we need God, even when we find ourselves in anxious places

Scripture: Exodus 32:1-14 (I will read); Matthew 22:15-22 Please read

Synopsys: The Golden Calf is the symbol of getting it wrong. It is the fundamental failure to know who and what God is and to do what they want without regard to the consequences. At least that is how we encounter the story more time than not. Yet it is human. We desire what we can touch feel and understand. Yet these are people responding to fear, responding to their conjectures of being left alone. Yet God choses mercy even here. God receives as we are even as calling us to know and confess who it is that we belong to.

Exodus 32:1-14

32 The people saw that Moses
was taking a long time to come down from the mountain.

They gathered around Aaron and said to him,
“Come on! Make us gods who can lead us.
As for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt,
we don’t have a clue what has happened to him.”

2 Aaron said to them,
“All right,
take out the gold rings from the ears of your wives,
your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.”

3 So all the people took out the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron.

4 He collected them and tied them up in a cloth.
Then he made a metal image of a bull calf,
and the people declared,
“These are your gods, Israel,
who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”

5 When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf.
Then Aaron announced, “Tomorrow will be a festival to the Lord!” 6
They got up early the next day
and offered up entirely burned offerings and brought well-being sacrifices.
The people sat down to eat and drink and then got up to celebrate
.
7 The Lord spoke to Moses:
“Hurry up and go down! Your people,
whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt,
are ruining everything! 8
They’ve already abandoned the path that I commanded.
They have made a metal bull calf for themselves.
They’ve bowed down to it and offered sacrifices to it and declared,
‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’ ”

9 The Lord said to Moses,
“I’ve been watching these people, and I’ve seen how stubborn they are.
10 Now leave me alone! Let my fury burn and devour them.
Then I’ll make a great nation out of you.”

[11] But Moses pleaded with the Lord his God,

“Lord, why does your fury burn against your own people,
whom you brought out of the land of Egypt
with great power and amazing force?

[12] Why should the Egyptians say,
‘He had an evil plan to take the people out
and kill them in the mountains and so wipe them off the earth’?

Calm down your fierce anger.
Change your mind about doing terrible things to your own people.

[13] Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel,
your servants, whom you yourself promised,
‘I’ll make your descendants as many as the stars in the sky.

And I’ve promised to give your descendants this whole land to possess for all time.’ ”

[14] Then the Lord changed his mind
about the terrible things he said he would do to his people.

There are stories where the point that we are supposed to take away is broadly self evident. The story of the boy crying wolf is to warn against being casual with the truth. Little Red Riding hood invites caution to be exercised even in familiar circumstances (that and it is generally handy to have a woodsman present). The three little pigs speaks to the importance of a job done well lasting the longest. In our own lives and families there are no doubt the stories born of mistakes and a generally bad day that are now handed down from generation to generations as the cautionary tale to do things in just a certain way less your oversight become everyone's bad day. Short, poignant and to the point they tell us what to do and not to do largely through other's misfortune, however accurately or not the story is later remembered.

I think that is how we understand this story from Exodus. How better to teach about the commandments just given then to observe their wholesale violation? I suspect that this is not the story that you have excerpted on your wall. The memories that we likely have about the golden calf are those directly from the Sunday School flannel graph. It is a story whose point is fairly self evident-- idols bad—and is generally told with a certain amount of rearward understanding that we associate with medical treatment of the middle ages: Aren't you glad we don't do things like that anymore? We tell the story with a bit of a knowing sense of being on the right ride of theological evolution "They worshipped this golden *thing* and thought that was God! Wasn't that a stupid thing to do?" We have gotten past leaches. We have gotten past golden calves. Thanks be to God. Next story.

Which is, in a word, problematic. Yes this is the historical text of Israel and God. Yes it is an uncomfortable bit of reportage of how things went down right after they were told that this was the last thing that they were supposed to do. Yes it brings us to entertain a nature of a God who can get so frustrated with humanity that starting over still sounds like a good idea. All of these approaches weakens what scripture is supposed to do: to teach us by the stories of what has been the active forces at work within human nature and how we might guard against them. Nevertheless it is a human story and one that can begin to sound rather familiar when read with some compassion.

Let's start here. Where this episode begins they have been in the desert for just about 100 days. They were still getting used to the notion of being in the desert, let alone being free. Within this time, their leader, their guide and spokesman who has been the voice of YHWH thus far has disappeared around the bend and up the mountain to have a chat with God and have left

the people to just sit there and wait. A few months out of slavery, a few weeks into their being convinced time and again that all of this will end badly never mind what happened back there at the sea, and they were left there to wait. Of those 100 days they have been out doing this, Moses has disappeared behind cloud and smoke for almost 50 of those days. They left behind Egypt and generations of having their overseers dictate to them exactly how the day was going to be. Their concerns was how to make the bricks or else, not wondering if this might be where the wheels come off this adventure. They did not know a whole lot of things: when or if Moses was going to be back; what God had to say about all this; whether there was really something there or just something that they did not understand; if this would be their new home, a dire as it might be, or if they would up stakes and move on; whether the food situation that they had discovered would continue or disappear as quickly as it came; what happens if Moses would fail to come back at all. They were free, but they are rudderless and that has made life terrifyingly unpredictable. Anxiety is a product of uncertainty. Nothing instills bad decisions like anxiety.

So they go to Aaron who likely is holding the same discomforts about him as well and gives them something to soothe them. Like a stuffy for a fretful child, they want something to hold onto. Aaron collects their gold and melts them down to form a calf. Sure it is an idol, but it was something solid. Something they could at least focus on, see and touch. Something that would not wonder away and up the mountain.

One of the problems of reducing there stories into the single dimension tale of right and wrong is it takes us out of the story. The distance between us and them can blind us to our commonality when we consider how different we are from them. Infant mortality is lower, deaths from malnutrition are far less common and most of us agree that the world is not flat and there is a point where we would simply fall off.

We are different people who have electricity, the printing press, telecommunications and air conditioning. Surely we would have handled the desert better than this? From the height of our own human progress it is tempting to think that we would at least have done better than they. We have gotten so good in fact that we somewhat write the whole thing off as superstitious and a bit backward. Especially for we in the west long accustomed to power and the ability to control things with relative ease that we wonder whether we NEED God quite as much as others. Maybe that is why we have made God a bit of buddy and not the singular superpower in the universe. We know what to do with a friend; we may not have a whole lot of utility for a universe that can

be changed at divine imperative, let alone a God we cannot even see lest we die. Do we need God when we have disposable income and ChatGPT to explain everything to us? There is an old saying: the question in the world today is not so much whether we would recognize the divine were it to come into our midst but rather whether anyone would bother to stand up.

But here is the thing. The Israelites took a God too big and too imposing for them to understand and manage and melted it down into what they can hold. Perhaps we just approach the problem from the other direction: we make ourselves bigger until we can put God into our pockets to carry like a worry stone to stroke when we get anxious? Different method but perhaps the same calf, only further domesticated for our ease and good breading.

I am saying this with every ounce of compassion and gratitude I have in me to anyone who have posed the question "aren't you glad we aren't the stupid anymore?", I say "Yes; we are precisely that stupid."

For the same reason: we are human.

Who among us does not know what it feels like to live with uncertainty and being washed with anxious thoughts? We wonder what will become us; what will become of this place that we love so well; of our place in the world, of our world itself. We worry for our futures and the future of our children and our children's children. All of this and more. When we are anxious, are we not all inclined to do whatever we can to make it stop? We avoid the issue. We hoard wealth and power. We are tempted by the lures of whatever promises a better day. We lean into the easy salve of scrolling, soothing, avoiding—whatever makes us feel better for a minute until the dopamine wears thin and we need to find something new.

Internally are we not far more inclined to cling to the promises of this world then the words of God? Do we not turn far more easily to our contingency plans than to wait for God who seems to be taking too long. Do we not rely on our own strength way more that God? All of this as if we need to fulfill the deductible of our self sufficiency. Here's the thing: God has only ever worked with the like of them and the likes of us. And even so the faithful covenant continues.

You will notice that the story does not end with the calf. If you read on in the chapter, you will see the troubles all of this unleashes. You will also find Moses talking God down from the unthinkable. When we are inclined and enamored a bit too much of our own power and the notion that is our there that by way of our own powerful prayers we too can bend God to our own

will, I want to be rather careful here as we draw this together. If this is what we take of this, than these are indeed dangerous waters.

However, when we bring to this the necessary element of confession and declaration, the notes that we are to take from this become far more clear. It is important to confess because it gives us a venue to be honesty about ourselves before God. It is an art that we have somewhat lost as Anabaptists, concentrating on we do on the demands of remaining the people of God doing their level best. I wonder at times whether we have room both for the ambitions we hold of being God's people doing the best we can AND naming honestly how consistently lousy we are at accomplishing these things we might be much the better for it.

We can confess that which is true: that we turn from God; that our trust in God's promises and God's kingdom is prone to falter, that we fail at loving our neighbors as our selves, that we often love that which cannot and will not love us back. We say this because we must say it. These things are true. But we say this too: God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love loves you each. Your sins are forgiven, now and always. You are forgiven. In other churches these are ritual words of assurance on a weekly basis. These characteristics of God are the nature of God first spoken in the Holy Scripture on Sinai spoken by God in radical self description (Exodus 34). These are the words that come AFTER the calf, not before. It is the description of who and what YHWH is in the light of who we are. These are words of assurance that we needed to hear then, and we need to hear not. They are words that we need to hear when we find ourselves in these situations and they are words we need to hear today. God's faithfulness is more reliable than our ability to forget, more reliable than our gold, and more reliable than our nervous efforts to be our own gods.

God may be far to big for us to get our heads around let alone hold in our hands, but we also have a God who will never let us go from his hands. Amen.