

Nijmegen/Arnhem, Oct. 12th 2020. The Golden Calf.

Ex 32.1-14

Psalms 106.1-6, 19-23

Phil 4.1-9

Mat 22.1-14

Imagine being just married and then finding your wife or husband in bed with somebody else within a week after the wedding.

You have given yourself completely. You have promised total commitment. You vowed that there would be nobody else, that the other person would be the one and only, that he or she would be enough for you. You trusted that this was mutual, but apparently it is not. Just imagine this happening to you. Not after years and years of marriage when the novelty may have worn off and your relationship is showing signs of wear and tear – no, it happens during your honeymoon. Your spouse needs somebody on the side. From the start, you are not enough.

The Anglican theologian Sam Wells, vicar of the famous parish church of St. Martin in the Fields in London, has said that the whole of the Old Testament is about one issue. One question that God keeps asking, one major thing that he wants to know: **Am I enough for you?** It is this issue that is also at stake in the story about the golden calf. God has been providing in the wilderness in several ways – we've been witnesses to that over the past month. He brought Israel out of slavery, and delivered them from Pharaoh's hand by leading them through the Red Sea. He has guided them through this desolate landscape by a cloud, shading them by day, and by a pillar of fire, lightening the darkness of the desert nights. He has been giving them their daily bread, and meat and water when they asked for it. He has given them his ten words of promise, the

blueprint of the good life, an everlasting covenant between the Source of all being, and this small, bedraggled and often cantankerous people. He has designed a special place to celebrate this relationship, the tabernacle, a beautifully decorated tent for them to be together. He has shown total commitment. And so they all lived happily ever after...?

And then this disappointment! This utter and complete disillusion! Today's story comes like a punch in the stomach. Not just to us. Also to Moses. Yes, even to God it is a real gut punch. Especially to God, I should say.

Let us have a look at the events. After the Lord had given his ten commandments to Israel, Moses has gone up the mountain to receive further instructions. For 40 days now there hasn't been a single sign of him. The people are becoming restless. We can understand why – after all he was their leader. Chapter 20 tells us what happened the last time they saw him. The Lord gave them the ten commandments, but hearing his voice had just been too much for them to bear. It wasn't the still small voice of the hymn, but an overwhelmingly loud and intimidating noise. Ch. 20, vs. 18: When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.'

So the people preferred Moses as a go-between, to mediate God's power and guidance. And now, for all they knew, he might be dead. With Moses gone, they are left with God himself.

This is too vague for their taste. And it is true – even the name by which God had introduced himself had some vagueness about it: Yahweh. It is a name that refuses to be pinned down to a specific meaning. Over the centuries people have tried to translate and explain it: I am who I am, The God-Who-Is, the Faithful One. It's just attempts. There is always something in the name of God that eludes us. Some Jewish commentators have pointed out that the name Yahweh, when pronounced correctly, sounds like a breath, like somebody inhaling and exhaling. That is what God wants to be for us: our life's breath. As intimate as that. As mysterious as that. As uncontrollable as that. But for the Israelites this kind of divine presence is not enough.

So they don't dare risk it. 'Make us gods,' they say to Aaron. As long as it is something solid, something they can hold and watch, something that will not walk out on them, something they can literally handle and control. After God has done his utmost to liberate them from slavery, and to teach them a new way of living and thinking, they fall back into their old habits and thought patterns; the familiar behaviour of their old life, how things were done in Egypt. 'Make gods for us,' they say to Aaron. 'They can lead us to freedom now that Moses has disappeared. You can have all the silver and gold that you need, just as long as you reassure us, give us a sense of security, make us feel safe.'

'Thus they exchanged their glory for the image of an ox that feeds on hay,' says Psalm 106. And Psalm 115 tells us what the result will be: Those who make idols shall become like them and so will all who put their trust in them.' Refusing to breathe can only have one outcome: you will die. Refusing the breath of God and choosing something dead to put your trust in will leave you with nothing and as nothing. We therefore understand Moses's panicky

response when God threatens to take away his breath from the people. It will be the end of the covenant, the end of the marriage. And this within 7 weeks of the wedding. Please, please, please, God, don't do that. There will be no hope left for anybody. Not for me, not for your people, not for the world. Not even for you and for the glory of your name! Because if you withdraw your breath from us, it is your dream of a new world and a liberated people that will come to nothing.

God loves to be reminded of his own words. Persuaded by Moses he does not give up. And so his question remains: 'Am I really enough for you?' It is not just a theme for Old Testament Israel. It is for the New Testament church as well. It is for all humanity and for the whole creation. 'I am your life's breath,' says God. 'Am I enough for you?'

And so this is the question that remains for us today. This Covid-19 crisis is our journey through the desert. Many familiar landmarks have been taken away, and we struggle to navigate this unknown country, longing for a return to the good old days. It doesn't look like it is going to happen any time soon, if ever. We will have to risk it: living off the breath of God alone.

Is it sufficient for us that he sends his breath, which is his spirit, to infuse us with life? That this is abundant life, whatever our circumstances are? We love to sing Psalm 23 – the Lord is my Shepherd, I lack nothing. But we are all human... I'm sure we all remember moments when we had to force ourselves to sing these words. When we felt more like screaming in protest, or when it came through gritted teeth, or through a mist of tears. I've just lost my husband – do I lack nothing? I've just lost my job – do I lack nothing? I have just been diagnosed with cancer, with an anxiety disorder, with Alzheimer's – do I really

lack nothing? And in this pandemic, is it enough for me that God is there? Can I just breathe his name and be comforted, reassured, feel safe?

I would like to send you home with a question to reflect on.

What would throw me into an absolute panic if it would be taken from me? Do I dare risk it to give this to God? To tell him: Lord, I do not want to depend on things or on people that cannot last. I am grateful for what you give me, but let none of it become a golden calf to me. Teach me to live the meaning of my own words when I say: The Lord is my Shepherd, I lack nothing.

Amen.