

(A)PENT19:pr23@GS new

By this time in our hearing of the Old Testament lessons from the book of Exodus, we and the Israelites are well on our way to the Promised Land pledged to us by God. Recapping the action thus far, we have

- Seen Moses encounter God in the form of a burning bush
- Experienced the Passover Meal along with the captive Israelites in Egypt
- Fled with Moses and the people to the Red Sea in which the pursuing Egyptians drowned when God parted the waters
- Wandered in the wilderness as the Israelites again bitterly complained about hunger and God answered them by raining down manna from heaven
- Heard the Israelites complain again about the dryness of the desert, whereupon, at God's command, Moses produced water from a rock
- Accompanied Moses to the Mountain Top to receive the Ten Commandments from God

So, things have been going fairly well, always with God's help of course, right? Well, today's reading tells us a familiar Bible story that shows us things going haywire in a spectacular way. Moses is still up on the Mountain talking with God and receiving the Ten Commandments. Meanwhile, down in the camp, the people have gone from murmuring to outright rebellion because they think God and Moses have abandoned them, leaving them with no one or nothing to worship.

Aaron, the second command, in an extremely unwise move, helps the Israelites create a new God, a flashy Golden Calf. The Israelites joyfully worship the calf and celebrate its arrival with much eating, drinking and revelry. God is not happy at the people turning away from the God who has rescued them so many times, often from their own folly. Furious, God swears to doom the people at last--but not quite all of them because God says to Moses *“of you [and your household]I will make a great nation.”*

Seizing on this tiny glimmer of hope, Moses begins to plead with God to save the Israelites, God’s own people. Moses plays on God’s own might in having saved the Israelites, on God’s many past kindnesses, and on God’s own sense of personal honor in regard to keeping promises, like those previously made to Moses and the stubborn people he commanded Moses to lead. Wonder of wonders, Moses’ heartfelt pleading convinces God to relent! The narrator goes on to pen one of the most remarkable sentences in the Bible:

“And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster he planned to bring on the people.”

Once again, a gracious God deigns to save the Israelites, proving they truly are God’s people, no matter what may befall them on their way to the Promised Land.

At this point, we could spend a lot time reflecting on what Golden Calves draw us away from God in our own lives, as well. The list of is endless, of course. There are literal things like McMansions, growing bank accounts, and racy sports cars. Non-material concerns about our family, friends, friends, neighbors and community can also make up a large part of the list. Even the weather that surrounds us, be it natural or political, can take on the characteristics of a dazzling, inviting Golden Calf.

Looking beyond the Golden Calf in Exodus or in our own lives, however, we can discern something else is going on in this lesson. God graciously desires a real, lasting relationship with the people of Israel. God is doing God's part, but, other than Moses and Aaron, the Israelites are not doing their part. Perhaps they have been enslaved for so long that their trust and love of God have died within their hearts. Perhaps they are suspicious that anyone, even God, could love them. Perhaps they are too immature as a fledgling nation to humbly receive the love God is offering. Although they finally do turn away from the Golden Calf, we will see them in Exodus readings yet to come their grumbling and murmuring against God and Moses does not stop. It continues for a long, long time. Let's just leave them to their own devices for a while as they struggle to grow into a mature relationship with God.

Let's move ahead many centuries to the Gospel of Matthew, where we hear Jesus tell a parable about the heaven being like a king who has a sumptuous wedding banquet to which those who are invited foolishly fail to attend. These non-attendees not only respond with lame, made-up excuses; they also attack the slaves bearing the invitations. The outraged king retaliates by destroying the ingrates and their cities. Then the king rounds up a group of willing invitees, all sorts and conditions of persons. And the wedding banquet takes place after all.

One way of looking at Jesus' parable is taking it very literally as a helpful Bible story, one of the many we already know. The king and the guests and the slaves can be for us people who are caught up in a very awkward social situation, one we can easily identify with.

Knowing Jesus doesn't tell simple Bible stories, though, leads us to see this parable in different way. We can see it as an allegory where the King is God; the son is Jesus himself; the wedding banquet celebrates the union of Jesus the bridegroom and his bride (the church) and the guests, both the doomed and the saved, are us.

Seen in this way, we discover that, though God can be angered, God does not vengefully retaliate. God is willing to save those who respond in a positive way. God's gracious willingness to give them (and us) a second chance shows us the early relationship between God and the people of God described in Exodus has evolved into a solid one based on God's steadfast love and trust. We also see that in this parable Jesus calls us to continue to honor this relationship by continuing to live into and out of God's gracious, loving invitation.

Knowing this, the puzzling last part of the parable having to do with a particular wedding guest not having the proper wedding garment becomes less confusing. Bible scholars agree that this allegorical image of unpreparedness does not have to do with a matter of fashion but rather the people of God always being alert and ready to respond to God's love and call. We remember that Jesus used the same image of being ready in another parable, the one about the wise and foolish virgins having or not having their lamps lit at the right time. The bottom line from Jesus is: be ready!

Exodus and Matthew's Gospel portray people journeying toward a goal of some sort. For the Israelites, it was the Promised Land; for we who are "wedding guests" it's a deep, continuing relationship with a loving God, which we can see as another promised land of sorts.

Perhaps what all of us, in ancient and contemporary times, are seeking with all of our heart is a promised land is a place where there is peace, however we define it.

This longed-for place of peace is what Paul describes as he writes to the Philippians:

“The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. KEEP ON DOING THE THINGS that you have received and heard and seen in me [and in Christ] and the God of peace will be with you.”

May we find peace in our receiving and doing today and always in our relationship with God and with each other.

AMEN.

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