
Tainted Love

Exodus 32:1-20

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on October 9, 2011 by the Rev. Meghan Feldmeyer

We all love a good love story. Especially if it contains a bit of drama, suspense, and betrayal. And while Exodus may not be the first book you think of in the genre of romantic novels...it is a love story. One of the really great ones. It is a story of the God, Yahweh, who casts the whole of his heart in the direction of the Israelites...it is a story of how God courts and woos and loves this wayward people into being. It is a story that includes drama, suspense, and betrayal. And this is betrayal of the worst kind. In Genesis with Adam and Eve, the eating of the apple comes to signify the fall of humanity. In Exodus, the story of golden calf signifies the fall of God's chosen people. And boy, do they fall hard. This fall seems all the worse because it comes after God has done so much for his people. This fall isn't one of ignorant curiosity. It is a fall of deliberate rejection.

Exodus opens by telling us that God's beloved people were suffering under the bitter and ruthless rule of Egypt's Pharaoh. God is in love with the Israelites. Radically, wildly in love. He yearns for them to be free and he is willing to go to the ends of the earth on behalf of his beloved. God calls Moses to set his plan of rescue and redemption in motion. God wages a fierce battle with Pharaoh to rescue the Israelites from slavery through a multitude of plagues. He then leads the Israelites through the Red Sea, where all the remnants of their past...all that held them in slavery and bondage was literally drowned. God becomes a steady presence and provider in the wilderness. In their journey to the promised land, the people of Israel are transformed...their unwanted bondage to Pharaoh in Egypt becomes a voluntary and joyous bonding to God. The chosen people of God say goodbye to a bitter past of slavery, and greet a future of freedom unfolding before them. It is quite the love story. The stuff of movies.

At this point, the Israelites are consecrated to God. This ceremony happens at the foot of Mt. Sinai, and not without a bit of pomp and circumstance...smoke and lightning and thunder and trumpet. God has asked for Israel's hand, and Israel has accepted the proposal. God sets out the framework of the relationship by gifting the Israelites with the law...clearly the ultimate covenant gift! God knows the Israelites, and loves them, and desires their utmost good. The law is the gift of order, breathed into chaos. It is a gift of common goals and parameters, offered to a community to allow them to live in peace and freedom. And this is architected with love and care, with all of God's hopes and dreams poured into it. The law is how Israel will be set apart in the world and how Israel can truly flourish. An ancient rabbinic text says, "tremble with joy" when you are "about to fulfill a commandment." For God's people, this law isn't a prison...it is their joy. Scripture tells us the people heard the law and answered with one voice, "All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do!" (Exodus 24:3b)

So with this resounding approval, God takes Moses with him to the top of Sinai to forge the symbol of the covenant...all that has been relayed at the bottom of the mountain will be solidified at the peak. This will basically set the covenant in stone... or "seal the deal" as we say. The law is like a wedding band, set as the outward and visible sign of this divine covenant relationship. The tablets of stone written in God's hand are powerful symbols of God's love and devotion to Israel.

But meanwhile, back in the valley, the Israelites are growing restless. They are getting impatient. We can suppose danger in the air, because the Israelites are in a valley. And valleys are not known for their awesomeness in the Bible. There is the valley of the shadow of death. And the valley of dry bones. And now this Exodus valley, where the Israelites are on the edge of apostasy. This is the very same valley where they'd been given the law. The same valley where they'd felt God's thunderous presence. The law had been road tested in the valley and on the mountain...it is tried and true. But, the people were weak. And the valley's shadows overwhelm.

This is a moment of dramatic suspense...God on the mountain lovingly fashioning words of his love and commitment in the wedding contract. The Israelites are in the valley, feeling abandoned and a little bit fickle.

They need God. And their yearning for a god that was a tangible presence grows so great that they decided to fashion a god for themselves. This is a god that they could shape and manipulate. This is a god they can touch and see and feel.

And so the Israelites gather their gold. But there is more to be said about this particular gold. This is gold that has been plundered from Egypt. Egypt...the place they'd just left behind. It is the gold of those who enslaved them. Making a god out of *this* gold...it is a slap in God's face. It is a return to worshiping the things that held them captive...the gold of a tarnished and awful past. It is like going back to an abusive ex. What do you say to someone who goes back to a destructive relationship? It is agonizing to watch. Israel, is this really what you think you are worth? Do you not know that you could flourish? Is your memory so short? Is your imagination so clouded? Is your perseverance so diminished? Do you not remember all that God has done for you?

But the Israelites aren't asking such questions. They erect a golden calf, and in this they definitively reject God. The Psalmist says, "they traded the *glory of God* for an ox that eats grass." The covenant between God and Israel is on the edge of collapse. This is betrayal. It is the kind of betrayal that when discovered makes you sick in the stomach. The kind of betrayal that makes your whole body go numb. God's radical and wild love is cast aside for nothing but a silly gold statue. Israel had *everything* with God, and they gave it all up for a false god and a false story. They have gone from slavery in Egypt, to freedom and liberation through God, right back to a slavery of their own making.

How could anyone do such a thing? It's horrifying. Until you realize we each do it. All the time. I wonder if you've ever been like the Israelites? Have you ever poured your hopes and dreams into someone or something that was, in the end, not worthy of your heart? Have you ever chased after something that seemingly had luster and beauty? And has that thing of beauty ever twisted in front of your eyes to represent only your failures, your betrayals, your utter stupidity? Have you ever hurt someone you loved and struggled to live with yourself? Have you ever known regret or shame so profoundly that you can feel it in your body?

But, this story isn't about how we betray each other. Or how we've been betrayed. *It is about how we betray God.*

We may scoff at the Israelites, because we don't have golden calves on our mantles. But we do have golden calves in our lives. We cast false idols. We put our hopes and dreams into silly and stupid things. We regularly discard God's love and care. We bristle against God, and we think we know the way to freedom, but we routinely choose deeper slavery instead. We, with the Israelites, try to shape and mold and manipulate God into being who we want God to be. And usually we want a God who will revel and dance around *us*. We may have a thousand excuses for our behavior, but ultimately no real reason. What excuse can we possibly architect that justifies tossing aside the gracious and unmerited love of the Creator of the universe? Our daily betrayals are no less sickening...no less perplexing...no less heartbreaking to God.

But however much heart-searching we may be drawn into, the fact is, the breach is made. Is there any possible way back? Is everything lost with God once we have betrayed the covenant so utterly? A very real question emerges at this point: what is to be done about this breach? How can it possibly be mended? The children of Israel have abandoned the covenant, and really...God had every right to obliterate them. Two books into the Bible and, boom, it looks like it is finished. Let's start over with a new people. All of Moses' life had been shaped around this covenant, this people...he had lived for this moment, and it is falling apart around him. What possibly is to be done when you are this grieved? This furious? This sickened by betrayal? How on earth can this relationship be resolved or reconciled?

Let's look at what happens in the book of Exodus. Let's examine what happens back in that valley. When Moses comes down from the mountain and sees the revelry around the golden calf first hand, he becomes righteously enraged. Moses hasn't just heard about the betrayal... he's actually walked in on it. Moses casts down the tablets of the law that had been engraved by God's heart and hand, further signifying the utter brokenness of the covenant.

Then it says Moses “took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.” This is a rather curious ritual. I wonder what drinking gold ash would taste like? But it’s as if Moses is saying, “look people, we can’t just gloss over this and pretend it didn’t happen. We can’t just throw the calf out with the bath water. This is a profound betrayal. You have tainted all the love God has poured into you. You need to face it. You need to taste its bitterness. You need to ingest this repentance. This food will mark you, become part of you, part of your story, part of your redemption.

This ritual may even seem a bit sinister. Unless you think of your own golden calf moments. Do those golden calves symbolize the worst failings and decisions of your life? Do those golden calves remind you of past shame or disappointment? Can you understand the longing for all that inadequacy and failure and regret to be burned with fire and ground into power? Can you understand the hope that all those remnants of your past disobedience and ignorance might be utterly obliterated in the same powerful and symbolic way? That with the burning destruction of the golden calf, all lingering sadness and betrayal could be purged and purified?

The golden calf is destroyed, but the pattern of failure and betrayal by the people of God isn’t destroyed. There is a sense of impending doom as the tension between God’s love and humanity’s betrayals continue. This is a tragic pattern that plays itself over and over again in the Bible. The question remains: how does the covenant survive when God’s love for his people is still there, but the trust is gone?

Fortunately, our story doesn’t end in that valley. Because we believe that God’s law was made incarnate again. We believe the shattered tablets are restored. Jesus embodies the law, with all God’s love and hopes and dreams for humanity poured in. Jesus transforms and completes the law so that we might have life, and have it abundantly. Jesus became flesh for our joy and our flourishing. Maybe Jesus is a sign that God recognized the Israelites really did need a God they could see and touch and feel. Jesus is a sign that the covenant God made with Israel is ultimately something that God will not let go.

But the law isn’t all that Jesus embodies in the incarnation. Jesus also embodies the golden calf. Jesus bears all our false projections, manipulations, failures, and betrayals. Jesus takes on all our disobedience, and rebellion, and false idolatries. Jesus invites on himself the worst parts of ourselves...all our excuses and fickleness and our routine return to things that enslave us.

And like the golden calf, Jesus is obliterated, crushed, and ruined. Jesus is trampled and destroyed by our sin. Jesus is broken and burned and ground into ash.

And Christians have our own curious ritual. A ritual of body and blood being consumed. The ashes of Jesus’ obliterated life, absorbed into our own being. We are the poor and needy who come to the gospel feast, in penitence and grief, as we acknowledge of all our sins and failures. But this scattered meal isn’t a meal of bitterness or pain. It is a meal of hope. It is a meal of life. It is a meal made up of the destroyed body and spilled blood of the covenant. This is a God we can touch and see and feel. This is a food that marks us, becomes part of us, part of our story, part of our redemption.

What would it be like if all the shattered parts of your life—every betrayal, every failure, every regret could be transformed into something beautiful? What if every awful broken promise and every dreadful small mistake could contain the fruit of your redemption? That in sharing in Christ’s body and blood, all the bitter ashes that signify your every failure instead lead to your conversion, your transformation? This is God, fragmented and demolished, yearning to come to life in you. This is the promised land. Can you feel the wonder and joy? Can you feel it in your bones, how beautiful it is to be so beloved by God? Say goodbye to your bitter past, and greet the future of freedom unfolding before you. This is a cosmic love story of the best kind. You are not bound by the betrayals and disappointments of your past. You are being transformed. You have been made free.