

The Gods We Worship When We Worry

Exodus 32:1-14

Philippians 4:1-9

“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.”

The Israelites were worried. According to one midrash, Moses had told them he would be up on the mountain for forty days. But it was now the sixth hour of the fortieth day and they were worried. What had become of him? He was their go-to guy in the aftermath of the thunder and lightning and trumpet sound and smoke that had accompanied the words of God’s commandments. Thirsty? Hungry? Tired? Afraid? Go to Moses. Knock. Seek. Ask. Moses will fix things. “You speak to us, and we will listen,” they said to Moses, “but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.” From that moment on, the golden calf was a disaster waiting to happen.

The problem of idolatry is, in a word, a problem of misplaced trust. Our hearts trust something or someone who cannot bear the weight of our hearts. Truth be told, most of what we trust cannot bear the weight: a marriage, a child, a parent, a lover, a nation, a political party, a hefty bank account, a bull market, a friend, a job, a preacher, a politician, a church, a religion. “To have a God,” Martin Luther famously wrote in his commentary on the commandment the Israelites broke when Moses was delayed coming down from the mountain, “properly means to have something in which the heart trusts completely. To have a God does not mean to lay hands on [God], or put [God] in a purse or shut [God] in a chest....To cling to [God] with all our heart is nothing else than to entrust ourselves to [God] completely.”

In the wake of what they thought was Moses’ betrayal of their trust, the Israelites made other gods. Some scholars think the gods were fertility gods because, Harvey Weinstein *not* aside, sensual gratification is often the god of a people who have forgotten the Love for whom they were made. But most scholars think power and not sex was the god of choice. The people fashioned the god they believed would win wars, conquer territories, grab power and so make the Israelites a people to reckon with. It was what they knew of emperor worship in Egypt and, in many ways, their minds had never had left Egypt.

If you think about it, the idols we fashion when we worry partake of one or the other sort of god. Either idolatry is a restless mania constantly seeking a new object to worship that will meet our needs. Or idolatry is a fixation on a bygone something that is tangible, powerful, and absolute. Then with traces of the true God we once worshipped or the God our parents and grandparents once worshipped, we transpose the stories of God we learned in childhood onto the story of a lover or a nation who will save us. As Israel said of the golden bull, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt,” so we say of the thing that satisfies our needs, the institution that feeds our self-importance or the nation that reifies our powerfulness, “You are my god who will save me from my worries.”

Yet notice that without Aaron, none of this might have happened. Aaron. Aarons are those sometimes well-meaning people in our lives who indulge our idolatry, first by playing to our worries and then by promising to take our worries away: a parent, a friend, a lover, a preacher, a politician who enables us to worship the gods on our own terms. Aaron has been called the Father of Liberal Protestantism and I freely admit that I am often Aaron at your service! You want to worship *this* God once a month at most? Grateful to have you show up when the other gods of your busy schedule do not need you. I truly am! You want the church to meet your needs? What can we do to make sixty minutes of your Sunday morning and not a minute more entertaining enough to hold your interest and send you back into the fray with a catchy phrase, a heartwarming story or a familiar hymn in your heart? In return, just give me the gold in your ears to keep this institution going. Sarcastic, I admit, but I am also not too far from telling the truth about what ministers are tempted to be when the church exists to meet your needs and take your money rather than to be a ragtag band of pilgrims who are gathered each week by the fiery, complicated, demanding, redeeming address of a jealous God.

Speaking of *that* God, as the Israelites sit down to eat and drink and then rise to revel in the tangible presence of their latest god, the story shifts to the top of the mountain, to the place of revelation, to the conversation between God and Moses. God’s first response to the people’s idolatry is to disown them. God

says to Moses, “Go down at once! *Your* people, whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them.” God first sees the fickleness, the orgiastic, meet-my-needs side of their idolatry. In no time, they have forgotten the God who redeemed them. I am here to tell you that it barely takes a generation to forget the God who may have been the God your parents gave you to call upon, but who likely will not be the God your children or your grandchildren will call upon without the disciplines of worship and prayer, of story-telling and service. What God first saw was a fickle people and Moses had no defense to make. He simply was silent.

God’s second response to the people’s idolatry is to destroy them. God sees a stiff-necked people—the opposite of fickle—intransigent, fixated on the deaf and dumb and callous-hearted gods of Egypt. “Now,” God says to Moses, “let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.” If you know the story, you will recognize this as a Noah moment, fire rather than flood now God’s means of judgment. Noah took God up on the offer because he heard God’s word literally. Moses instead hears the redemptive intent hidden in God’s words. Therefore, he refuses to leave God alone and, in refusing, gives us a glimpse of what it means to have a God who can bear the weight of the human heart, a God who is worthy of human trust.

Our human means of not leaving God alone is called prayer. In the next chapter we will be told that God used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend and I think that is how Moses speaks to God here: as a friend, the sort of friend who will not let you get away with being someone you are not. Moses reminds God that God bears the responsibility for bringing this people out of Egypt; that God is the loser if God destroys them; and that God is the God who made promises to Abraham, Isaac, Israel and their descendants. Moses’ working hypothesis is that *this* God “is not iron impersonal fate but,” in Robert Jenson’s words, “an omnipotent conversation that is open to us.” In short, *this* God hears; *this* God changes his mind; *this* God acts to redeem God’s people.

The gods we worship when we worry do not hear. In the words of the psalmist: “The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; they have eyes, but they do not see; they have ears, but they do not hear, and there is not breath in their mouths. Those who make them and all who trust them shall become like them.” The God who can bear the weight of our worried hearts, the God who is worthy of our trust, is the God who, in these latter days, has stooped to hear us through the human ears of his Son. In him and through him, our worries live eternally in the heart of the God who can bear them.

The story is told of Rabbi Yitzchak who stood silently facing the Holy Ark on the eve of Yom Kippur, his back to the congregation for more than two hours. When the people began to grow restless, the rabbi turned to his congregation and explained:

I want to bring you into the conversation I was having with G-d. I said to G-d, “I have come before you on the Day of Atonement to ask that you atone for my sins.” But then it suddenly struck me that in the past year, I haven’t brought any plagues upon any part of the world. Nor have I made any woman a widow. Nor have I made any child an orphan. Nor have I caused anyone to go bankrupt and thereby not be able to sustain and support their children. Yet, G-d has done all these things. And then it struck me, why isn’t G-d coming to ask *us* for forgiveness. So I said to G-d, “In the past year, I have caused no death. I have brought no plagues upon the world, no earthquakes, no floods. I have made no women widows, no children orphans. G-d, you have done these things, not me! You should be asking forgiveness from me. So I’ll make a deal. You forgive us, we’ll forgive you, and we’ll call it even.

“Prayer,” I read in the midst of another week of fire and flood, of bombs and bombast, of widows and orphans multiplied, “prayer is the expression of those who live in time and must implore God for glimpses of meaning.” [Zornberg] I imagine that is why the God who hears became flesh, to give us that glimpse, and I imagine that is how Paul could write to the congregation at Philippi, “God is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.” Thanks be to God. Amen.