

Exodus 32:1-14
Philippians 4:1-9
October 15, 2023

Miraculous Peace

Our texts this morning are fascinating and well worth the attention we give them. We began the service with the 23rd Psalm with its pastoral scene and promise of everlasting mercy and love. The final reflections will be based on the passage from Philippians with the exhortation to rejoice and promise of inner peace.

The Old Testament text is from the Book of Exodus and is the story of the Israelites in-between Egypt and the land of the promise, where they made a golden calf and worshipped. It admittedly seems out of place with the other two. But I couldn't avoid at least the mention of it.

The situation turned into a scene of revelry, celebrating something or other, pleasure, cows, which stood for the regenerative power of earthly life. Fertility cults and nature religions were standard in those days, and along with sun and moon religions they worshipped the natural order as if it was divine. In theological terms it is the worship of the created rather than the creator. Another word for it is idolatry.

Idolatry, over the years, has changed its form. It is no longer focused on images or statues, but on real-world kinds of things; the buildings we build, the ships and planes and bridges and computers we create. They all make us proud and draw us deeper into a consumer culture that celebrates the human body and

mind and the things people can do and have created. Many of these things are good if they are kept in the right perspective. They are not easy to keep in the right perspective.

If I were asked about the greatest danger that the world faces, I would still say it is idolatry. Only I do not really think we worship the statues and monuments, the skyscrapers and bridges and spaceships, football stadiums (and the people who play in them). What we worship is ourselves, the highest humanity that we can imagine. In the end, idolatry is self-idolatry.

It is not too much of a stretch to say that the human family is mistaken on this point. The level of unrest and dissatisfaction in the world is a witness against the power of people to achieve their own fulfillment, salvation. The golden calf is a metaphor of all this. It represents the way of the world.

So it is that the scene in Exodus is presented in the way that it is. Moses is busy setting up an ordered life for the people, not only does he receive the Ten Commandments, but he also works on more specific sets of laws for how the people can conduct themselves.

When he comes down the mountain, what he finds is a celebration of a golden statue of a calf, a work of their own hands. The irony is profound. One thing is happening up on the mountain, another down in the valley. The scene below *seems* to conquer the scene above.

The story has its most interesting feature at this point. God was furious with them. Moses, becomes an advocate before God on the people's behalf, and after successfully convincing God not to destroy the people, immediately descends to find such a scene that he *himself* becomes angry and destroys the tablets instead. It is a comical scene. It reveals the inner conflict in God's nature between judgement and mercy, in which mercy is triumphant, and in Moses, and I suppose, in all of us.

Paul's letter to the church at Philippi involves a completely different scenario. It is written into the context of a conflict within the church, but not an epic drama like the Exodus. We are not given to know the specifics of the tension between Euodia and Synteche, only that their conflict was distressing enough that Paul mentioned the situation in the letter and begged them to find a way to work things out.

And in the context of his pleading, gave to the world this familiar but challenging set of lines that rise above the immediate circumstances that inspired the letter, and applies to many situations in our lives.

Here we read high and holy words that beg to be heard, understood, and practiced.

"Rejoice *in the Lord* always, I will say it again, *rejoice!*"

"Let your *gentleness* be evident to everyone."

"The Lord is *near*."

"Don't worry about *anything* . . . prayer . . . petitions . . . thanksgiving;"

"*The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*"

" . . . whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy . . . *think* about such things."

It makes sense that rejoicing would come in good times, times when for the most part, even if not perfectly, the world is working, and workable solutions to problems are at hand. That would seem sensible.

Given the reality of the world's trouble, to rejoice and to have no anxiety, set themselves up as unreasonable and out of touch. Yet it is in *just* such problematic situations, that one would not think of joy as a possibility that we are exhorted to rejoice; in just such situations in which there is high anxiety, that we are encouraged to be liberated from anxiety . . . and promised *miraculous peace*.

The golden calf stands for the world, for the attempt to find inner peace and general life satisfaction by depending on earthly resources, and the wisdom and skill of people to bring those resources to bear in an effective way, and hopefully a just and responsible way as well.

It is the message of the bible that neither our money, our houses, our government, our schools, our churches, nor our skill or intelligence, nor any other thing can protect us from the trouble in the world, and do not solve the problem of anxiety.

The worship of the golden calf is opposed by faith in God, creator and redeemer, author of life, who alone is able to bring all things to fulfillment. The Philippians text may extend from a personal conflict between two people in a little church somewhere, but it gave Paul an opportunity to express sacred ideas about God, and about ourselves, and to promise a deeper sense of joy and contentment than is possible in a world that stands under the power of the golden calf.

The presence of the Lord, like the cloud by day and the fire by night that accompanied Israel on its way from captivity to freedom can, and is the lone trustworthy source of our joy. And it is more than enough to protect from us the anxiety that threatens.

I am reminded of a fourth text, from the 55th chapter of Isaiah, which makes the following promise:

You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands . . .

This will be for the Lord's renown,
for an everlasting sign,
that will endure forever.”

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Matthew 28:28-30 - The Great Commission

Isaiah 54:2-3 - expect great things from God, attempt great things for God

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