Sunday, August 26, 1990
The Return of the Golden Calf
Exodus 32:1-6,15-24

As some of you know, I grew up on a small farm in eastern Missouri, where we had a few beef cattle and a half dozen milk cows, so I know a little bit about calves. I can remember helping my dad as he filled the role of midwife to some of the cows as they were giving birth to their calves.

This sermon, however, is about a different kind of calf — a golden calf. It was made by a man named Aaron, and the story is told in some detail in the book of Exodus in the Old Testament of the Bible. What makes this golden calf especially interesting to us today is that a few weeks ago, a team of Harvard University archaeologists announced that they had found, in their excavations in the ancient port city of Ashkelon, a statue of a calf inside a pottery container.

Rachel Stark, a student volunteer, accidentally made the discovery. She said, “I didn’t realize what I had found.” Those in charge of the excavation did. Harvard’s Lawrence Stager, the director of the project, dates the figurine to about 1550 B.C. Because that is up to several hundred years before Aaron made his golden calf, it might well have been a prototype for the one in the story in Exodus. It also supports the theory that the Israelites took some of their religious practices from other Canaanites.

But how else does the story of the golden calf in the Old Testament concern us? I believe we can find in that story some things that reflect our own image and our own temptations. In other words, today we have our own kind of golden calves.

To better understand this, first let’s look at this golden calf from the point of view of the people who wanted Aaron to make it. They were ordinary people like ourselves. Life had been difficult for most of them. They had been under tyranny and oppression in Egypt and now were free and on their way to a new place to live.

Moses, their main leader, had gone up on the mountain to talk with God and had left his brother Aaron in charge. When Moses had been gone longer than anyone expected, the people said to Aaron—"The God that Moses has been telling us about, and which he claims has led us to freedom, we can no longer trust, so make us a god.”

It is the deepest desire of human beings — to have something to worship; something to trust, something in which we can place our ultimate hopes and fears and loyalties.

There isn’t a person alive who does not, in some way, want a god, something he or she can bow down before, or look up to, or count on, or die for. We either worship the one true God or something less.

Now these people wanted a god they could see and touch. They were not satisfied with abstractions and mystery. They wanted a god they could carry with them, and no doubt they had in their memories the image of the calf that some of their neighboring tribes had worshipped.

We are not so different from these people. We can easily recognize in them one of the elemental desires of humankind, the desire for a god, and for some sort of visual

representation of that god. We all like things we can see and touch. For example, it's easier to worship the flag than to understand the deeper meanings of true patriotism.

These people also forgot something very important — they forgot Moses. They forgot that through Moses, they had seen God. He showed them something about God they had never dreamed of before. He showed them that God was not only in the physical powers with which they were so familiar — the volcano in its eruption, the storm as it shook the earth. Not only in those violent powers of nature was God at work, but God was at work in the daily lives of human beings, in justice among women and men, in righteousness in people's dealings with each other, in movements toward freedom.

That was a completely new glimpse of God, and they had seen it through Moses. He had reminded them that this was the same God of Abraham and Sarah. Later on, people would see even more of a glimpse of God and God's love through the person of Jesus. But they knew, through Moses, that it was the very God of nature and justice that had brought them out of Egypt. But they forgot that!

What short memories we have. So easily we forget the one true God and worship something less. The golden calf is here among us in other forms. We have the god of technology, the god of armaments, the god of prosperity, the god of increasing consumption, and we have our own private and personal golden calves, and we mistakenly believe one or more of these will satisfy us and even save us.

Some of us have gone through dark and dangerous valleys, even the valley of the shadow of death, where we have been up against reality in all its starkness and terror; and there we have met God, the God that Moses and Jesus revealed. We have learned something about the God of life and death. We have entered, for a moment at least, into the mystery of the great God of the universe, and we have seen and felt something of the meaning of life. And then, after a few months or a year or so, once we have emerged from that valley, we forget and go on our way crying out, "Make us a god to go in front of us, a golden calf that shines and glitters and that we can get our hands on," and the golden calf returns.

These people yielded to the greatest of all temptations — they worshipped something less than God. Can you see yourself reflected in that story? It's so tempting and so easy to set up our little golden images, little half-gods, and bow down before them and worship because we want a god that can go before us.

Now let's look at the golden calf from the perspective of the individual who made it — Aaron, the brother of Moses, and see how our image is reflected in him.

He was a very capable man, trusted by Moses, and yet he was the kind of leader who gave in too easily to everyone's requests without thinking through the implications.

So when the people came to him, complaining that Moses had been gone too long, and wondering if he was ever going to come back and wanting another kind of god to worship — he gave in. No doubt he cared about the people. He wanted to do the right thing for them. He understood them in their human weaknesses, and he gave in. You can almost hear him say to himself, "Well, if these people want a golden calf, and if that will make them feel better and quit complaining, why not let them have it?"

Do you know people like that? Have you known parents like that? The child makes a request, and while the parents realize that it is not the best thing for the child, they find it very difficult to say no, and so they tell themselves, “Well, after all, if the child really wants it, why not let the child have it? It certainly won’t do the child any good, but maybe it won’t cause too much harm.” And so they give in.

And then worse still, Aaron did what we all do — he blamed the whole matter on someone else. When Moses came down the mountain and found the people deep in their idolatry, he was very upset. And when Moses confronted his brother with what had happened, Aaron’s reply was a classic. Here’s a paraphrase of what he said:

“You know these people. They are set on mischief. I couldn’t do anything with them. They wouldn’t listen to reason. Don’t be angry with me. It was all their idea. What else could I do?”

Aaron then came up with a second excuse. He blamed the whole incident on the fire. He said, “To keep the peace, I asked the people to bring me all their gold jewelry. So they gave it to me; and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.”

What really happened is told earlier in the story if you listened carefully. When the people asked for a god, Aaron thought of this particular kind of god. After all, the people had seen their Canaanite neighbors worship such a god. So he arranged for it. He made it. He personally engraved it. He even built an altar for it and arranged for a festival in celebration of it. That’s what really happened. But when confronted by Moses, he said, “It was the people’s idea. And I said, let anyone who has gold take it off. So they gave it to me; I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.”

Aaron carefully left out one important fact in the story — his personal responsibility, his own action in it all.

Have you heard others say, or maybe you’ve said it yourself—"What could you expect of me? You know the kind of environment I grew up in; the awful childhood I had. I am the victim of circumstances. What a corrupt society I was brought up in. And then when I was in college, I got into a bad set. When I went into business, I was surrounded by bad influences. When I became rich, people flattered me. When I grew poor, people bullied me. The world has made me what I am — this wicked world.” “I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.” So the poor, wronged, miserable creature looks into your face with his bleary eyes and asks your pity.

The excuses of Aaron are heard everywhere and always. The worst of it is that there is some truth in what Aaron said. I imagine he thought that it really wasn’t his fault, that he was free from blame. He had become so accustomed to playing down to people, to letting nature take its course, to becoming a pawn of circumstance, that when the time came, he was carried along by the drift of circumstance. Once people begin to play down to life, they usually go down themselves. If you don’t stand up to circumstance, you will succumb to it.

What happens is that we often put ourselves into a current that is sweeping on that way, and then lie still and let the current do the rest; and in all such cases, it is so easy to forget the first step, which was that we chose that current for our resting place. Aaron did not have to make the golden calf; he chose to do so.

Have you noticed that most of us are always ready to claim the good deed in which we might have the slightest part, while at the same time, we try to disown the mistakes, the bad

decisions, the sins which are almost entirely our own? There's an old saying that goes, "The person who can smile when he has made a mistake has found someone else to blame it on."

What did Moses do? He took the calf, burned it, ground it into powder, put the powder into water, and made the people drink it. Moses did not play down to people. Thank God there have been women and men in our history who are true leaders, who have not been willing to accommodate themselves to our human needs and desires, but rather help us to own up to our bad decisions and sinful ways.

Jesus never played down to people. He held them accountable and at the same time loved them and forgave them. For example, when Jesus met Zacchaeus, he promised Jesus that he would pay back all the people he had defrauded four times over.

The story of the golden calf then asks two things of us — first, what are some of the false gods in our lives that keep us from the one true God?

Second, if we are to become mature followers of Christ and if we are to experience the joy and peace that comes from that, then we need to be able to admit when we have done wrong and not try to place the blame where it does not belong. It is then that God's love begins to flow freely in and through our lives. Amen.