

**GOD BEYOND GOD**  
Randall Tremba  
October 12, 2014  
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

**Exodus 32:1-14**

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, *Come, make gods for us, 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.* Which is to say, "We can't make it without him. We are helpless on our own. We need a savior!" More on that later.

**Matthew 22:1-14**

Then the king said to the attendants, *Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

\* \* \*

*We are part of the whole which we call the universe, but it is an optical delusion of our mind that we think we are separate. This separateness is like a prison for us. Our job is to widen the circle of our compassion so we feel connected with all people and situations.* **Albert Einstein**

\* \* \*

The first lesson for today is about the forging of a golden calf, a powerful looking bull, which the recently freed Hebrew slaves would claim to be their savior when in fact it had been Moses and his curious so-called god that had sprung the prison gates to set them free. Moses and the LORD. Not some dumb, mindless, breathless, metallic thing like a golden bull or a gigantic bomb!

Moses and the LORD set them free. Well, Moses for sure. I mean you could see Moses with your own eyes. Not so much that so-called god which, as we're about to find out, is no god at all, or if so, it's a god beyond god—so beyond it is no god at all and doesn't want to be.

If that god—who is not a god—could speak it might say: *I am who I am, that's what I am. I am not god—at least not in the way you think of that.*

And, of course, this is quite puzzling, but it does expose a certain sub-current in our religious tradition—called non-duality—that has not been much noticed in our part of the world until recently. Non-duality. Despite appearances, all are one. All is one. All are one. And yet we are greater than one. We are greater than the sum of our parts.

More on that later. And yes it's tricky but I'm pretty sure we can get this.

Meanwhile, back to the story.

According to the story before us this morning, from the mountaintop, God saw the people molding a golden calf and flew into a rage. *I'm going to kill them all,* God said.

*Please don't,* said Moses. And just like that, according to the lesson, God changed *his* mind. Although to say "his" is already to slip into idolatry, making a graven, verbal image of God in the likeness of maleness which is a taboo in our tradition.

So, let's just say: *God had a change of mind.* Or was it Moses who had a change of mind before he changed it again? Is Moses just arguing with himself here?

Maybe you saw the scene in the 1972 film *The Ruling Class*, in which Peter O'Toole, playing Jack the 14th Earl of Gurney, claims he is God. Why do you think you are God,

someone asks. To which Jack replies: *because every time I pray I feel like I'm talking to myself*. I guessing you've had that feeling yourself. I have.

And maybe that's not as crazy as it sounds.

There's actually a sub-current in our Judeo-Christian tradition that pulls us that way. Humanity and divinity as one. *I and the Father are one*. Not two as in dualism. Not either/or. But both/and. It's called non-dualism. It's similar to Buddhism on that count, not to mention in synch with science and its notion that everything is one, everything is light or energy vibrating at different speeds. And to think our Great Ancestors intuited that and said it the only way they could: God is one. Everything is one.

A few hours later Moses left the mountain and returned to base camp. He saw the golden calf and ordered 3000 people slaughtered in the name of God—or was it in the name of Moses?—for treason. That episode ends with Moses blessing the executioners and their swords and ordering them to keep them sharp.

It was as though Moses said: *I am who I am and I am NOT forgiving. I am NOT merciful or tolerant. I am a raging warlord. I will judge and I will punish. I am righteous and you are wicked*. And that's the loud voice of dualism in our tradition. You must be one or the other. You can't be both! So we must destroy the wicked.

Vengeance, it seems, is our species' primal instinct. But it doesn't have to be final instinct. We can change. We are evolving. Not automatically. Choices must be made, like who is favored and who is not.

The gospel lesson for today is a parable, told by Jesus, about the Kingdom of God in which a king's invitation to his son's wedding feast is snubbed by the king's noble friends. So the king orders them killed, then invites the poor and lame to attend. The king notices one disheveled attendee improperly dressed and orders him bound hand and foot and hurled into a dungeon.

We may be evolving. But choices must be made, like who to exclude and who to include at the Table.

It's as though the king said: *I am who I am and I am NOT forgiving. I am NOT merciful or tolerant. I will judge and I will punish*.

Is that the voice of a god we honor and respect?

You know and I know we must get beyond that kind of god and on to a god of love or no god at all. And believe it or not, our religious tradition helps us, if we can tap into that deeper sub-current.

Ironically, our tradition is *anti-god*. If Jesus is God then Jesus must be crucified. If you meet the Messiah on the road...

By one way of seeing it, our tradition is anti-god. No gods but this one and this one is nothing. No thing. Make no graven images, we warn ourselves, because the image of god is in human beings, which I take to mean: *creativity*—our god-like capacity like no other species on earth to create and to destroy. It's both awesome and horrifying. We don't need to be told that by a voice outside. We can see that for ourselves within human experience.

One of the coolest things about our tradition—and believe me there are plenty of uncool things—one of the coolest things is its playfulness about God.

Here's one example.

Moses once asked to see God's face. *No one can see my face and live, said God. But if you'll crouch down in that hole and not open your eyes until I pass by, I will let you see my backside.* (No, I didn't make that up. It's in the Bible.)

And here's another example.

Once upon a time, long before the golden calf incident, Moses was itching to liberate his people from slavery in Egypt. For 40 years in the wilderness, while tending his father-in-law's herds, Moses had been stewing and fuming, burning up inside about the injustice of slavery brutally inflicted upon the Hebrew people. He had seen it first hand. He had violently murdered a slave master; then ran away when the violence backfired.

And thus Moses entered 40 years of self-imposed exile in the middle of nowhere. Not unlike the exile of Nelson Mandela. As it turns out, we often learn most deeply in the dark, in exile, through suffering.

Moses was burning up inside when suddenly in the middle of nowhere God shows up in a burning bush that wouldn't burn up. Moses crept close to see it. *I have heard my people crying,* the voice from the bush announces.

And here I will paraphrase the story a bit.

Really, says Moses? I thought they were my people and I thought it was I, not you, who can't stop hearing those cries and groans day and night, all night long sometimes. I can hardly sleep.

Whatever, says God. Maybe our ears are one and the same. I can't hear without you. Anyway, I want you to go and tell old Pharaoh to let my people go.

Right, says Moses, still talking to himself. Or maybe not.

Let me get this straight. You want me to walk in on the most powerful tyrant on earth and tell him to let his slaves go? Well, I can't do that and I won't do that unless I have the name of some god or some credible authority to win Pharaoh's respect. So why don't you tell me your name?

So God says, *OK. Here it is: YHWH* (breath sound)—which is the Hebrew verb for "is" or "I am," or it can be future tense too, "I will be what I will be." If you must have a name, that's my name being itself, which I know is actually a verb, but let's not get picky. So when Pharaoh asks you by what power or authority or god you demand freedom, you just stand up and tell him: *I am who I am, that's who.*

See what I mean? Playfulness. Mystery.

So why would you want to spoil the puzzle and mystery by turning that god into a stupid golden calf, or system of religious morality, or a military machine, or a bank account, or some old bearded man sitting on a throne high in the clouds?

*I am* is enough. *To be* is enough.

*I am what I will be* suggests openness, incompleteness, potential yet to unfold. Yes, we are one. But we are not static, fixed, graven, finished. We are evolving together.

We are one with being. I am. You are. We are. One breath. One love. One heart. One body, still evolving in love—into wider and wider compassion as we choose to include more and more and more into communion and community.

This pervasive notion of separateness, or dualism, may start with the cutting of the umbilical cord, which is, of course, necessary for life to have a chance. But how quickly we forget we were once one body, one heart, one breath, one love. As it turns out, it

takes a long journey—often through darkness—for us to remember again who we are and to whom we belong, which is to say, it takes a while to find our way home.

Whatever you are or think yourself to be, there's more to you than the sum of the parts and that "something more" just may be the breath of god beyond god.

As our friend Steve Garnaas-Holmes puts it:

*We are not separate things, but all parts of one living Being.  
We are no more separate than the fingers on a hand,  
the notes in a chord, the words in a sentence,  
the flavors in a gourmet dish, the cells in a body.*

*We are part of one another;  
we are each other in different ways.  
There is one body, and we are all it.*

**Breathe in. All is love.**

**Breathe out: Love is all.**

\* \* \*

**HYMN: One Bread, One Body**