

October 18, 2020 by Lori C. Morton

Exodus 33:12-23

Psalm 96:1-9, (10-13)

Mt 22:15-22

Let's get back to the golden calf in the room.

Moses has just come back up the mountain

after witnessing God's people dancing and partying around a golden calf.

A god they demanded.

An idol, his own brother formed for them.

An attempt to pacify the people,

until Moses and God returned.

Only 40 days and 40 nights since Moses delivered the covenant of God.

Gave them the boundaries of the 10 Commandments

to navigate their relationship with God and with each other.

Only 40 days and 40 nights

then they were willing to accept

the authority of another, as their god.

Not, even something living, but a statue made of gold.

At first, Moses persuaded God not to act on the anger and betrayal God felt.

Actually, changed God's mind.

But, when Moses came down from the mountain and saw for himself

He lost it. Lashed out.

Broke the tablets with the commandments and let the people have it.

Now, we find Moses back up on the mountain with God

planning and negotiating their next move

on how to get the people to the Promised Land.

But, God just told Moses,

he will have to do it without God leading the way.

What?!!!

You saw how long the people lasted

without knowing your presence for 40 days.

And, just to remind you ... they aren't my people,

they are your people, God.

You don't get to back out of this now! Pretend you didn't hear their cries.

Send me to help them escape, then fulfill their fears.

Abandon them in the wilderness, with only me as their guide!

No! You got me into this mess, now you are going to finish it God!

Even I am struggling to believe in this promise.

You know they built that calf because we humans don't deal well with not knowing.

Not knowing where we are going.

Not knowing who you really are.

We are tactile people. We need something we can see, smell, touch, and hear.

Yes, even I need more.

I want to see your glory ... to know you completely God!

I need to be able to convince your people that you are in fact with us, not against us.

That we are not lost, but will reach the land you promised!

It is one of the challenges for communities. We need leadership.

Whether it is in our families or a town or a nation,

We need someone to help us keep our purpose before us equip us to carry it out

and inspire us to believe we are truly better together.

Even with our diversity of ideas, cultures, identities and gifts of the Spirit.

Yes, even mediate when we start ranking who is the greatest or casting others out we think are a threat

or when we inevitably crash into each other

unable to reconcile our problems with our neighbor.

Yes, even with only two,

it didn't take long before Adam and Eve

were hiding from God, pointing fingers of blame,

and lost their experience of union with each other,

God,

and all of creation.

Like Moses, they had a direct relationship with God.

Knew God's footsteps.

Yet, they still looked for something else;

something more

than the promise of God. "I am with you".

As the families got larger,

became tribes

struggled between each other and other nations

God sent prophets and judges.

We became dissatisfied with them too. So, we demanded a king.

(1 Sam 8).

Disappointed, God said, "As you wish."

Knowing once again, the people

chose an idol, rather than the real thing.

Saul went crazy with the power and fear of losing it.

David succumbed to lust.

Arranging murder to get the woman he wanted.

Solomon fell to greed

and all the kings that followed

worshipped the throne and other gods

rather than God.

In bondage to sin, they could not free themselves.

And, eventually the nation divided

the least oppressed by their own people

and, as we studied last Fall, Jeremiah tried tirelessly

to get the leaders to turn,

to recognize they worshipped idols,

not God.

but, exile in the wilderness is where they returned.

The main, First lesson from the lectionary, Isaiah 45:1-7,

tells how God rescued the people.

God chose a foreign king, Cyrus.

A king, who had never heard of God.

Yet, just like Moses, God calls Cyrus by name.

Sends him to overthrow the Babylonians.

A king like no other in the region. “Cyrus introduced a genuinely fresh idea onto the world stage: tolerance. Rather than smashing small countries, killing or deporting their people and destroying their religion and identity, Cyrus began a policy of encouraging ethnic minorities. He let them return to their homelands and helped them reestablish their places of worship.”<sup>1</sup>

The Israelites were able to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

Now, none of this happened overnight.

Or even over a couple of generations.

Each fall

each rescue

each rebuild and

consequent transformation

of God’s people took hundreds of years.

And, generations more,

until we find ourselves in the Jerusalem Temple, once more.

With Jesus,

and another discussion

around what has authority in our lives.

The Pharisees do not believe God’s people should be paying taxes to Caesar.

The Herodians (followers of King Herod) believed that refusing to pay the tax was an act of sedition.<sup>2</sup> Much better to go along and get along with the

Romans, then encourage the people into a rebellion they cannot possibly win.

Odd combination of leaders to join up,

but they had a common enemy, Jesus.

The order to have Jesus killed had been set.

Now, they just needed the evidence for a proper conviction.

“Tell us, then, what you think.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

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<sup>1</sup> Study Bible - The New Student Bible(NRSV) “Cyrus *Good Shepherd*” (Augsburg Fortress Minneapolis, 1990) pg 743.

<sup>2</sup> By Debie Thomas. Posted 11 October 2020. “Give to God What Belongs to God” <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>

This emperor, who thinks he is the son of god.

Caesar's head stamped right there on the coin,  
the coin everyone must use to pay taxes,  
an homage to their god.

And, yet, Jesus does not seem phased by this. "Give to the emperor what is the emperor's and give to God what are God's."

Preacher and teacher Scott Hoezee describes this moment,

"When Jesus takes Caesar's coin into his hand and holds it up in front of his bewildered questioners, you can almost see him shrug his shoulders, furrow his brow, and just generally convey the idea, 'What are you talking about? THIS is all you have to ask me about? Who cares? This means nothing! Get a life! And remember that God is still ever and only God and that no human power can dislodge [God], displace [God], or challenge [God's] claims on our hearts and on this world that belongs to [God].' ...

Getting all excited about the powers that be and becoming hyper focused on them tempts us to downplay and underestimate the glorious sovereignty of God."

Who knows us.

With Moses and Cyrus knows your name.

And calls you.

Yes, it would be fabulous not to have to wrestle with  
or struggle with who is doing God's will and who is not.

Yes, if we could see God's glory in all its fullness.

*(pause wishfully)*

God does give us a very good glimpse ... in hindsight ...  
of a God, in all God's glory.

Who loves us so much ...

will do almost anything for us

to know this love and trust it.

Yes, this glory is hidden on the cross for all the world to see. Amen.