

Proper 23A; Exodus 32:1-14; The Golden Calf; 15th Anniversary of 9-11
September 11, 2016
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Immense is the distance that lies between God and a thing, once wrote the esteemed theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel. This wisdom is as true today as it was in biblical times, as poignant this morning in Excelsior, Minnesota as it was 4,000 years ago in Sinai. It is wisdom about idolatry. A particular kind of sin that, as we read this morning in Exodus, the Israelites discovered the hard way.

In the story of the Golden Calf, the people Israel make a series of, shall we say, unfortunate choices. As our story opens, the people have just received the 10 Commandments given to Moses by Yahweh on Mount Sinai. The commandments are new. The people don't yet understand their meaning or grasp their import. Moses, their leader, has made a number of subsequent trips up the mountain to receive further instructions from God for the people. But with the commandments so fresh, God so illusive, and their spiritual leader so absent, the people Israel feel the void, and panic. Rather than wait five minutes for Moses to return, the people take things into their own hands. "Come, make gods for us!" they shout to Aaron, Moses' younger brother. "We do not know what has become of this Moses."

In no time flat, Aaron has the tribes of Israel dancing around a Golden Calf in a drunken craze. The ink on the commandments is not even dry and in one fell swoop, the people violate the first one: "I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before me." And the second one, "you shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath...you shall not bow down to them or worship them."

To make matters worse, the people break the commandments not with a whimper but with a bang as they whoop it up and thumb their noses at God. It's as if, in their weakness, they have become vulnerable to a dark force outside of themselves, that invites them to join it, that pulls them in and controls them like the undertow of an ocean. Though Moses intervenes and God's compassion prevails, though the Israelites are ultimately spared their lives, things are far from over. If we read on in Exodus we learn that after successfully begging on the Israelite's behalf of God's mercy, Moses turns around and inflicts such severe punishment that ultimate extinction looks like a welcome alternative. Moses' anger burns so hot when he sees the calf that he crashes the tablets to the ground, seizes the calf, burns it, grinds it into power, scatters it in water, and makes the Israelites drink it. Then he commands each Israelite to choose one brother, friend, or neighbor and kill them, setting into motion a mass slaughter across the camp. Moses takes no chances. The people must remember the commandment. The message is violently clear: do not worship anyone or anything other than God.

What we have before us this morning is a severe little story about idolatry: the sin of worshipping things of our own making. Or, as theologian Frederick Buechner once defined it, idolatry is "the practice of ascribing absolute value to things of relative worth." The story of the Golden Calf and its lesson about idolatry is, as if by magic, the precise lesson we need to hear on this, the anniversary of 9-11. It was 15 years ago today -- on a bright blue Tuesday morning -- that American Airlines Flight 11 left Boston bound for Los Angeles only to be hijacked 15 minutes into the flight. Loaded with fuel for the cross-country flight, the plane became a guided missile, steered by the hijackers into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Within minutes the media went live with news of a terrible accident

in New York City -- as firefighters and police rushed through Manhattan commuter traffic toward the shredded remains of the upper floors of the tower. Around the city all movement ceased, a quiet descended as all eyes fixed on the evolving nightmare downtown. Seventeen minutes after the first accident, the impossible happened: a second airliner disappeared into the South Tower. In that instant, reality crashed down upon our heads: this was no accident. America was under attack.

Unimaginable tragedies piled one upon another that horrible day. A plane crashed into the Pentagon and then another into a Pennsylvania field. The Twin Towers fell in a blaze of fire and billowing clouds of ash. Before nightfall, the nineteen hijackers had killed 2,973 people, sending waves of grief, devastation, and anger around the world still felt today, 15 years later.

Ever since 9-11, America has grappled with, debated, written about, professed, and pondered so many questions about our collective life: the political, economic, cultural, emotional, and social ramifications of those acts of terror waged against us as a nation. But I also wonder, as a person of faith on this 15th anniversary, about the religious questions. What were the spiritual aftershocks of 9-11? What did we learn about God and the many faces of God on that day? And, maybe even more importantly, what are we *willing* to learn? In anticipation of this morning's anniversary, I spent weeks thinking about and researching spiritual questions pried open on 9-11. Questions like: "Where was God on that day?" and "Was what happened the manifestation of evil?" and "Was religion itself to blame?" What rose to the surface, for me, is this spiritual question about the role and power of religious idolatry – of its capacity to singlehandedly bring about one of the most infamous expressions of hatred and destruction in human history. Sometimes we domesticate the story of the Golden Calf – poke fun at it, read it as comical or a bedtime cautionary tale. But the story is dead serious. The commandment is dead serious.

Many American religious leaders believe that "religion drove those planes into those towers" – that in some deep way, religion was the motivating force behind the terrorists' carefully crafted, evil plans. In a 2002 interview with PBS, Monsignor Lorenzo Albacete put it this way: "From the first moment I looked into that horror of September 11th, into that fireball, into that explosion of horror – I knew it. I knew it before anything was said about those who did it or why. I recognized ---- an old companion. I recognized ---- religion. Look, I have been a priest for over 30 years. Religion is my life, it's my vocation, it's my existence. I have given my life to it...and therefore I knew it. I knew and recognized that day that the same force and energy, the same instinct and passion...that motivates religious people to do great things is the same one that, that day, brought all that destruction. When they said that the people who did it, did it in the name of God, I was not in the slightest bit surprised. It only confirmed what I knew I recognized. I recognized this thirst – this demand for the absolute...for the never-ending, this intolerance for, and fear of, diversity – that which is different – these are all characteristics of religion. And I knew that that force could take you to great things. But I knew that there is no greater or destructive force on the surface of this earth than the religious passion."

In their book, *The Age of Sacred Terror*, Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon put it this way: We believe the 9-11 terrorist attacks were purely religious, seen by the perpetrators as "a sacrament...intended to restore to the universe a moral order that had been corrupted by the enemies of Islam." The attack was neither political nor strategic, they maintain, but rather, in the hijacker's eyes, an "act of redemption" meant to "humiliate and slaughter those who defied the hegemony of God." The plan was an act of puritan extremism within modern Islam – the kind that is arrogant and self-righteous,

an extremism that purports to know exactly what God wants and what Islam is. The most dangerous part of this type of religious extremism is that it is a type of thinking that allows a person to think that they speak authoritatively and decisively for God. In doing so they evolve into worshipping an absolute or a certainty of human construction, about God and God's will. And this absolutism, this certainty, becomes the object of worship, displacing God as the focus of worship, which is the basest form of idolatry.

Religious idolatry is slippery because it masks itself as intense religious observance, and uses spiritual language and ritual for its own purposes. It masquerades as extreme piousness and faith. As an orthodox rabbi present at 9-11 commented: It is so easy to get drunk on God and you can get so drunk on your own interpretation of God that you don't see anything else. It's so easy to get wrapped up in a Messianic vision of how the world could be. And as you fall deeper and deeper into this idolatrous trance, you start taking matters into your own hands and you don't think for a minute about the impact of your beliefs on other people who don't share them. An idolater no longer worships God, but his or her interpretation of God. And in so doing, the mystery, the love, the power, and the unknowedness of God is displaced, cast aside. One of the most significant spiritual lessons of 9-11 is that this type of fanaticism, this unchecked, pulsating, furious fervor makes a person available to the forces of evil – like an undertow of an ocean, enveloped by a force that invites you to join it, a power that captures and consumes, whose only possible conclusion is pain and destruction.

The examination of the spiritual reverberations of 9-11 begins with our understanding of the power of idolatry as a real and destructive force in the world. On the morning of September 11, 2001, Rowan Williams, the then-Archbishop of Canterbury and spiritual leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion, was preparing to record a program on spirituality at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wall Street – just two blocks from the World Trade Center. He was interrupted. As the terrible events of that morning unfolded, Archbishop Williams and the Trinity staff found themselves trapped in the basement of the church, choking on clouds of dust and debris, fearing the Armageddon unfolding outside. Reflecting on that experience Williams later wrote, “[When we are spoken to, we] have some choices about how to answer...Violence is a communication, after all, of hatred, fear, or contempt, and I have a choice about the language I am going to use to respond. If I decide to answer in the same terms, that is how the conversation will continue.”

On this anniversary day, among the saddest of days in our nation's history, we are presented with the kind of choice posed by Archbishop Williams. How do we choose to respond, 15 years later, to the evil manifestations of religious fanaticism and the arrogance of idolatry? What is the language, the actions, we select as our response to that unspeakable violence?

For me the first and most important response is to acknowledge, and then somehow accept, that religious fanaticism is a sad and tragic part of every major religion. Islam doesn't have a monopoly on evil, or on crazy, or on idolatry. Every religious tradition has its dark corners, its “passion,” as Monsignor Albacete described it, available for good or evil. We all know that Christianity has been used to legitimize the human horrors of the Holocaust, of slavery, and the decimation of indigenous peoples. No religion has a corner on extremism. I was surprised this summer, when I received three complaints from parishioners after I put a lawn sign in front of Trinity that said: “To our Muslim Neighbors: a Blessed Ramadan.” The sign was distributed to Twin Cities religious communities by the Minnesota Council of Churches as an act of friendship and reconciliation. And, at a deeper level, as an

acknowledgment that we will not allow Islamic fanatics to define the faith, any more than we allow Christian extremists – who distort and twist the words of the Gospels for their own purposes -- to speak for us. As my former professor Harvey Cox wrote, “We as religious thinkers must stop simply making nice about this age of ecumenism, interfaith dialogue and fuzzy feelings among priests, imams and rabbis. We need to take a step toward candor. In response to a secularized intelligentsia, at least in the West, we have tried too hard to put a positive face on religion, when the truth is we know that *all* religions have their demonic underside. ... Telling just the children's version will no longer do.” The objections to the lawn sign indicated that we have some work to do here, at Trinity, about our understanding of Islam and our common struggles across religions with sin and extremism. I am so grateful that those three parishioners trusted me enough, and trusted their faith community enough, to express their opinion that has opened up an opportunity for us all to learn and grow. This fall Trinity’s Adult Forum will offer 4 sessions on Islam that hope to open up these questions in a non-judgmental, inquiring way.

In the end, one lesson of 9-11 can be interpreted as a call to spiritual humility. It is our work to do to learn how to follow God completely and fully in the distinctive tenants of our Christian tradition without confusing our faith with absolute certainty in anything that is not God, including maybe some of our language about God. 9-11 teaches us that putting words in God’s mouth, claiming absolute knowledge of God’s will is idolatry, and, along with our holy scriptures, promises us that that path leads only to destruction. Five years ago on the 10th anniversary of 9-11, our then-Presidenting Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori called upon the Church to reflect on what we have learned from the trauma of the past as a way of directing our actions in the present. “Have we,” she wrote, “become more effective reconcilers as a result (of lessons learned from this experience)? Are we more committed to peacemaking? The greatest memorial to those who died 10 years ago will be a world more inclined toward peace. What are you doing to build a living memorial like that?” It’s an excellent question, and one I ask of you this morning: What are we doing to build a living memorial to the 3000 people for whom we will pray and remember this morning? Amen.