

“The Golden Calf: The Icon of Our Fear”

Exodus 32:1-14

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Today’s Scripture reading describes how powerfully fear and anxiety can dominate our souls and challenge our lives. The Israelites’ creation of the golden calf is an expression of their fears and anxieties when they couldn’t feel God’s presence in tangible or visible ways. Indeed, fear and anxiety make us feel vulnerable when we are alone and we realize that there is nobody around us that we can count on. Imagine you are forced to deal with a situation where fear and anxiety attack you, or recall any personal life moment when you had to struggle to overcome your fear and anxiety. When you are stuck in fear and anxiety, it is hard to claim your own strength and courage to move forward. It was the same for the Israelites who had been traveling in the wilderness. In order to enter the promised land, they had to go through God’s special tests. That was why God challenged the people of Israel to wander in the wilderness for forty years. A couple of questions come to my mind. How could the Israelites go on their journey and continue to move forward? Was this God’s way of disciplining the Israelites so they would become strong and brave? How does this story challenge you? Let’s go deeper and find a meaningful and relevant spiritual lesson to deepen our Christian faith.

No one is free from anxiety and fear. It is inevitable. Psychologically speaking, the feelings of fear and anxiety can be a type of defense mechanism to protect our body from any harmful attack. These are like our shadows following us wherever we go. We find this shadow in the Israelites’ golden calf narrative. Last Sunday, we explored the passage about the people of Israel receiving the Lord’s Great Commandments. It was vivid and clear evidence of God’s presence and guidance and of the Covenant that God would be permanently with them. Among the rules, the first commandment was this:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ***you shall have no other gods before me.***
(Exodus 20:1, NRSV)

Many signs and miracles were given to the Israelites to prove God’s intimate and dynamic presence among them. For example, first there was God’s deliverance of the Israelites through the parting of the Red Sea. Secondly, God provided the Israelites with water to quench their physical thirst. Lastly, God gave them laws to govern and rule the whole Israelite community. What other

disciplines did they need to give their trust to God? God prepared another test that the Israelites had to go through. What was that?

God called Moses to come to Mount Sinai, and God gave Moses further instructions that the Israelites had to follow. It took forty days, and the people started worrying about Moses. They thought that Moses was taking too long to come down from the mountain. No surprise. The people became impatient and anxious and started feeling fearful about Moses's absence. Some people started to ask each other, "What's wrong with Moses? What if he happened to die somewhere on the mountain? What should we do?" Rumors began to spread throughout the community that Moses might be gone so that they would have to continue traveling on their own. In fact, the Israelites were heavily dependent on Moses's leadership. They could not imagine a journey without Moses. Their hearts suddenly became fearful and anxious about their present and their future. They were afraid they had been abandoned and left to die in the wilderness alone. Some impatient people went to Aaron and claimed, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us" (v. 1). Aaron, Moses's brother, asked the people to bring up the gold, form it, and cast it in the image of a calf. Aaron declared, "Hey friends, these are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" (v. 4) What does the golden calf represent? Why did Aaron and the Israelites break the covenantal relationship with God?

Psychologically speaking, the golden calf served the Israelites as a 'comfort object' that soothed their loneliness and feeling of being left out in the wilderness when they were vulnerable in the absence of Moses. The Israelites desperately wanted to convince themselves that God wouldn't abandon them and neither would Moses. The image of the calf projected their longing and desire that they were still with God and Moses on their journey. In 1953, English pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott introduced a new term, 'transitional object.' He described a young child's strong and persistent attachment to his or her parents as the concept of a 'holding environment.' He argued that young children experience a safe, comfortable holding environment that protects them from being fearful and scared and having anxiety attacks. That's why children want to keep their blankets, bits of cloth, or a teddy bear with them at all times. They don't even want them to be washed. My two sons always carry and hold on to their Mickey Mouse dolls when they go to bed. One day, Jacob tied up the two Mickey Mouse's tails with strong double knots. It took me a while to untangle them! Winnicott argued that objects such as these give the children 'transitional status,' which allows them to experience the 'real world' in their imagination.¹ Truly, any transitional object can play the role of a

¹ "Donald Winnicott," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_Winnicott, accessed

‘developmental facilitator’ that enables children to move toward physical and emotional independence.²

From Donald Winnicott’s point of view, the Israelites made the golden calf their transitional object because they desired to continue experiencing the protective, safe, and tangible holding environment of God. But, God didn’t want them to stay there and remain in their comfort zone. Rather, God challenged them to move out of their safe zone, take a risk, and grow by moving forward, trusting in faith. God wanted them to be independent, courageous, and brave children of God! This was God’s plan and hope—that they would learn from this test.

Speaking of fear, I want to share a story about my family. Last Tuesday, our family went to get our flu shots. The problem was how we would make it work for our two non-compliant boys! I wasn’t sure whether Jacob and Joshua would be willing to cooperate. Clearly, when we reached the clinic, Jacob became quite nervous and anxious. He hid behind me and wouldn’t step forward. Thankfully, Joshua was falling asleep in the car. Without hesitation, we decided to have Joshua get the shot first, before he woke up. And the nurse, indeed, helped us with our plan. Certainly, Joshua cried out, but he easily calmed down when he got a piece of candy and a sticker with ‘BRAVE’ written on it. But six-year-old Jacob feared the needle. We had to go home because he said that he couldn’t do it. I was frustrated and not happy, but I told him that if he wouldn’t have the flu shot, it would make me sad. I reminded him that I would love him no matter what. However, I also reminded him that there would be no TV on weekends and no birthday gift. He promised me that he would try it again on Thursday morning. Last Thursday, he texted me with Youngjae’s help, “Daddy, daddy, I had my flu shot and I didn’t even cry.” I felt so proud of him and celebrated his accomplishment. Later that evening, I asked him why he had been so fearful. He said he thought that he was going to die. And then I asked him how he was able to find the courage to do it. Because of the birthday gift? He answered that he had even forgotten about the reward—he just automatically did it. I thought he was determined to be brave. However, Youngjae told me the truth. A well-trained pediatric nurse did it so fast that Jacob didn’t have time to be afraid of the needle!

Even though fear and anxiety are essential and inevitable parts of our lives, this is not the whole understanding of who we are. We are God’s humble

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² Carole J. Litt, “Theories of Transitional Object Attachment: An Overview,” *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 9 no. 3 (1986), <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/016502548600900308>.

creation. Truly, when God created us, our life came from dust, but we are created with God's ultimate meaning and purpose through His breath of love and joy. Otherwise, our life wouldn't make any sense to us. God wants us to grow and go on our own journey, not to stay a small child but to boldly move forward. A great German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, claims that God is not a being that we only call upon to offer us strength when we are powerless and weak.³ He challenges you and me to be adult Christians, not to remain as little children who stick close to their transitional objects such as the golden calf. Bonhoeffer challenges our faith in his book *Letters and Papers from Prison*, as follows:

The same God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34). The same God who makes us to live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. ***Before God, and with God, we live without God.***⁴

The phrases “without God” and “before God” challenge us to believe in God as constantly and permanently with us, not merely as a mechanical God who solves our problems but as a God who wants us to know that wherever we go, wherever we are, we will not be alone because God always finds us and stays with us as our guide and center. We need to learn to trust in this God and accept Him! Friends, find this God and go on your life journey with boldness and courage. God is always with you! Amen.

³ <https://blog.faithlife.com/blog/2015/03/bonhoeffers-religionless-christianity-engaging-a-post-christian-world/> Accessed on November 11 2017

⁴ Ibid.