

Burned, Broken, Ground and Washed Away
Elizabeth Communities of Faith Lenten Series 2011
Wednesday, March 16, 2011
Hawthorne Lane United Methodist Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Deuteronomy 9:13-21
Hebrews 3:12-15

On behalf of all the entire congregation of Caldwell church, let me say thank you to our gracious hosts here at Hawthorne Lane. Having hosted this series last year, we at Caldwell have fresh memories of the effort it takes to sustain this series for seven weeks. From the parking lot to the kitchen clean-up after lunch, it takes a team. Thanks to all who are making this happen every week. The partnership among our churches and hospitals is a joy and a blessing that produces more fruit every year. Thanks be to God.

Down the street at Caldwell, our community of faith spent the weeks leading up to Lent considering the Ten Commandments and their role in our twenty-first century lives. Yes, the Decalogue is as familiar as any part of scripture. But we found, I think, how the commandments can express in fresh ways what is timeless in our relationship with God and with each other.

The story we heard a moment ago of how we got the Ten Commandments may seem an unlikely stop on our way to the cross this Lent. But, taken as a whole, the commandments are focused on one central theme; they speak to those things that separate us from God. They name our idols – whether they are false gods, false worship or false relationships or our desire for those things that don't belong to us. Each in their own way, these idols stand between us and God and God's expectations of how we live.

In that sense, then, Lent is very much about our idols – how we name them, claim them and how we dispose of them.

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This story from Deuteronomy is one that often gets overlooked. It does not appear in the original Exodus account of Moses and the commandments. We only learn about it when Moses reflects on those heady days years afterward. As Paul Harvey used to say, it is

“the rest of the story” that often gives us the full meaning. So it is with these verses, which provide a stark reminder of just how attached we are to our idols.

If this were a play, it would break down neatly into three acts. The key is to keep your eye on two things - the calf idol the people make and the tablets God gives Moses. From there everything unfolds.

As we heard, Moses comes down from Mt. Sinai with the Decalogue on two tablets from God. Before he'd even reached the foot of the mountain, he saw they people had revolted, one more time. This time, big time.

The New Revised Standard Version quotes Moses as saying the Israelites had “been quick to turn from the way that the Lord had commanded.” That’s a whopper of an understatement. They had committed the sin of all sins, what one scholar calls a “catastrophic sin.” Rather than at least waiting for Moses to return, they lost trust in the one God and they made a god of their own to worship.

So, if this were a three-act play, Scene One comes to a close with patient Moses, standing between God and the Tablets of the Covenant on one side and the people and their calf idol on the other. Moses smashes the tablets to the ground. The symbolism should not be lost. Moses wasn't just angry. His action signified the stark truth that the covenant between God and the people had itself been broken into bits. The curtain falls on Scene One.

Scene Two opens with Moses alone with God, laying prostrate, perhaps trying to figure out if he can make one more appeal to God on behalf of his woefully wayward, stiff-necked people. The commandment tablets are smashed into pieces, but the calf idol is still whole and getting lots of attention. Forty days and forty nights Moses suffers with neither food nor water. He removes everything that might get between him and God, as Jesus would do in his own days in the wilderness. So we are called to do the same in these days when we seek to walk most closely with God.

Finally, Scene Three of our play brings resolution and reconciliation. Moses fulfills the role of mediator beautifully. He appeals to the tender place in the heart of God, that place of grace that is always there, even when it is overshadowed for a moment by God's justifiable anger with us stiff-necked people. Then comes the shift. Moses destroys the calf idol and God provides a replacement set of commandments, this time to be placed in a special ark for protection.

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What are your idols this lent? What stands in between you and God?

Idols aren't always things we make, like the Hebrews did with the calf. Most often, they are more handy than that.

There is always money or work or alcohol or sex.

Maybe it is an ideology – a way of believing or thinking that makes you infallibly right and others inherently wrong?

Maybe it is the ironic comfort that our fears and anxiety can give us – comfort that keeps us from stepping out in faith and in courage.

It might even be part of our faith – if, consciously or subconsciously, we use faith to separate ourselves from others or to justify one view over many.

Or, as the great preacher of Riverside Church William Sloane Coffin said: “Nothing separates us more from God and our fellow human beings than our grievances. If you want to avoid God, concentrate on money, status, health, but most of all your grievances.”

Coffin is right; idols are those things that make intimacy with God impossible. That's why we create idols, isn't it? To cover our fears and conveniently prevent us from being open and vulnerable with the One who knows us best, the One who has called us by name and counts the hairs on our head.

Today, I invite you to name at least one idol in your life ... and then to do something with it. Did you take note of how Moses destroyed the calf in the story from Deuteronomy? He certainly didn't leave anything to doubt. He burned it. Then he crushed it. Then he ground it thoroughly until it was reduced to dust, which he threw in the stream to be washed away.

However we may spend these 40 days and forty nights of Lent with God, we can only get even a bit closer to our Lord if we name an idol and then do as Moses did – crush it, grind it, burn it and wash it away so that we are clean of it.

In your bulletins today, you should have received a blank note card. I invite you to take a moment, claim an idol that stands between you and the God that loves you. Write it down on the card, keeping the card anonymous. Fold the card if you want keep it private. After we affirm our faith and hear the benediction, you may bring the card

forward to the foot of the cross. Clergy will collect the cards, burn them and reduce them to dust to be washed down a nearby creek.

In closing, here again our New Testament reading for today:

Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today', so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end. As it is said,

'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.'

Amen.