



## Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

### *The Exodus God and the Easter God*

Sermon by Pr. John Strommen

on Exodus 32:1-14 (Luke 23:34)

on Sunday, October 11, 2020 (19<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost)

And so here we are. The year is 2020 and the pandemic has turned our world upside down and proven to be anything but short-lived. Jokes and humor are much needed to help us through. Permit me to share a few jokes that highlight our common plight.

One woman said, “my husband purchased a world map and then gave me a dart and said, ‘Throw this and wherever it lands- that’s where I’m taking you when this pandemic ends.’ Turns out, we’re spending two weeks behind the refrigerator.”

We feel geographically stuck.

Or how about this? “My mom always told me I wouldn’t accomplish anything by lying in bed all day. But look at me now, mom! I’m saving the world!”

Yes! Love your neighbor by avoiding them at all costs!

And this: “I finished Netflix today.”

As if we need another way to spend hours in front of a screen.

Here’s one of my favorites: “This morning I saw a neighbor talking to her cat. It was obvious she thought her cat understood her. I went home and told my dog about this. We laughed so hard.”

Yes, our sanity is suspect.

Lastly, one mother groaned, “who’s idea was it to sing ‘Happy birthday’ when you wash your hands (you know, sing it twice and that’ll be 20 seconds)? Now every time I come out of the bathroom, my kids expect me to walk out with a cake!”

Despite the jokes, our patience does grow thin. We can't do – or we're wary of doing - the things we're used to doing, that we want to do, that we need to do. Like gather indoors for concerts, sporting events, parties, weddings, funerals, travel.

And *in-person worship*. How are we supposed to be a church now??

But truth be told, being church was already hard enough, even before the pandemic. Churches like ours have been in a strange new land for a long time as we've watched each of the generations after the boomers - one by one - take a pass on joining church. They don't see the relevance.

There are even jokes about this: did you hear about the man who had a vegetable garden, but birds wouldn't leave his garden alone. They kept eating his vegetables. He tried everything to get the birds to leave, but nothing worked. So, eventually he asked his pastor to come over and confirm the birds. They left and never came back.

OK, gallows humor. This is the wilderness, you see. It can be a lonely place. People not going to church, the pandemic, civil unrest. And I haven't even mentioned our cultural divide and domestic terrorists plotting to overthrow state governments. Don't mean to be gloomy on my last Sunday, but this story today is about what can happen to people in the wilderness.

The wilderness is exactly where the Israelites were after they were freed from slavery. And in the wilderness, they often complained. "Remember the good ol' days when we had meals and a roof over our heads." And the good old days they pined for? That would be when they were slaves in Egypt – somewhat of a compromised existence. But predictable, dependable in its own way. They got used to it. So, they complained to Moses while they were in the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula. And in their impatience, they constructed a golden calf to worship.

And this is a testament to how easily we as human beings can glorify the past. The past is safe, even if you happened to be a slave; even if it was awful and terrifying. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't know? Never mind that God delivered them from bondage, protected them from the pursuing Egyptian soldiers, parted the Red Sea, brought forth water, bread and meat from

the wilderness when they needed it. Need I go on? This God, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob was a God that would provide. A God even more dependable than the three squares they got as slaves.

If people can glorify really awful bygone days, think of how tempting it is to glorify your past if it was truly wonderful? Even then, though, you can't go back. The past occurred in a different time, under different circumstances. History and its passengers are evolving and must learn to adapt to the changing contours of the journey.

So, too, for Mt Carmel. I hope you understand that.

Well, in our Old Testament journey this fall, we've reached a point where Moses climbed up Mt Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, while the Israelites waited below for him to return. Turns out, Moses was gone for 40 days!

Eventually, the people said to Aaron, Moses' righthand man, "make gods for us to lead us through this wilderness." So, Aaron collects everyone's gold jewelry and trinkets which they probably stole from the Egyptians on their way out, melts them down, and forges a golden calf.

*"These are the gods* who brought you out of the land of Egypt," said Aaron.

What, a golden calf? At no point, did the Israelites bow down to the likeness of a calf or bull of any kind.

So, who were these gods who supposedly had led them?

OK, there is a lovely little nuance here which bears attention. When the people requested of Aaron that he make them "gods" to lead them, the Hebrew word for gods is "*elohim*." Most English versions translate this word as "gods" – plural - but it can also be translated as the singular noun, "God." So, stay with me here: the people may have been asking Aaron not to create other gods for them – new gods - to follow. They may have been asking Aaron to make them a physical form of God – the one God who delivered them from slavery. The God of Abraham and Isaac. The God sometimes referred to as Yahweh.

Think about it, the people were used to God being present in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. And for the Israelites, God was always present

with in the form of Moses. No, Moses was not God, but the Israelites sometimes conflated Moses and God.

And now Moses, and God, have gone missing. As Hebrews 11:1 says, faith is the conviction of things unseen, but the Israelites in our story, I think, are expressing a deep human desire -- even a need -- for something tangible. Something to see, to follow, someone to listen to. Because Moses is not there, the people want to see (a) God.

So, it may very well be that when Aaron presents the golden calf to the people and says to them, "Here is the God who brought you out of Egypt," he meant Yahweh, and the people *expected* Yahweh. But the golden calf doesn't cut it, for they have created a god out of their own impulses rather than letting God be present the way God wants to. They had created a false image of the true God.

And predictably, this little move by Aaron and the Israelites didn't go over well with God. God says to Moses, "what's going on with *your people*?" and Moses retorts, "*My people*? They're not my people, they're *your people*." Moses, God, stop it! They belong to both of you. Well, after some shaky moments, God reaffirms his commitment to *his people*.

But, honestly, we can relate to the Israelites. We are currently in a wilderness on several fronts where we don't know what's coming next. So, we look for security. We all need tangible signs of God's presence with us. Ones that are familiar. That's why we have baptism and the Lord's Supper. But the danger for us is always looking to the past, to the familiar, for how we experience God. But after God used the pillar of cloud and fire, we don't see that again in the Old Testament. Instead, the living God moves with and among his people in real time, modulating the way he is present in the ways that they need God most. The people were frayed at the edges, threatening to scatter. They needed a clear center. So, when Moses came down from Mt Sinai with the Ten Commandments, God's presence for the next generation and beyond was expressed in the ark of the covenant, and the tent where the ark resided -- the holiest of holies. God's guidance was found in the Ten Commandments, which gave boundaries and definition to a struggling community. God settled in as the community center, the law giver, the glue to the people as

they lived nomadically for two generations in the Sinai Peninsula. But they had to learn to trust God and let God show up in new ways for them.

How is it that we are tempted to worship images of God, but not the living God, the image of Jesus but not the living Jesus? The living God always moves forward with us and cultivates a living community, one that is never static or still. One that never believes it has arrived in its final form. Therein lie the dangers in loving anything from our past too much, where the trappings around it can make me too comfortable and dull my awareness of God's mission. For us it may not be the predictable meals in Egypt, a pillar of fire or a seemingly magical man who did wonders with his staff. It might be a certain liturgy or traditional way of doing things. Some things will remain largely unchanged for us, like the Lord's Supper. But most everything else is open for re-packaging, for letting God inhabit new containers that house how we have fellowship with one another, get things done, reach new people, be in mission in the world.

Good people of Mt Carmel, my prayer is that you will always turn to God in Jesus Christ as the center of your existence, and in the activity of the Holy Spirit, let God be God. Dependable, yes, but elusive and in motion, forging new paths to create a new future. So, pay attention and follow. Amen.