

I know that we just heard the scripture, but I am going to tell it again, because it's a really good story with lots of interesting twists, AND you get to hear my commentary thrown in.

So, the story takes place in two locations.

The first location is on the top of Mt. Sinai where Moses is spending time with God.

The second location is the bottom of the mountain.

The Israelites, who have been liberated from Egypt, are hanging out there, with Moses' brother Aaron, and they're waiting for Moses to return.

They've been fed manna from heaven, they've experienced a pillar of smoke leading them through the desert, but they are once again doubting God's devotion to them.

Moses has been gone almost 40 days and is about to come back down to them, but they don't know this.

In fact, they think he might be dead, so they summon his brother, Aaron, who is waiting with them.

I guess they figure that if their original leader is gone, his brother should be a pretty good backup.

So, the people tell Aaron, come, make gods for us.

We don't know what happened to Moses, we've obviously been deserted by our God, so let's make new gods that we can actually see and worship.

Now, Aaron, even though he's older than Moses, has been living in his younger brother's shadow for his whole life.

Some of us might know what it feels like to live in the shadow of an over-achieving sibling, so it's no surprise that when Aaron finally gets the spotlight, his chance at leadership, he wants to keep the masses happy.

So he's like, okay, you all want a god, no problem, coming right up.

But first, I need some things from you in order to make this god.

Give me all your gold, all of it, all your jewels.

They must be really desperate, because they comply, they give them all their gold.

Aaron proceeds to melt it all down, and make, a golden calf.

Right after he makes it, they're like, 'Yes, these are the gods that delivered us from Egypt!'

Wrong.

Yahweh did that, but they'll learn their lesson soon enough.

The next day they build an altar, sing and dance and do unmentionable things as acts of worship to this golden calf.

Meanwhile, God is on top of the mountain with Moses and God is witnessing this idol worship.

God gets mad.

God tells Moses what's happening and tells him go to back to his people at once, so that God can burn God's wrath against them and consume them with fire, and then God will start over with a new people, a new nation, that will be lead by Moses.

But there's a reason why Moses is the most beloved biblical prophet, he's very wise.

When God gets all angry, Moses says waaaiiit just a minute there God.

Let's think about what you're actually planning to do.

You just rescued all these people from bondage in Egypt, how do you think it will look if you go and kill off all the people you just saved?

The Egyptians will think you're evil!

After all, who rescues people and brings them to the wilderness, only to kill them?

Moses puts on his PR hat and tells God, that it doesn't make any sense, nor does it look very good to kill the Israelites.

You probably should turn away from your fierce wrath.

And besides, God, remember when you swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that you'd multiply their descendants like the stars of heaven and that you'd give them land to inherit forever?

Reeemmmeeember that little promise that you made, God?

And thus, because Moses is so persuasive AND because he holds God to the promises God made, God changed God's mind and doesn't bring fiery wrath against the people.

Now, Moses seems so convincing, it's like he should be a lawyer or something.

But the passage that we didn't hear this morning is the one that shows us Moses's unflattering side.

We saw God's, but not Moses's.

Right after Moses rationally appeals to God and calms God down, he descends down the mountain.

He's got the stone tablets with the 10 Commandments tucked under his arm, ready to lead the Israelites once again.

But all of a sudden, it's his turn to get angry.

The next verses say, ¹⁹*As soon as [Moses] came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing,*

Moses' anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.

²⁰He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.”

He made the Israelites drink the water that contained the ashes of their golden calf.

I guess even near-perfect humans have their moments.

After all, Moses had shown the Israelites so many times that they could trust him!

He freed them from slavery, gave them food in the wilderness, but they seem to have collective amnesia and their allegiance doesn't last long.

They get impatient, and the next thing you know, they've built a false idol.

And Moses also probably got mad because his own brother led the whole idolatrous affair!

I mean really, if one person is going to be loyal it should be Moses's own brother, but poor Aaron was misguided.

He was a bad leader, sure, but he was also just a people pleaser.

He wanted to be liked!

That's understandable, especially considering he was really only known as 'Moses's older brother.'

He wanted the spotlight for once and he was going to give those Israelites what they wanted- a god to worship, one they could actually *see!*

Aaron might've felt hopeless too, I mean, sure the Israelites had lost their leader, and thought he was gone for good, but Aaron had lost his own brother!

It really seemed like God had given up on them and that God had taken his brother.

It's no wonder he was ready to worship the golden calf.

But Aaron's response has something to teach us, which is to say that we need to be wary of leaders who always tell us what we want to hear.

If you have a religious leader or a boss or an elected official who always tells you that which is music to your ears.

Take note.

You can be assured that they are saying giving the same lip service to all people, even those who disagree with you.

This means that whatever they've assured you or promised you, it's probably a lie, because it's impossible to please everyone.

Also, there's no way to reconcile our material desires with our faith.

So if you hear a religious leader who always tells you what you want to hear, who asks no sacrifices of you, and tells you things that completely coincide with your other desires like materialism, egoism, etc., then they are twisting the scriptures so far out of shape, they're barely recognizable.

Leaders like that will lead you right into the arms of a false god, with devastating consequences, akin to what Aaron did.

We can get ourselves into real messes when we compromise our theology to avoid upsetting people (as Aaron did), or if we compromise it so that it reconciles with the values and lifestyles that we don't want to change.

It's quite convenient that Aaron led them down a path in which they could worship a god by being gluttonous, debaucherous and perverted.

To be a person of faith, to follow the one, true God, is to make difficult sacrifices concerning money, vanity, pride, sexuality, vengeance, and the list goes on.

We know that we are called to live humble, generous lives.

We are called to put others and their needs before our own.

We are called to forgive others when they wrong us, to assume positive intent and to refrain from judgment when people do something we disagree with.

We are called to focus more on our inner character, and less on our outward, physical appearance.

We are called to give away not from what we have left over, but to give our first fruits to God.

If any religious teacher tells you otherwise, in regards to any of these topics, well, beware of the false prophet.

They are inviting you to worship golden calves.

The idol that you worship, don't worry, we all have one somewhere in our lives.

That idol takes you away from the one true God and compromises your devotion to the Gospel message.

That idol affects your relationship with family members, friends and co-workers.

That idol makes you competitive and judgmental.

But ultimately, that golden calf leads you down a path of eternal longing, because you'll never feel satisfied.

You'll never feel like you have all you need.

You'll never feel filled with love and belonging, because that thing that you're chasing, worshipping, it will never complete you.

You'll never have enough, you'll never be good enough.

But worshipping the one God, whom we might not be able to see in the form of a statue, that God will give you an indescribable sense of contentment and belonging if you give it your complete devotion.

You'll see evidence of that God in your relationships with friends and family, which are no longer based on competition but on compassion.

You'll see evidence of that God in your online bank statements where you have more money to give away because you're spending less on frivolous things.

You'll see evidence of that God in the mirror when you look at yourself and remember that you don't need to be any younger, thinner, stronger or prettier, but that you are a beloved child of God, just as you are.

There are golden calves all around us, my friends, but we must choose the path that carried the Israelites through the wilderness (despite their temporary moments of idol worship).

We must choose the faith that nurtured Mary and Joseph and Jesus, the one that inspired the first Christian movement, the faith of our ancestors.

We must follow Moses, not Aaron. Amen.