

In our last episode, we saw that God told Moses to establish the annual ritual of Passover in order that the people would always remember that God is a liberator. In the story since then, God has given them the gift of the Law, which makes them into a community defined by values like mutual responsibility, integrity, and allegiance to this liberating God. Now in Exodus 32, Moses has gone up the mountain again to talk with God and left Aaron in charge, and when he does not return as soon as they expected, the people forget all their inspirational lessons and plead with Aaron to make them some different gods.

You can't tell from the text whether Aaron is complying enthusiastically or reluctantly, and I'm kind of taken with the idea that he's playing for time, dawdling and figuring they won't want to give up their gold jewelry. But even if that's the case, he does make an image of a calf out of the people's gold, and they say, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" Then they have a festival where they sacrifice to the calf and feast on the sacrifices and even "revel," which some commentators say is a euphemism for engaging in fertility rites. They reverted to Egyptian ways *fast*.

But I'm not sure they're worshiping a false god. There's no alternative biography for this calf; in fact, they attribute to it the fact of having led them out of slavery in Egypt. I don't think this is a false god; it's a false *image* of the true God. They are too unsettled by the absence of their actual leader and the apparent absence of God, who had manifested only as a pillar of fire and cloud earlier. They are just so panicked out here in the wilderness, they want something they can see and touch and describe, a god they can count on. I think Aaron made them an image

of their God, Yahweh.

Now, this is a direct contravention of the commandment not to make graven images, and up on the mountain God becomes very angry and proposes to burn them alive and make of Moses a great nation. But let's linger for a moment on the people's motivations. Simply taking the story at face value, I can sympathize with them. They've been through the trauma of slavery, a frightening escape from Egypt, and they're in the midst of the wilderness with no end in sight. Moses has really been their only anchor, and even when he's around they're not sure he knows what he's doing. I remember hearing about a toddler learning to walk on her own who would hold her own hands to keep from falling. People going into danger often carry good luck charms. It is natural to want something concrete to hang on to. They don't want a different god, but they want their god to be *at hand*. Visible, touchable, firm and unyielding. But this is *not* what God would be for them, and God was angry.

Last week on public radio I heard a story about a vote in Hungary to reject 1300 Syrian refugees. One of the reasons for the refusal was that they are a Christian nation, and this would dilute their culture. As you can imagine, my jaw fell open and I said a good many cutting and incisive things there in the car, chief among which was the observation that it's *because* you're a Christian nation that you need to take the refugees. Isn't that what Jesus would want? "Who was this man's neighbor?" he asked the lawyer, and the lawyer had to reply, "the one who helped him." But if it's true that Hungarian voters rejected Muslim refugees because they themselves feared losing their Christian identity, I would suggest that they have

created a false image of the true God. They have somehow confused cultural celebrations, customs and institutions with the living God. They derive comfort from, let us say, beautiful church buildings and Christian prayers in public gatherings . . . but those things are human constructs; they are not God.

I think God is so angry up there on the mountain because the people cannot find God within. They demand an external god who looks like the neighbors' gods, a calf representing strength and fertility and wealth, because they are completely oblivious to the fact that God is with them and within them already. Despite their liberation, despite Moses' leadership, they persist in believing that they are all alone in the universe, like the little girl who remembered having her hands held by others, but didn't realize that the power to walk was also within her.

The reason we continue to read this story about people constructing an externalized god for themselves is that the temptation is ever-green. We have a very hard time taking seriously that God is the Ground of Being, not another Being writ extra large who may be present and may be absent. But here is where, of all things, the doctrine of the Trinity can help us. The famous icon by Andrei Rublev shows the persons of the Trinity seated around a table eating together. They are gazing at one another in infinite hospitality and utter enjoyment together. At the front of the round table, facing the viewer, is a little rectangle which some historians believe once held a small mirror. If so, the viewer of the icon also became a companion at the party, invited to sit at the divine table. The viewer is called "to consciously participate in the divine dance of loving and being loved." The gist of the icon is that intrinsic to God's identity is relationship, a flow of attention, respect and love to and

from each party.

Such consciousness would transform the fear of being overcome or swallowed up by others, as symbolized by that Hungarian vote. As Richard Rohr says, “Trinity is all about relationship and connection. We know the Trinity through experiencing the flow itself, which dissolves our sense of disconnection. The principle of one is lonely; the principle of two is oppositional and moves you toward preference and exclusion; the principle of three is inherently moving, dynamic, and generative.” Our sense of disconnection is an illusion; as Paul says to the intellectuals in Athens, this God “is not far from us, but is the one in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:27-28).

You’ve probably heard before Tolstoy’s retelling of a folktale about a dreadful old woman who died and went straight to the burning lake of fire in hell. She cried out for mercy, and her angel came and said, “Can you show me any evidence that you ever did anything for another person?” The old woman thought and thought, and finally remembered that she had once given a rotting onion to a beggar. So the angel produced the onion and held it out to her, and she grasped it and began to be pulled out of the lake of fire. Seeing this, the other souls in hell grabbed her ankles so they could be pulled up too, but she kicked them off, screeching, “No, this is *my* onion, *my* salvation!” And as soon as she had done that, the onion broke and she fell back into the lake of fire.

Richard Rohr writes that “God is not, nor does God need to be, “substance” in the Aristotelian sense of something independent of all else. God is relationship itself.” And *salvation* is simply the readiness, the capacity, and the willingness to

stay in relationship. Thus it is not surprising that Moses can talk God down from God's rage on the mountain. "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? . . . Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven . . .'" Given the choice between justice and faithfulness to the people, God chooses faithfulness.

The Buddha said nirvana was No-Thing. It's not nothing, it's no-thing, not external and pointable-to. This story reminds us that God is not a golden calf or anything external to us, though we would find that reassuring. In fact, there really isn't an image of God, but an experience of God: an infinite flow from one to another, best described as love. If at times we need a reassuring touchstone—and there are always times when we do—the touchstone should not be an image but this story, when God chose faithfulness to God's cranky, superficial, and undeserving people. Let us pray.

God, we know in our heads that you are love, that love powers the universe, that love has no limit or end. But in our guts we are not always so clear, and we eagerly grasp for things that are not you, to reassure ourselves. Help us be in touch with you within ourselves and among your beloved community, so that we have the courage and the power to reach out and multiply love. Amen.