Sunday, May 24, 1992
BLAMING IT ON THE FIRE
Exodus 32:1-6,15-24

One of my favorite quotations is: “The person who can smile when he or she has made a mistake has found someone else to blame it on.”

For many years, life had been difficult for a group of people known as the Hebrews. They had been under tyranny and oppression in Egypt, some of them slaves. Now, for the first time in their memory, they were free and on their way to a new place to live. They believed Moses when he told them that God had promised them a new land, flowing with milk and honey, and that God would be with them as they went on their way. But fulfilling this dream was taking too long. The journey was arduous. Food and water were scarce. People began to complain that life in Egypt, even under tyranny, was better than living in the desert in freedom.

To make matters worse, Moses, their leader, had gone up on the mountain to talk with God and had left Aaron, his brother, in charge. When Moses had been gone longer than anyone expected, the people became more and more restless. Finally, they said to Aaron, “The God that Moses has been telling us about and which he claims is leading us to a new land, 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 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. Ask yourself, what is the most important thing in your life? In whom or what do you place your trust?

These people in the desert 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 they had in their memories the image of a golden calf that some of their captors in Egypt had worshipped. It seemed to work for the Egyptians, so why not them?

We are not so different from these people as we might think. 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 patriotism.

How easy it was for these people to forget the God that they had experienced with the help of Moses. 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 present, but God was present and at work in the daily lives of human beings and especially through the community of people who were descendants of Abraham and Sarah.

Moses demonstrated to them that God is present in movements for freedom and in those who work for justice. This was a completely new understanding of God.

What short memories they had. It's so easy to forget the one true God and worship something less. So too for us. We have the god of technology, the god of armaments, the god of prosperity, the god of increasing consumption, the god of living in the fast lane, and we mistakenly believe that one or more of these gods will satisfy us and even save us.

While Moses was away, these people yielded to the greatest temptation of all — 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 we can see and touch and manipulate.

Notice also the weakness of Aaron, the leader in charge while Moses was absent. He was the kind of leader who gave in too easily to everyone's requests without thinking through the implications. He governed according to the latest opinion polls.

So when the people came to him, complaining that Moses had been gone too long and that God had forsaken them and that they needed a new god to worship, he gave in. No doubt he cared about the people. His intentions were good. He wanted to do the right thing. He understood them in their human weaknesses, and he gave in. You can almost hear him say to himself and his advisors, "If these people want a golden calf, and if that will make them feel better and quit complaining, if that will give them a positive attitude, why not let them have it?"

Do you know leaders like that? Have you known parents like that? The child makes a request, and while the parents realize that granting the request is not the best thing for the child, they find it difficult to say no, and they tell themselves, "After all, if the child really wants it, why not let her have it? It won't do her any good, but it will stop her complaining." And so they give in.

And then worse still, Aaron did what we all do — he blamed the whole matter on the people and the fire. When Moses came down the mountain and found the people deep in their idolatry, he was angry. 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 the second part of the 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. No one was more surprised than I."

That was his excuse. What really happened is told earlier in the story. When the people complained and asked for a god, Aaron thought of this particular kind of god. After all, the people had seen the Egyptians worship such a god. So Aaron arranged for it. He made it. He personally engraved it. He even built an altar for it and arranged for a festival in its honor. 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 left out the most important fact in the story — his own personal responsibility, his own action in it all. Instead, he blamed it on the people and the fire. "The people gave me their gold, I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf."

Have you heard that before? A young man who has been caught driving his dad's car without permission and without a driver's license said, "The car was there, the keys were in it, and as I was sitting in the driver's seat, the engine started all by itself and what could I do? I had to drive the car."

Or someone who has been caught in an unethical or illegal practice says, "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 went to 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."

Or here is a parent whose child, now an adult, has never done one wise thing or made one good decision. The parent, when the child was growing up, never took any responsibility in helping the child to learn how to make decisions, never gave any guidance of any kind. And now the parent says, "I cannot understand how my child has turned out this way. It is not my fault. I put him into the world, and this came out."

Doesn't this sound similar to the congressional excuses for their overdrafts? "It wasn't my fault. The House Bank had such poor bookkeeping. They didn't keep good records." I wanted to ask: "What about your own personal records? Did you keep any? Did you try to balance your checkbook each month? You knew the bank's bookkeeping records were not what they should be. Did you work at correcting them? Weren't you the members of Congress in charge of the bank?"

The excuses of Aaron are heard everywhere and always. The worst of it is that Aaron actually believed what he 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 give in 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 did not have to put the gold into the fire. 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, our wrong choices, our sloppy ethics and practices? Those we try to blame on someone else or on bad circumstances. So many people refuse to take responsibility for their mistakes and bad choices.

What did Moses do? He took the golden 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 men and women in our history who are true leaders, who have not been willing to accommodate themselves to our lowest and most selfish desires, but rather help us to own up to our bad decisions and sinful ways. Furthermore, a good leader, when he or she has made a mistake or bad decision, does not try to put the blame elsewhere, using such flimsy excuses as "I had bad advice," or "The circumstances were against me."

Jesus never played down to people. He held them accountable and at the same time loved them and forgave them and told them to sin no more. For example, when Jesus met Zacchaeus, he asked Zacchaeus to make restitution, and Zacchaeus promised that he would pay back all the people he had defrauded four times over. He would not let Zacchaeus or anyone else he met get away with the excuse, “I threw it into the fire and out came this calf.”

This story of the golden calf and Aaron’s excuse asks two things of each one of us — first, what are some of the golden calves in our lives, the false gods which divert us away from the one true God?

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