

# A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson

“Wilderness Idol”

Exodus 32:1-14

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There were several things you could count on seeing on TV when I was growing up. Annual televised rituals.

Once a year, they would show “The Wizard of Oz” and “Psycho.” I’d like to see a movie with the Wicked Witch vs. Norman Bates.

You’d always see “Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer” at Christmas.

And at Easter, “The 10 Commandments,”

Starring Charlton Heston as Moses.

So... if you grew up when I did, you have these Hollywood images of this scene. Everyone partying down below, dancing and frolicking around the calf Aaron had made... until Heston arrives bearing the two tablets which he hurls towards the idol destroying both the commandments and calf... and bringing the party to an abrupt end.

It’s a very dramatic and memorable scene...violent...

And while some of it disturbs our New Testament sensibilities... It’s a very good story and a story, which needs to be heard on this day of celebration and remembrance.

God, I think, behaves strangely in this story. You have this dramatic exit from Egypt and rather than making a B-line for the Promised Land and all the milk and honey, God takes them out into the desert.

This is not good strategy. You have a vulnerable nation... unorganized, not used to governing themselves, lots of potential chaos and ideally, you want to get them settled and get the economy going. Get the national mood up, if you know what I mean. Draft a constitution.

God, it seems, has some other priorities. Apparently God knows the journey is as important as the destination and that Promised Lands require some maturing on our part, so they are led out further into this desolate place to this mountain.

Their God appears to be a kind of smoky, fiery, frightening presence. Again, that doesn’t seem like such good strategy... Bring folks out into the desert and scare the bejeebers out of them. But... that’s what God does first which means, I guess, that’s what God wants for them and from them first is awe.

I’d want them to be comfortable, had I just liberated them. **“Great to see all of you. Welcome to my mountain... Hey, my mountain’s, your mountain. Is there anything I can get for you... anything at all?”**

**A plate full of meaning?**

**A warm cup of self-esteem?**

**Or just a big diving hug?**

**I just hate the way mean ole’ Pharaoh treated you and if you need anything... I’m here for you... I’m your man... uh... God.”**

God doesn’t do that... God keeps a mysterious distance and is saying clearly, **“Get this straight from the beginning, I am not easily handled. In fact, don’t think you can grab hold of me. I am a great mystery and that’s where we begin.”**

Before they get a faith, literally, carved in stone, they get mystery. As we will... It's a mystery... deal with it.

But at least they have Moses, right? Well, they did up until this story. They didn't really know Yahweh... couldn't see Him... or handle Him. But Moses seems to be His go-to guy. And he had that staff... and he had that face of his that would be all aglow after a one-on-one with God. So, at least they had Moses...

But not anymore. And again... bad strategy. God hid the pacifier. You know how parents do eventually when they know it's time for the kid to give up that object of security... they hide it... or try to. They want the child to develop internally so that he can soothe and calm himself without a blanket or binkey.

Moses has been the pacifier...

the intermediate...

the conduit of God's guidance and power and presence.

And God takes him away... up on the mountain for 40 days and 40 nights, of course. And here's the thing, according to the proceeding chapters, God is dictating some pretty mundane things. They already had the Ten Commandments. It's not like God was up there debating with the heavenly host about amending them.

**“Oh I don't know, maybe we should include that one about not having church on Sunday night.”**

That's not happening, God is going through details with Moses. God goes on and on... 'bout this and that. How big to make the tabernacle... how the priests should dress right down to their linen ephod underwear. On it goes... how to burn incense... again, very mundane stuff. Stuff that could have been handled by his assistant, Joshua.

I'm thinking, **“Let's get Moses back down the mountain ASAP, because we know how people can be when they're left alone.”** This is like leaving a bunch of 7<sup>th</sup> grade boys unsupervised in the camp dorm... good will not come of this, trust me.

Get Moses back down the hill.

But God keeps him, 40 days and 40 nights. He withdraws the conduit of connection. Because...that's what God does. This is the way God seems to work... And it's a back and forthness. Dramatic presence... absence.

Great power... now vulnerability.

Consolation... and withdrawal of consolation.

Have you noticed that in your journey with God yet? How quickly the feeling can fade? How something once so meaningful can appear mundane? The spiritual fathers tell us that this is the way. God gives us gifts...

Feelings... security... meaning... things we need.

Relationships... community... callings... gifts of goodness.

People... leaders like Moses.

And in time... when we're ready... like a parent pulling a pacifier... it's gone. The Father's called it “withdrawing the consolations.” Of course... God needs our hunger and our longing in order to lead us deeper.

Why would you learn to pray intimately with God if your marriage was perfect?

Why would you read about spiritual paths and truths if your career was completely fulfilling?

Why would you contemplate the great mystery if what could be crocheted on a bookmark and sold in a bookstore was enough. We don't like this part, do we? We love it when God makes us feel good.

Richard Rohr says, **“the last experience with God is frequently the greatest obstacle to the next.”** Cuz we aren't letting them go. God knows this...so...

God withdraws, at some point, what has been the channel. That's the way God pulls us further. You get the high at camp... sing Pass It On... get all teary when your 14 but go back at 17 and see if it's not quite enough.

The mystics loved Song of Solomon... where the lover would knock on the door... pretend he was about to enter the room and so the passion could begin. His beloved would go to the door and the lover would have disappeared. And she goes out of her chambers-her confines-and goes out into the nights and wanders the streets, "**Anybody seen my lover?**"

Moses stays gone because the people must go looking for God... for themselves.

But they don't, do they...

they can't stand the anxiety...

the not knowing.

And just like that, they turn to idolatry. Got to have something to remove the anxiety. Got to get things formed up again. When God seems absent we are at the threshold of something good or bad, depending on what we do with it. Can we wait... bear it? They couldn't... didn't. They are still slaves... slaves to their own anxiety and dependence.

They make this calf and notice that it's made from the gold God told them to take from Egypt. That's interesting. The idol is constructed from something God had given them... something God had blessed. Idols are typically that way. Good stuff elevated to the best stuff. Some gift glorified in an inappropriate way.

In this story, gold which might have come in handy in the Land of the Hittites... gets wasted on some ole' time religion. This was one of the gods from Egypt.

And they look so silly with it... jumping around. It's so ridiculous.

Our idol making is typically more sophisticated and our idols are harder to spot. But like these lovers of the golden calf, our idols are usually made from the gifts God has given us.

We're given some talent... a skill, perhaps... an ability. And we trust in it. "**It will bring me what I need.**" The gift gets mistaken for the Giver.

We're in some relationship... and it brings us such joy... Does it? Or is joy a gift from God that is being channeled at this moment through this person.

It's very subtle what we're worshipping in place of the One True Mysterious God... all sorts of gifts being seen as the Giver.

The Bible... a teacher... an experience...

The Doctrines we believe...

Our ability to believe them...

Gregory of Nyssa said that, "**Every concept formed by the intellect in an attempt to comprehend and circumscribed the divine nature can succeed only in fashioning an idol, not in making God known.**"

Our ideas can be idols...our conceptions... our convictions... our righteous issues...

Anything can be idolized and I'll guarantee you... you have some golden calves in your life. And they'll be betrayed... just start paying attention to your feelings.

What makes you jealous?

When do you get anxious... afraid?

Whom do you resent?

Are you angry?

There's a chance some idol has been shaped up from some gift God gave you and it's not saving you like you want it to... because it can't, of course... and your life, your God, is trying to make that clear to you.

Which is what happens here in our story. Moses comes back down the mountain and confronts the idolatry. And there's such a resistance to seeing it. Once an idol is in place it's hard to know it as one.

They'd created a false story. **"This is our god who lead us out of Egypt."** They can't see what's real. They aren't awake at all.

Later Moses confronts Aaron and it's just too funny.

**"Aaron what were you thinking?"**

**"Well, you know how mean these folks can be... they made me do it... They brought me this gold... I threw it in the fire and out popped this calf. Just like magic. (Yeah, that's the ticket...it jumped out of the fire.)"**

Aaron can't own his idolatry to the point of sounding like a 3 year old caught with a hand in the cookie jar. And we laugh, not just at him but also with him. It's just so hard to see and hard to own... all of what we're looking to, to make us whole. All that we've fashioned because God is too mysterious and we'd rather have something handy and easy.

I said at the beginning that this is an important story for a church celebrating a 12<sup>th</sup> anniversary and looking forward to the future.

It's important because it's been my experience that churches make really good golden calves. They've been such gifts to us... conduits and bearers of great meaning and of such care. God has knocked on the door of many of our hearts through this church. We have much to be thankful for today and celebrate...

But we'd better not confuse gift and giver.

And even more important... we'd better not sing the praises of a church. If God uses a community, then thanks be to God. There is never a call to say, **"Yeah us... look at what we've done... Aren't we unique... sacred and simple and just right?"** Whatever part we've played is pretty small potatoes.

And if you've been blessed, remember who was the blesser. And don't be surprised if someday you find yourself saying, **"It's just not the same."** It will happen and when it does... lift up your heart and open your eyes... God is about to lead you deeper.

If my sermons get boring... good... you're growing.

If Kurt's playing doesn't always put a lump in your throat, don't assume something is wrong.

If the fellowship isn't as sweet... don't panic... don't idolize the community... Maybe God's about to call you beyond your own needs for friendship and feeling.

This is a very important story... not only as we put ourselves in the anxious and idolatrous sandals of those waiting at Mt. Sinai... but also as we think about all who'll be coming our way in the future. There are so many folks wandering in the desert and what they need is God.

They need to see a community reverent before a mystery.

Struggling with the deepest questions about God.

Communicating something vast and comprehensive, proclaiming the gospel...

Big enough for their lives...

Big enough for the pain, the wonder,

and the journey they've known.

What a great and wonderful calling we have...and I look forward to being faithful to it with you in the coming year.

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