

# LIGHT FOR THE JOURNEY V - REJECTING FALSE GODS

## Ordinary Time

Exodus 32:1-14

A Sermon Preached by  
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Seattle, Washington 98125  
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### Scripture:

Last Sunday we remembered the story of Moses going up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. This week's story continues but the scene shifts from the mountaintop to the valley below where the people Moses has led out of slavery are waiting impatiently. Let us listen for God's word for us in this story.

#### **Exodus 32:1-14<sup>1</sup>**

When the people realized that Moses was taking forever in coming down off the mountain, they rallied around Aaron and said, "Do something. Make gods for us who will lead us. That Moses, the man who got us out of Egypt, who knows what happened to him?"

So Aaron told them, "Take off the gold rings from the ears of your wives and sons and daughters and bring them to me." They all did it; they removed the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from their hands and cast it in the form of a calf, shaping it with an engraving tool.

The people responded with enthusiasm: "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from Egypt!"

Aaron taking in the situation, built an altar before the calf.

Aaron then announced, "Tomorrow is a feast day to God!"

Early the next morning, the people got up and offered Whole Burnt Offerings and brought Peace Offerings. The people sat down to eat and drink and then began to party. It turned into a wild party.

God spoke to Moses. "Go! Get down there! Your people whom you brought up from the land of Egypt have fallen to pieces. In no time at all they've turned away from the way I commanded them. They made a molten calf and worshiped it. They've sacrificed to it and said, 'These are the gods, O Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt.' ... "I look at this people – oh! What a stubborn, hardheaded people! Let me alone now, give my anger free reign to burst into flames and incinerate them. But I'll make a great nation out of you."

Moses tried to call his God down. He said, "Why, God, would you lose your temper with your people? Why, you brought them out of Egypt in a tremendous demonstration of power and strength. Why let the Egyptians say, 'God had it in for them – God brought them out so God could kill them in the mountains, wipe them right off the face of the earth.' Stop your anger. Think twice about bringing evil against your people! Think of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants to whom you gave your word telling them 'I will

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<sup>1</sup> The Message [translation of the Holy Bible, Old Testament]. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002 by [Eugene H. Peterson](#). Text accessed by Beth Bartholomew, 11/22/2017, at <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+32%3A1-14&version=MSG>

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give you many children, as many as the stars in the sky, and I'll give this land to your children as their land forever."

And God did think twice. God decided not to do the evil against the people.

Pastor Peter Ilgenfritz

Reading

"Rejecting False gods"<sup>2</sup>

Bent at the beginning  
in the seed, the corm,  
we grow taller toward the light  
carrying up the grace of our leaves  
and with them our canker  
of waywardness, our wont to be  
mistaken, self-absorbed, even  
cruel in the face of kindness—  
burr and thorn as much a part of us  
as any fragrant rose

—————

The little boat was coming up around, around the Cape of Good Hope, and they knew that to come up around that Cape gonna need a lot of hope, because it's one of the most dangerous and treacherous passages you'll find at sea – the Cape of Good Hope, covered with great rocks. And every good sailor knows you going to need a lot of hope to find your way through. But they had it. They *knew* where the lighthouse was, there in the distance. They knew "If we keep the light to our right we'll stay away from the rocks and we will find our way through." And then the winds shifted and the fog bank rolled in and kept rolling in. And the light went out – and instead of knowing where they were, all that they knew is that they were nowhere between two somewheres.

Our fall worship series is called "Light for the Journey." In it we are going to trace – and we have been tracing – Moses's journey with the people of God out across the desert from the *somewhere* of slavery to *somewhere* out there called the Promised Lands. But what you do along the way when the light goes out?

Will you join me in prayer:

God,  
We are your people who come to you today  
and we are stumbling in the dark to find our way  
and we often find ourselves, God, exactly here  
nowhere between two somewheres.  
Come to us, speak to us in word and wisdom deep within  
that we may find our way through these treacherous days in which we live  
and that we might find our way home.  
– Amen

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<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Trogdon, "Rejecting False Gods"

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Last week we were with Moses and we were there at the top of the mountain. And there at the top of the mountain Moses was given two great gifts [of stone engraved with] that we call the Ten Commandments. They were a bunch of rules, a bunch of laws about how they were going to make it across the desert: If only they looked to each other and saw each other, they could make it through.

Well, that's where we were last week, up there on the mountain peak and remembering that good point. But today, the camera shifts from Moses there on the peak down there to the people down below where the light has gone out. Moses has gone away. Moses is up on top of the mountain. And if you were to ask those people, "What the heck are you doing out here in the desert?" I imagine they would've said, "We're not quite sure, but we're with him. And he's got something that he's going to show us the way through." And what do you do when he's gone?

Has your light ever gone out?

I mean, have you ever lost a relationship?

I mean, has there been somebody in your life that's just reflected back to you who you are and reminded you of who you are? I mean, has somebody in your life died who did that for you?

I mean, has a friend ever stopped being your friend?

Or has a friend moved far away?

Or maybe, maybe perhaps you've moved some time and all those people and all those reminders that told you who you were, well, they were no longer here.

Perhaps it was a new school, perhaps it was a new job, perhaps it was a new place.

But all those reminders are gone.

Has your light ever gone out?

And what do you do? What do you do – when that person, that relationship, that everything that just reminded you "I can make it safely through because I know who I am" is gone, what do you do? How long does it take? I don't think it takes very long – not long at all for us to want to *do* something, right? Because we hate that feeling! We hate this feeling. We hate feeling vulnerable. We hate feeling alone. We hate feeling lost.

So vulnerability kicks right in, and quickly we've set into fear. What the heck are we going to do? How we going to find our way? – Which quickly turns to anger, settling into "Do something! Just do something! Find something. I'm lost! I've got to find my way through. What am I going to do here without you?"

And quickly, in our story, that's exactly what the people of Israel do. They've lost their light. And they look around and they see what have we got? Well, the one thing that was really good about this people, they said you know, "If we're going to be out there wandering in the desert, we might as well look good." So they brought jewelry. Have jewelry! Why the heck do they have jewelry? But they have jewelry. So they take what they had, they take the rings off, the earrings off, the necklaces off. They take the whole pile off of what they got and they throw it down into a great fire. And they said, "Out of this nothing, we're going to make something. Let's make a *good* something." So they make it into this great *calf* – which really doesn't matter what it is, – but just "Let's make it heavy, and let's just make it count, and let's just make it be here so that we can find our ways through. All right?" So

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they make a big calf, something *heavy* and that they can *count* on, they can see their way through. "We got it!" And then they remember: that's what we used to do, when whatever-his-name-was was in our life – that's what we used to do. We used to dance. We used to party. We used to drum. Let's just do that! Let's remember who we were. And they go back and they do that again and again and again.

And God, up there on the mountain, sees what the people of Israel are doing.

And at that this point I want you to know, there's a great sermon. There is a great, great sermon waiting to be preached – because it would be great to sit up right here and stand and talk about just this past week and about *all* of the ways again and again and again our country – all over the news – has fallen to false gods. Right? Oh, my gosh, falling back into the hands of power, if only we have enough of that; privilege, if only we have enough of that; money, if only we have enough of that. It would be great, it would be really great to preach that sermon. ... But the only problem is this: I don't know about you but I'm right down there at the bottom of the darn hill with those people building the calf trying to get something when I have lost my way.

My favorite things, my favorite things to look for at times like that are fuel, broccoli, and prayer. Those are my favorite gods that I make along the way. And I believe this. I believe when push comes to shove, when I've lost my way, if only I've got enough gas in the gas tank and if only I've got enough money in my pocket, I'm going to make it through. And it's going to be all alright and, by God, I'm going to make it! ... Or I believe this: if only I eat enough broccoli and if only I jump up and down enough times at the gym, I am *never* going to get cancer. Nope! Rip that one right off the map. ... Or if only, if only I pray long enough and fervently enough and powerfully enough and passionately enough, everything is going to be alright with the people in my life and with me.

And you know there's nothing wrong with those things. There's nothing wrong. God, we need it! To have just enough money to get by, right? Just enough fuel in the tank to get somewhere. Yeah, it's not a anti-broccoli sermon. Eat your broccoli; it's good for you. And prayer, no, that's not the point, that's not the point that it's all bad. But what runs wrong is we put too much weight in it. We put too much weight – in that which cannot help us find our way through. I turn to false gods all the time, the things that I expect to find weight so that I will find my way.

What about you? What do you turn to? What is your favorite false god(s) that you turn to the find your way?

Well, back up there to the mountain peak: God is very angry! God is rip-roaring angry. And God says, "I just want to wipe those people out, just wipe them off the face of the earth. And I'm going to start over with you, Moses, just do a do-over, everybody's will look like you big beard, big staff. It would be great!" I know that. I know how harsh I am with myself when I lose my way and I turn to false ways to find my way. I know what it is to be such a harsh critic and maybe you do, too. And if you're like me, it probably doesn't do a heck of a lot of good. And Moses ... And Moses at this point doesn't give in. He doesn't give in to every dictator's great dream: Make everybody look like me, the world would be great. He says no to that. He says no to that and he tells God to remember. He calls God back to remember. He said, "God, remember what we're doing out here. You didn't bring us out here just to die in the desert. You brought us to lead us home. Remember you made promises to us. Remember, God, who you are. Remember who you are."

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You know, last week we gave out a bunch of Bibles to all sorts of our youth and our children. And the Bible's a great book, because it's full of lighthouses – just full of lighthouses all along the way. These people, these places that showed people where to go and everything.

There's just one problem: Every single one of those lighthouses in the Bible went out. I mean, Moses went away today. Moses, just in a couple of weeks is going to die before he ever reaches the Promised Land. Heck, we got Jesus, and then Jesus goes up and dies. We had a great temple; the temple's destroyed. We built another one; it was destroyed. All the lighthouses go out!

And in another time, in his life when the light went out in the Church, Martin Luther said, you know what the heart of that book is all about is not about lighthouses. There's not things or people or relationships that will never change and always be there forever and a day. It's not true. It's not true. But there's two things this book is about. It's about the Law and it's about the Gospel. That's what you got.

What the heck?? What the heck is a bunch of law and a bunch of gospel going to do [for] *me* in my lostness?? Well here's how Luther put it. He said, "Look. Your lighthouses will disappear. But two things won't. May you never forget these two things.

God wants things from you. He really does, from you and me and from our church and from our world right now. God really wants things. And Luther talked about it as Law. And what's Law all about in biblical terms? It's all about Justice. God wants to put things right in the world and wants people to be treated equitably and well. There's God's passion right there. Just remember that! Remember that.

And over here, you're going to mess up all the time. And you're not going to do that stuff really well all the time. And sometimes you're going to do it really badly. So there is this thing called Grace. And Grace is what finds you again and again and again; in me again and again and again. So when I fall down, and fall down and fall down, I keep getting up because I know God hasn't given up on me. What about you? Do you know that God hasn't given up on you? Do you remember Law and Grace? Remember who you are, remember what you are made for.

Well, you know, it was another reformer almost 500 years after that, Martin *Luther* King Jr. He put it this way. He said, "Power – the Law – Power. Power without Love is abusive and violent." And he said, "Love. Love without power is just sentimental and anemic, weak. Love – the Gospel – and the Law, they need each other. It was Luther's great gift to us. You can't get rid of one; you need both.

Perhaps you, like many of us here, have been in systems or in churches or in families or in homes or in someplace today were there's just a lot of "lay-down-the-law." And that's a horrible and abusive and unsafe place to be and we *have* to find our ways to safety. And many truly have found their way to the United Church of Christ. But just as well, if there is only Love, if there is only the sentimentality of love, if there's only "God loves everybody," it's completely meaningless – for I'm right there. I love everybody! – It's just *you* I have problems with. – And it's that "you" that I have to be called back to again and again and again in the particular. So here along our way two little gifts: a little Law, a little Gospel; a little Love and a little Justice. A little love and a little justice.

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You know every biblical scholar that I know worth their weight is going to tell you this story that we been following all fall *never happened*. It never really happened. But every justice seeker that I know worth their weight will tell you this story happens all the time. And the only way that you and I are going to make our way through is not by counting on a bunch lighthouses that will all go out, but by being recalled to who we are, who God wants us to be: God's Law, God's hope for Justice, and God's Grace to pick us up when we fall.

You know, it was only last week that seventeen members of our denomination went to Europe, to go back and probably do one of those tours and follow, you know, the 500-year-old steps of where all our reformers went to ... and went from and to: Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, – the whole nine yards of them. I was really struck that, though, they didn't come back with lots of conversations about law and justice, and things I don't understand. Every one of their conversations came back to two things. They said, "What are *we* going to do? What are *we* going to do about the immigrants and migrants in our land? And what are we going to do about racial justice?" In other words, they called us right back to the very heart of what the Law is all about: Justice. In our society right now – you and me and perhaps all of us – [we] are making a lot of false gods out of what does not matter; and we're forgetting what does. And God calls us back, calls us back to remember it. Before we called it orphans and widows, immigrants, migrants. Today we might call it, as well, the elderly, the poor, any of us in need. God calls us back to remember. He calls us back to that Grace to pick us up so that we can keep at that hard work of Love and Justice, the heart of our faith.

You know, in order to make it around in *our* little boat, truly our little boat around the Cape of Good Hope, yes, may we know that hope is with us. Hope, yes, that we will together find our way. But Hope as well to remember this that on either side of us is God's great hope for us and God's great hope that we might remember God's Grace along the way. And it's this: lost and found and nowhere as we all are, in *this* very place, in *this* very time, may we look out to each other, just find each other here, find *each other* here – *each other* here, the *new others* here and call forth God in everything you are:

community,  
communion,  
wholeness,  
healing,  
forgiveness.

Prayer:

God,  
Meet us here.  
And together You with us,  
together You with us,  
we will find our way.  
We will find our way home  
through doing it together. – Amen

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Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from [www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2017/11/22/2017](http://www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2017/11/22/2017)

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