

Sermon: You Cannot Serve Both God and Mummy: Pharaoh Hunger and the Draw of a Golden-Calf Spirituality (Exodus 32:1-35)¹

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Their little eyes widened as they pressed their faces to the glass. The room was dark, except for a single light shining on the shriveled corpse in front of them. There the thing was, mouth open, eyes still and dead. Their voices quivered as they asked two questions. The first, “Dad, what is it?” I replied, “She’s a mummy.” The second, “Dad can we go now?”

We walked out the doors of the room—the museum here on the campus of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. It was late on a Friday night, after a new student orientation event and I was walking back to my office with my two six year-old sons. Benjamin asked a third set of questions, with his voice cracking: “Dad, why do you have a mummy at your work? Aren’t you scared to be here?”

I reassured them that, of course, I wasn’t scared. Mummies aren’t real—at least, not real in the way we’re accustomed to seeing them in the black-and-white horror films. Mummies are dead. They can’t hurt anyone. Despite the fact that these boys kept looking over their shoulders, I told them, “One can’t be chased by a mummy.”

But is that entirely true?

The text in front of us is a very familiar passage to those of us who’ve followed Christ for any length of time. The people of Israel are dancing around a golden

calf. We instinctively know this is wrong. We know this is idolatry. We know it kindles the anger of Israel’s God. What we miss is that this is no one-time incident. Instead, the entire Bible points back to this incident—repeatedly—as a paradigm of rebellion.

This act of worshipping a cow is exactly what the Apostle Paul tells us is true of all people in all places everywhere—a pattern of turning away from the Creator and toward the creature, even to the image of a beast (Rom 1:18-25).

The horror of this account is even worse than the brute fact of idolatry. Our brother Stephen, right before he was pelted to death with rocks, preaches something very interesting about this incident. He says that even after Israel had seen God’s work on their behalf—in the defeat of Pharaoh and the deliverance from the Egyptian empire—the people of Israel turned their back on God’s prophet Moses. They, Stephen preaches, “thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned back to Egypt” (Acts 7:39).

When the Israelites dance before this thing, they are doing more than simply rebelling against their God. They are becoming affectionally Egyptian—again.

The Israelites complain to Moses, asking if he had brought them out to the wilderness to kill them. They recall how

Pharaoh had given them food and springs of water. And when Moses is gone for a while, they remember something else Pharaoh had given them: visible gods.

There are very few people in Christian churches who have ever danced in worship around a cow statue. But the Scripture warns us that our forefathers and foremothers weren't especially aberrant. There remains before all of us, everywhere, a pull toward a golden calf spirituality. Israel was delivered from slavery—and so were we. The Pharaoh hunger that led them to disaster is persistent in our own lives and ministries. If we're not careful we'll find ourselves—like them—longing for the power of a mummy.

The Pull to a Christless God

When Moses goes up to the mountain to pray before Israel's God, the people gather around Aaron to negotiate with him. One can hear even in the way they are speaking a profound ingratitude. "Up," they say to Aaron, "And make us gods 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" (Exod 32:1).

Moses? Was it Moses who brought them up out of the land of Egypt? It was Yahweh who poured out the plagues, who split the seas, who drowned the army. The people though speak as though it were by the power of the flesh that they were delivered. God turns this same language back toward Moses when he says, "*Your* people, whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt" (Exod 32:7). In there is an indictment. These people don't see themselves as redeemed. They don't bow the knee in gratitude. They are, as Paul puts it, those who refuse to give thanks (Rom 1:21).

The posture of ingratitude is seen even

in the way they make this idol. This calf is formed, after all, by their jewelry. But where does this jewelry come from? The gold is from Egypt. They have it only because the Lord gave them favor in the sight of their masters, so they were able to plunder their captors (Exod 11:2-3). Aaron is taking the very spoils of war God had granted them and turning it into an arsenal against the One who gave it in the first place.

Their problem isn't just ingratitude, but also fear. The Israelites aren't looking for a ceremony. They instruct Aaron to "make us gods who shall go before us" (Exod 32:1). They are echoing—in a perverted sort of way—God's own promise to them. Yahweh had told them he would go before them to fight off their enemies, to bring them into the land of promise.

Here the people stand—outside the land of Egypt but not yet in the land of promise—and they are afraid. They are seeking a god who will fight for them, a god who will satisfy their needs, a god who will give them good. Because they don't see it by faith, they decide to force it by sight. Because they don't believe in a good, wise, powerful God, they decide to create one.

In addition to this ingratitude and fear is self-deception. After all, the Israelites don't say to themselves, "Let us worship Baal" or "Let us worship Ra." They speak as though they are worshipping Yahweh. Aaron even speaks of the calf thing in this way, commemorating it with "a feast to the Lord" (Exod 32:5). The people believe themselves to be worshipping the God who has delivered them from Pharaoh's Egypt, but they want to worship him after the pattern they've seen in Pharaoh's Egypt. And they are able to convince themselves this is the way it ought to be.

Most of us have a hard time seeing ourselves in the picture of ancient Middle Easterners howling around a cultic statue. But there we are. The Scripture tells us there will always be scoffers among us, right up until the last days, asking the question, “Where is the promise of his coming?” (2 Pet 3:3-4). The walk of faith is so difficult and the walk of sight so easy. The way of the Spirit is so frightful, and the way of the flesh so comfortable.

Faced with the prospect of a wilderness journey, the Israelites looked backward. Back in Egypt, they reasoned, we had all the gods, all the food, all the protection we needed. As they stand in the land outside the land, they find themselves looking back at Egypt, back toward gods who could be created and formed, guaranteed to be visible and tangible, guaranteed to ward off fears and fill stomachs. So they try to replicate it.

The Israelites want what we want—a life without questions, a life that can be manipulated toward the end we desire. Don’t you hear the echo of our idolatrous ancestors in your own grumbling? Do you think you would have the life you really need if only the two strips on the pregnancy test would line up or if only that acceptance letter would come in the mail or if only your ministry would succeed the way your peers’ ministries have? It is easy to seek to manipulate and order your life and affections around these things, forsaking everything else until you get it. You’re longing for some thing—for some thing. You can place this at the forefront of your mind, even calling it “Jesus,” but deep down you know better.

Here in this text, the Israelites stand and worship the work of their own hands. They have what they want: something tangible before them, something they

can feel and point to and say, “This is our God.” Moreover, they can control this. They can conveniently turn their heads away from it when they wish. They can move it about where they want. They can control its sight of them, and thus its oversight of them. This golden calf seems more real to them than their invisible, often hiding God.

In the exact same way, there are those today—even among us—whose driving force is their own ambition, their own pleasure. It’s what is most real to them. This leads to idolatry, and idolatry leads to destruction. The persistent temptation before us is to rather have a calf than a Christ, a Pharaoh than a Father.

The Pull to a Christless Intercession

On display here in this text are two very different priesthoods. Aaron melts the gold. He forms the calf. When Moses returns to confront him, Aaron hides in a fashion reminiscent of Adam in Eden. “Mistakes were made,” he replies. “Moses, you know these people. They kept grumbling so I gathered their stuff together. I melted it down—and how was I supposed to know it would come out on the other end as a calf!” Aaron presents himself not as a craftsman but as a spectator—like the amazed man who sees the outline of the Virgin Mary in his grilled cheese sandwich.

This evasion, though, doesn’t succeed. God repeatedly tells us in this text—all the way to verse 25—that “the people broke loose.” Why? It’s because Aaron let them. When God speaks of the calf he names it “the calf Aaron had made” (Exod 32:35). This thing bears Aaron’s name, and Aaron’s responsibility.

Aaron stands as a priest before the people, and he responds to their appe-

tites—deceiving himself that he’s actually doing the service of God. Aaron takes the worship of God and uses it to manipulate the people—just as Pharaoh did. Just as Pharaoh used gods, and even proclaimed himself to be one of them, to secure loyalty and veneration, Aaron uses the sacred things of God to secure his own tranquility.

As new covenant believers, this danger now applies to all of us. We are, after all, now the promised “kingdom of priests” (Rev 5:11; Exod 19:6). Don’t we follow this tragic Aaronic path when we deceitfully twist our language to get some desired end? It’s easy to be the kind of priest who gossips or lies. It’s easier to protect ourselves than to seek to deny ourselves to edify one another. Aaron certainly believes this to be the case. But in so doing, he images Pharaoh and not Jesus.

As the people dance, though, this text points us to another priesthood. It tells us of Moses as he stands before a furious God, a God who vows to come down and wipe out his people. Moses stands before his God and pleads. He pleads with God to remember that he has delivered this people. He pleads with God not to give the Egyptians further ammunition for their propaganda campaign. He pleads with God, above all, to remember his covenant with Abraham. Moses intercedes for the people, and God’s wrath is turned back.

Moses here is a pattern, a pattern for exactly the kind of life every follower of Christ is now living.

Jesus, our high priest, intercedes for us right now, as One greater than both Aaron and Moses. Jesus, the Book of Hebrews tells us, is praying for us even now, present with his own blood, before the Father. And in Christ the wrath of God is permanently turned aside on our behalf.

We come before God as rebels and law-breakers—exactly the same as our forebears. But when we pray we are praying with Jesus through the Holy Spirit. He is praying with us, and we pray in his name. God hears us then not because we have any meritorious reason to be heard, but because God always hears the voice of his beloved Son. Jesus’ priesthood averts us from disaster—because God keeps his covenant promises to his Christ.

How many of us can see the beginnings of a golden calf spirituality in our own prayerlessness? I wonder how many of us would rather spend a day at the beach or before a television screen than an afternoon on our faces praying before our God? I wonder how many of us would rather preach and teach than to stand in the very presence of God, with Christ, and plead for his power?

The Pull to a Christless Judgment

As Moses and Joshua come down from the mountain, they hear a commotion. It sounds like a victory party. Then it sounds like the wailing of the defeated. Finally, though, it sounds to Joshua like neither triumph nor tragedy, but just a party.

When Moses sees the cultic worship taking place, he throws down the tablets of the Law, the very Word of God. He grinds up the calf and pours its ashes in water. Moses then makes an earring smoothie, as it were, and forces it down the throats of the people.

God then brings judgment on his people—and notice how he does so. God has Moses gather the sons of Levi and instruct them to kill their brothers and companions. God judges the people of Israel exactly the way he judged Pharaoh and Egypt—by causing them to lose their brothers and sons. God sends

plagues on the people—just like he did with Pharaoh and Egypt. God treats them exactly how they've asked to be treated. They turn their hearts to Pharaoh and align themselves with that old pyramid system. So God comes to them as he did to the Pharaoh they wish to serve—with judgment.

God shows his people then that they fear the wrong thing—just as Pharaoh had. Pharaoh feared the Israelites when they began to multiply. They were a threat to his political power. Pharaoh feared his enemies, and used idols to keep them at bay. What Pharaoh did not fear was God.

The Israelites fear starvation. They fear warfare. They fear isolation. But they don't fear their God.

Isn't this so often true of us? Isn't fear-mongering so easy among us—fear of everything from Hillary Clinton to Hollywood? How many of you have an almost crippling fear of failure in ministry? You don't want to be embarrassed in front of your family or friends—maybe the ones who said you were insane for going into the ministry in the first place. I wonder, though, how many of us actually tremble in holy, reverent fear before a God who will one day expose every thought, feeling, inclination, word, and affection before his face?

God brings judgment because the issue, ultimately, isn't a cow. The issue is Christ. God is preparing these people to have the visible God they so earnestly desire. God is moving these people toward the fullness of time, a time in which they will have an Immanuel—God with us—a God in the flesh whom they can touch with their hands. But they'll not touch the smoothed-over gold they've graven out themselves. They'll touch instead the scabbed-over hole in the side of an abdomen.

These people want a priest to stand and intercede before them, but on their own terms. They want a god to save them from judgment and give them their daily bread, but, again, on their own terms. They fail to recognize that this doesn't come by "the will of the flesh or the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13).

We see our Christ Jesus foreshadowed in the desperation of Moses, who stands before God and pleads that God would blot him out of the book of life in order that the people may be saved. God refuses to do this. Why? It's because, as we'll see later in this Book of Exodus, Moses is himself a sinner. God is moving toward another Prophet, another Priest, who indeed will be blotted out of the presence of God. He will cry out, "My God, my God, have you forsaken me" (Matt 27:45-46). God is preparing his people for a Christ.

When the Israelites turn toward this golden calf, they're not just turning away from some abstract idea of true worship. They are turning away from Jesus.

This remains a persistent danger, even—maybe especially—for those of us called to Christian ministry. Remember the rich young ruler. He wanted the right thing—eternal life, the inheritance promised. What he did not want was Christ (Mark 10:17-22). There is a way of reading Christian Scripture and a way of carrying out Christian ministry that employs a golden calf hermeneutic. Just as the Israelites said all the right things about the wrong god, it is possible for us to preach theologically pristine and practically on-target sermons that evade Jesus. It is possible to counsel people in ways that bypass Christ. It is possible to have devotional exercises that make one more spiritual but further away from the Savior.

I wonder how many of us today are just

like these Israelites: ungrateful, fearful, prayerless. I wonder how many of us are slinking toward our own golden calf, that object of our own hedonistic idolatry. I wonder how many of us have turned our hearts back to that Pharaoh-behind-the-Pharaoh—the prince of the power of this air—from whom we were delivered.

The Israelites seemed to be safe. Pharaoh was no longer chasing them. His troops were drowned. And yet, the Pharaoh in their own hearts, their own imaginations, was indeed still chasing them. Pharaoh could no longer draft them into hard labor. He could no longer kill their children. But he was still there. And the people could become just like him.

That's the danger for you and for me. There's always that pull to the flesh, to the appetites. We can always make ourselves think our golden calf is noble, even divine. We claw to get that corner office, in the guise of "providing for my family." We baptize thousands—but secretly in order to see our name printed in the denominational newspaper. We want to find a kind of stability, a life that can be manipulated for our own tranquility. In this kind of life, we proclaim that we'd rather have a calf than a Christ, a Pharaoh than a Father.

The Spirit, though, pulls us in the opposite direction. He points us away from our own hands. He draws us away from our craving to see and to feel, pointing us instead to Jesus. He reminds us of the invisible promise—and the invisible judgment—to come. He reminds us that we cannot serve both God and mummy.

ENDNOTES

¹This sermon is a version of a message preached in chapel at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary on January 31, 2008.