

## **Beyond Aaron's gods!** Exodus 32:1-14

### **Division and Chaos Today!**

I bet many of you feel that we are living in one of the most divisive and chaotic socio-political times. As we fight the Coronavirus, we not only have to fight the deadly virus itself, but also misinformation and disinformation about the virus. While medical experts have warned of the danger of the coronavirus and have recommended wearing a mask, some believe, the virus is a political hoax and have refused to wear a mask in public places.

Amidst of this ongoing fight against the pandemic, the fight for racial justice has continued. Some shout, "Black Lives Matter!" while others shout, "All Lives Matter!" Some say, "No Justice, No Peace" whereas some say, "without law, there is chaos."

As the 2020 presidential election approaches, we hear more about lying, conspiracy, mockery, insults against political opponents rather than calls for healing, reconciliation and national unity. Analysts say the United States is the most divided since the Civil War. As America has become increasingly divided by politics, so have its Protestant churches. Half of evangelical Christians believe "President Trump is anointed by God"<sup>1</sup> while other Christians say, Trump is an antichrist.<sup>2</sup> We are not only going through a chaotic moment in history but we also live in a 'post-truth' world. We hear conflicting accounts and reports of the same event. Some say, 'it's factual truth' and other say 'it's fake news.' When we don't know what to believe, we tend to believe what we want to believe.

### **The Golden Calf**

This is what the Israelites were doing in today's story. Moses had gone to the mountain for forty days. As his return was delayed, the patience of the people grew thin. When they seemed to lose their charismatic leader, they became restless, and their nerves were frayed. So what did they do? "They rallied around Aaron and said, "Do something. Make gods for us who will lead us. That Moses, the man who got us out of Egypt—who knows what's happened to him?" (vs. 1 MSG) We do not exactly know if they threatened Aaron to get him to make gods for them or nicely asked him to do it. But upon their request, Aaron told them, "Take off the gold rings from the ears of your wives and sons and daughters and bring them to me." And he created the golden calf. The Golden Calf symbolized power and prosperity in the ancient world. From the wealth of Egypt and the symbols of slavery, they created gods for themselves and claimed, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from Egypt!"

As the Israelites were getting anxious about the uncertain future, they moved backward, creating an image of god for themselves from the symbols of slavery. And they gave it divine status by attempting to find a sense of ultimate security from them. By doing so, they were enslaved by their own creations. They believed what they wanted to believe and worshipped their own creation.

### **The golden calf in today**

We can easily name our own golden calf. Right? In fact, we have many golden calves. What are they? One is surely in New York City. Can you guess where? [ppt] We have a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://bigthink.com/culture-religion/was-trump-anointed-by-god>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/stephen-long-should-we-call-trump-antichrist/12335450>

“Charging Bull” statue on Wall Street. Perhaps, the Charging Bull is the much more powerful version of the golden calf.

I first saw the charging bull statue in 2009. I was surprised by its massive size and its bright and shiny surface. Do you know why the charging bull statue is so shiny? [ppt] Because of people from all over the world rubbing it with their hands. There is a common superstition that rubbing the bull can bring financial fortune. The bull is shining like the feet of John Harvard’s statue. The charging bull symbolizes the financial might of America and no one would deny that money has become a golden calf for many Americans today.

What other golden calves do we have? Peter W. Marty, the editor of the Christian Century journal, says, [ppt] “Guns are Americans’ golden calf.” He wrote, quote, “We’re in golden calf country here, elevating a loyalty to the gun over a fidelity to God’s desire for abundant life. More than a hunting or safety device, the gun has become an object of reverence. We bow in devotion at its altar. “Sacred stuff resides in that wooden stock and blued steel,” onetime NRA president Charlton Heston said. And when a gun becomes an idol, it demands loyalty even if it regularly disappoints. Like other small gods that offer false consolation, a gun’s guarantee of ultimate safety and security is a myth.”<sup>3</sup>

This idolatrous worship of deadly weapons is often combined with militarism. Some say, “Show me your budget, and I will tell you what you value.” In those terms, what the US government values most is its military power. About \$ 1.5 trillion will be spent on military spending over the next two years.<sup>4</sup> National security is an important matter. But as we begin to believe that the strongest army in the world and advanced weapons are the ultimate guarantee for peace and our security, it is a sign that we worship the idol we have created.

Of course, politics is the most dangerous golden calf that entices us. One politician said, “At the bedrock of our politics will be a total allegiance to the United States of America and through our loyalty to our country we will recover loyalty to each other.”<sup>5</sup> What do you think of this claim? This is not a mere political claim but a theological claim that offer a kind of salvation. Once we give our ultimate loyalty to our nation or political party, politics defines our identity, attitude and perception toward reality. It often makes us see the world only as black and white or blue and red.

As we attempt to find our ultimate security and identity in something other than God, we often mistake our own creations for our gods and give them power to control our lives. Ironically, the more we rely on these things for our security, the more we are enslaved by them. The golden calf we have made may promise power and prosperity, security and happiness, but it doesn’t lead us to the promised land and abundant life. Rather, the golden calf moors us to the impatience of our ignorance and fear and eventually to death. The golden calf is not our God.

### **Learn to Live with Living God**

The golden calf is not our God. We need to put our trust and give ultimate loyalty only to God and our God refuses to be confined to any image. It means that we need to learn to live before the living God. Perhaps, this is another lesson we learn from today’s text.

Please think of and tell me what word first comes to your mind when you think of God? Many different words. But generally, they relate to some good characteristics. But Walter Brueggemann, a renowned theologian, says, we need to learn to live before “the wild, dangerous,

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/editorpublisher/guns-are-americans-golden-calf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/militarization-national-religion/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://therootsofthemountains.wordpress.com/2017/02/08/stanley-hauerwas-on-donald-trump/>

unfettered and free character of the living God.” Aaron’s gods were quiet, gentle, predictable and somewhat controllable. They were like vending machines so if people offered something, Aaron’s gods would return something else they wanted.

But how was Moses’ God? Moses’s God was not always gentle and nice. In fact, Moses’ God was wild, furious, and even dangerous. In today’s scripture, “God said to Moses, “I look at this people—oh! what a stubborn, hard-headed people! Let me alone now, give my anger free reign to burst into flames and incinerate them.” (vs 9-10)

Have you ever imagined that God would destroy you and your family with furious flame because of your unfaithfulness? Maybe not. We tend to think God as a gentle and loving grandpa who always smiles and gives unconditionally. But in today’s scripture, we meet a very wild, angry and strange God. This somewhat troubling text reminds us that the God we believe in is living and thus, unlike idols, we cannot control or domesticate this wild and living God. God is not a divine vending machine that gives us what we want when we insert our prayer, offering or devotion. The Living God has freedom and purpose and we may not fully comprehend God.

Let us be honest with our experiences. We pray for our concerns but God does not always answer in the way we want. Right? When our family members are ill, we pray for them. Sometimes, they get well but sometimes, they don’t. As you know Juhee and I cannot have our own child because of Juhee’s fragile health. We prayed about it for many years but we have not experienced miraculous healing. When my father was missing on a mountain, the whole church family of my home church prayed for my father’s safe return but they found out about his passing the next morning. In those moments, I couldn’t help myself from struggling with the question, “why? Why did this happen to my family? Why did God not answer my prayer?” I believe all of you have had similar moments. I haven’t found the answer to these ‘why questions’ but I know that God has always been with me and my family and because we believe in eternal life and the resurrection in Christ, we can go through those moments of grief and continue our life journey.

Uncertainty is a natural and unavoidable part of life. We don’t know why bad things sometimes happen to us just as we don’t know why good things happen to us. Just like the Israelites, we fear of the uncertainty of life and are tempted to find a sense of security in something tangible. But that is not the way out of our fear and anxiety. Only through trusting the living God, can we overcome the innate fear of uncertainty. Believing in the living God means accepting uncertainty as a part of our lives but at the same time, it means to trust in living God who is with us and will continue to be with us in our uncertain journey of life.

[ppt] It may look like surfing with our father. We don’t control the wave or know how it will turn out. So we have to navigate it moment to moment. Sometimes, we may be overwhelmed and crushed by the big waves but we also know our father will get us out of the water. As we trust God who is with us, we may enjoy riding the rolling uncertainty of our lives like a wave. When our joyful ride has ended, we all will rest with our father on the beach in heaven.

The uncertainty of life makes us anxious and fearful. But don’t attempt to find a sense of ultimate security in money, power, politics, family, relationships, or anything we have made. Do not trust the golden calf. The golden calf is not our God. Give up your constant yearning for control and accept the uncertainty of life. Trust our living God who is with us and ride and enjoy the rolling waves of life. Amen.