

“What does God look like?” based on Philippians 4:6-9, Exodus 32:1-14

Delivered on October 11, 2020 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

Let me set the scene for you, so we can understand this story today from the book of Exodus. You see, the book starts with the people of God living in the Empire of Egypt. This is the very place that God had brought them to in order to keep them safe. You see, the Lord, YHWH, the God of Israel, made a promise to Abraham, that his descendants – these Israelites – would be a great nation. So, when famine threatened to destroy them, God kept them safe in the plentiful land of Egypt.

But Egypt was never meant to be their home. Eventually, the Hebrew speaking people descended from Jacob seem to have overstayed their welcome in Egypt. The Emperor, or Pharaoh, wants to destroy them – so he makes them serve him, forcing their men to do hard labor, while even trying to kill their children.

But God saves this one guy named Moses to be the people’s representative. Like the Israelites, Moses is protected in the comforts of Empire, raised as a child of the Pharaoh, as an Egyptian elite. But while Moses is representative of the people, his heart burns for justice and even tries to be God. He sees an Israelite being beaten, and kills the Egyptian beating him. Moses now has to run away.

Years later, God then calls Moses and asks him now to represent God to the people of Israel. God has heard the cries of the people, overwhelmed by the Empire’s burdens on them, and the Lord promises to deliver them from bondage in Egypt. Moses goes back to Egypt, and meets up with his brother Aaron and sister Miriam, and they answer the call to try to lead the Israelites out of the Empire and to the promised land.

After 10 plagues, or strikes from God, the last being the death of Egypt’s first born sons, they are set free. Seeing that Israel’s sons were spared, by the blood of the Passover lamb, Pharaoh finally gives up and lets the people go. But this freedom is short lived – Pharaoh chases after them – but God slows the Egyptians down.

You see, the Lord, YHWH, comes down to be a pillar of fire by night and smoke by day, shielding the Israelites as they approached the Red Sea, which God then opened, to make it like a dry land for the people to pass through. And when the Egyptians followed, their chariot wheels got stuck, and the waters that had been held like walls along the path, came crashing down on them, destroying Egypt’s army.

I want to give you this full picture because I want you to imagine being among the people. I want you to imagine following Moses, the one who threatened the Pharaoh of Egypt to the Pharaoh’s face, and not only lived but exposed this Pharaoh and his Empire as false gods. Imagine being a first-hand witness to God’s amazing power and love. But then the first thing the people do when they get out of Egypt and into the wilderness where admittedly, they’re tired, hungry & thirsty, is complain and think they had it better in Egypt.

And so, God hears their cries in the wilderness and addresses their worries and concerns, meeting their needs time and time again. And after three months of wandering, Moses leads

them to a mountain, Mount Sinai. At this mountain, God does something truly incredible – the Lord speaks directly to the people. All that fire and smoke we saw leading them now covers this mountain and God makes a covenant with the people. Here God announces to the people of Israel a foundation of 10 commandments, and an additional 52 more about worship, justice and social order.

The Lord promises that if the people keep these commandments then they'd be treasured, having God's presence with them. They will be Kingdom of priests, the ones who reveal God, for all the world to see. What's interesting here that I want to point out is that Abraham did nothing to deserve or receive God's love and covenant. God even, when making the covenant, was the one who walked through the sacrifice, meaning that if the covenant was broken, God promised to be the one to pay the price. That is God's love.

Likewise, up until this point, Israel also had done absolutely nothing to deserve God's love. Even Moses was a murderer before God called him. Yet, now, they are free from Egypt's bondage and God is finally saying, let's put some conditions on this. They are asked to respond to God's love by keeping these commands. They are even given a choice, to which they said, "We will do it all!"

At this point, there is a verbal agreement from the people to enter into this covenant, and they have even sealed it with a ceremony and consummated it with a sacrifice. The only thing left to do is put the agreement in writing, then build God's house. Moses goes up the mountain to get the details for the house, the long list of descriptions of the tabernacle that is to be built, and to get the commandments in writing by the finger of God. But while the people are waiting for Moses to return, they seem to forget everything.

This is where we get to today's reading, but first, I want to give you a hypothetical. Imagine for a moment, a wedding, because a wedding is our best example of what a covenant is. A wedding is an agreement between two parties, in ancient times two families. By it, the married couple promises they will be faithful to each other – always. Now imagine you are the one who has gotten married, and you have made the agreement, you've had the ceremony, and you have consummated the relationship. All that's left really is for you to move in together, and get the legal documents signed.

Now, imagine that you go off to get a house and get the legal documents completed, and while you are gone, your husband or wife immediately has an affair. Their only excuse is, "well, I wasn't sure if you were coming back." This is essentially what, at first glance, it looks happened here with the Israelites. Moses goes up to make everything official and they get worried and cheat.

Now, to understand this fully, I want to again show you something about translation. Our reading today translated the word 'Elohim' in Hebrew as 'gods' which is correct. Elohim is plural for El – the word for God – but Hebrew has no capital letters. So, with some words, when you want to make it a proper noun, the Hebrew language makes them plural. When you make it plural, you can only tell by context if it should be translated as 'gods' or 'God.' But context

here is difficult, because there's this golden calf, and no one wants to give it the proper name 'God.' So, it's often then just translated in the lowercase plural.

Yet, then again, only one calf is made, and Aaron refers to the calf as 'The Lord' which is the name of God – when we see LORD in all capitals in our bible, that is the name of God, YHWH. And if we look at this story through what Psalm 106 says about it, then we see that the Psalmist confesses and repents of the sins of their ancestors saying they traded the glory of God for this image of a calf. And if we look forward to what happens in the Northern Kingdom further on in the story of God's people, we see that the people there used a calf to represent God too.

You see, the God of Israel was unique in that time and place to be a God that did not require a physical image. The God of Israel even demanded not to be made into one. At the moment they make the calf, they have heard the commandment against graven images and they can still see the cloud and lightning and fire on the mountain. They can see it. However, the people do not seem to see this as a representation of God, and are only concerned about Moses.

I believe the people here saw Moses as their idol, as a physical representation of God, and with him gone, they were desperate to be like all the other nations, as they made a false god, but gave it the name of the true God. In our wedding analogy, it's as if your spouse cheated on you, but called the person they cheated with by your name, believing this meant they were still faithful to you.

This is all well and good, you may be saying right now, but what does this have to do with me? Well, I want you to ask yourself a question: "What does God look like?" How do you ponder the image of God in your life? What is God like to you? Now, we know better than to make God into a golden calf and call it God, but I think it is easy for us to mold God into images of our choosing or ideas of our own choosing, ideologies of our own choosing.

For some, God is an angry destroyer looking for reasons to punish and kill. For others, God is weak and bends to our human whims, whatever people want. For others, God is a storehouse of goods to gain. But for you, what image do you cast God into to perhaps worship as though it is really God?

In our divisive age, I believe often ideologies become the image of God in our minds. For us, this really means that God must fit the molds we have for our political party or the economic system of our choice, or our philosophical viewpoint, or culture. So, then what happens is if we see someone in a different category, we see them as having a different god and that may be so, because a golden calf is being worshiped.

Friends, the image of God in this story is not the calf, and it is none of the ones we make. No, the image of God is the description that God makes at the end of this story, beyond what we read today, when all of this incident is resolved: "The LORD, the LORD God, is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in chesed which is, lovingkindness, steadfast love, covenantal faithfulness, or loving devotion and faithfulness, maintaining that chesed to a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin. Yet, God will by no means leave the guilty unpunished."

It's tough to deal with because here we have this loving God on one side, and then a realization that justice requires there be consequences. So we see God in the portion we read today, seeing that the people have no ability to keep the covenant they just agreed to. God reveals for Moses the struggle that is within God's very nature, that sin is God's enemy and God wants to destroy it and get rid of it. But death is also God's enemy that God also wants to destroy and get rid of.

God offers to let Moses be the new Abraham, a new father of a nation. But Moses reminds God of the promise made to Abraham, not to Moses, and the message it would send to the world if God relented on that promise. For, God's promise was not only to Abraham's children, but to redeem the whole world through them.

So, what we see here is not God changing God's mind – the Hebrew word here is more like 'relented' – but God turning away from the impulse to go back on God's word, what was promised. The Lord does not destroy the people of Israel and start a new people with Moses, but keeps the covenant, repairs it, knowing that they will fail again. Moses instead punishes the wicked for leading the people astray, and then goes back to God, hoping to make atonement. But Moses cannot do this. God alone makes atonement possible and did so in the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Yet, at that moment God remains faithful to the people of Israel, preserving them to fulfill their role, in the person and work of Jesus. Friends, that is the good news. Jesus is 'God with us.' In Jesus, God entered into our humanity, shared in what it means to be one of us, as an actual biological descendant of Abraham, to live, die and rise again so that we might share in God's life, which is abundant and eternal.

It's easy, I think, to judge the Israelites for their Finding Dory type memory, in one ear and out the other. But today, you have heard the good news of Jesus Christ that God is with you, and yet, every one of us will sin today. We will fail to love God with all that we have and love our neighbors as ourselves. We will know God's goodness and still sin.

But God is faithful to us and does not want us to remain in those sins, because sin is God's enemy and death is God's enemy too. So, God has conquered sin and death through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's why the Apostle Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone." The first response he calls us to have upon rejoicing, is for our gentleness to be known. That is how God handles us, mercifully and compassionately.

"The Lord is near." God is with us. That is the good news. God is with you right now by the Holy Spirit in the believer and in this church, with the church universal throughout the world. That is so much what the story of God is about. In the Garden of Eden, God is present with the people, but the people turn from God. So, God becomes present to Abraham and tells him that through him, God will be present to the whole world.

So, to the Israelites, God is present on that mountain and even after the golden calf incident, God will come down again to be present in the tabernacle, atop the Ark of the Covenant, which later becomes the temple, and God's presence will be there. But the people continue to turn their back on God. So, finally, God's presence comes down in the true temple, the Lord Jesus,

and God lives among us and by His death and resurrection, we are all made to house God's Holy Spirit, until a time when God will make all things new and dwell with us, as it was in the beginning.

That's the good news. That's the exciting thing we hold on to. It's all about God's presence. This is why we pray for God's presence, to be aware of it, to feel it, to know it, and to call it to be with us. This is the heart of the good news, at the heart of scripture. This is at the heart of what it means to be a believer.

Let's not make God into something we want, but instead see God for who God is – demanding, but loving, gentle, with those who hurt him most, and strong enough to lead with love and compassion, rather than pain, sin and death. This world is broken, but we each can be a part of God's reconciliation, knowing that love in our hearts, and sharing that abounding steadfast love with all whom we meet. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in *bold italics*

(Exodus 32:1-14 NRSV) When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the *mountain*, the people *gathered* around *Aaron*, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the *man* who *brought* us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." Aaron said to them, "Take off the *gold* rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the *people* took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, *formed* it in a *mold*, and cast an image of a *calf*; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an *altar* before it; and Aaron *made proclamation* and said, "*Tomorrow* shall be a *festival* to the LORD." They *rose* early the next *day*, and *offered* burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people *sat* down to *eat* and *drink*, and rose up to *revel*. The *LORD* said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have *acted* perversely; they have been *quick* to turn aside from the way that I *commanded* them; they have *cast* for themselves an *image* of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O *Israel*, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" The LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how *stiff-necked* they are. Now 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." But Moses implored the LORD his *God*, and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn *hot* against your people, whom you brought out of the land of *Egypt* with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? *Turn* from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not *bring* disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this *land* that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.