

# Gold PLATED Religious NONSENSE

Sermon, October 15, 2017

Texts: Psalm 103, Exodus 32:1-14

Last June 3, Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts gave the commencement address at the Cardigan Mountain School, a New Hampshire boarding school for boys in grades six through nine; his son was in the graduating class. An excerpt from Justice Roberts' address: *"Now, the commencement speakers will typically also wish you good luck and extend good wishes to you. I will not do that, and I'll tell you why. From time to time in the years to come, I hope you will be treated unfairly, so that you will come to know the value of justice. I hope that you will suffer betrayal, because that will teach you the importance of loyalty. Sorry to say, but I hope you will be lonely from time to time, so that you don't take friends for granted. I wish you bad luck, again, from time to time so that you will be conscious of the role of chance in life, and understand that your success is not completely deserved, and that the failure of others is not completely deserved either. And when you lose, as you will from time to time, I hope every now and then, your opponent will gloat over your failure. It is a way for you to understand the importance of sportsmanship."*

He continued: *"I hope you'll be ignored so you know the importance of listening to others, and I hope you will experience just enough pain to learn compassion. Whether I wish these things or not, they're going to happen. And whether you benefit from them or not will depend upon your ability to see the message in your misfortunes."*<sup>1</sup> Wise words from the judge about the message in our misfortunes; at times it takes adversity for us to realize and appreciate the really good things we have ... which is a lesson the Israelites had to learn time and again.

I'd like to re-read one line from our Psalter this morning, Psalm 103:8 -- *"The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love."* The Psalmist is actually quoting something God spoke five centuries earlier, recorded in Exodus 34 (*which is two chapters after our reading this morning*). The background: God had just delivered the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt; as we talked about in previous weeks, they arrived at Mt. Sinai approximately six weeks after the miracle of the manna started. In today's reading, Moses had been gone just over six weeks more, as he was at the top of Mt. Sinai conferring with God forty days. While he was receiving the Commandments and other directives that would prepare them to fully enjoy the promised inheritance, commandments that contained directions and promises of how they would live long and well in the land, the people were down below busily betraying everything God held dear. We know the story. In spite of all the miracles they had witnessed to date, they were tired of waiting. They were now worshipping this idol and "indulging in revelry" ... it was actually a pretty wild party. God was pretty upset, as we are told in verse 7, *"Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Go down, because YOUR people whom YOU brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I've commanded them, now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them.'" We read that Moses responded, "O Lord, why should Your anger burn against YOUR people whom YOU brought out of Egypt with great power..." and they have this wonderful argument about whose people they are! But Moses interceded on their behalf and God did not destroy them.*

In the verses following our reading today, we can read that Moses then goes down the mountain, sees the carousing and the idolatry, and in a rage hurls the two tablets containing the Ten Commandments to the ground, shattering them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. This is the only case we know of in the Bible where all Ten Commandments were broken simultaneously. To make a long story short, in Exodus 34 we read how God takes Moses back to the top of Sinai, and says, *"Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke."* Moses does so, then God proclaims, *"The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, [is] slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin."* That's what is quoted by David in Psalm 103:8; it provides the context for this entire Psalm. David continues, *"As a father has compassion on His children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. From everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him, and His righteousness with their children's children -- with those who keep His covenant and remember to obey His precepts."*

So let's look at the story of the Golden Calf, that idol fashioned out of gold in the form of a young bull. The people of Israel were tired of waiting for God to come through, tired of waiting for God's promises to be fulfilled. Moses is up on Mt. Sinai, the people are down below, and he's been gone well over a month. For over a month, the people were gathered down below wondering, *"Where is he? When are they going to be done talking up there?"*

Back in 1986 I had an experience that gave me a wonderful insight into this scene. I was part of a tour group of pastors and spouses going to visit the traditional site of Mt. Sinai; we rode a bus from Cairo into the

<sup>1</sup> You can watch Justice Robert's address by clicking here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gzu9S5FL-Ug>

wilderness. We stayed in the comfort of a three-star hotel in the middle of nowhere; when we arrived, many of the staff were huddled around a little TV watching World Cup Soccer. We were given a hearty meal and then went to bed a little after seven. We arose at 3:30 A.M. (*to beat the desert heat*), ate a good breakfast, and began the ascent of Sinai, walking where countless thousands, perhaps millions of pilgrims had walked over the centuries. The climb to the summit of the traditional site of Mt. Sinai was a moderate climb for those in good health, a bit difficult for some of the others. After our ascent and descent, we awaited our tour guide (*a Lutheran pastor by the name of Ken*) on the patio of a Carmelite monastery, St. Catherine's, situated at the foot of Mount Sinai. Ken had arranged for us to have a (rare) tour of this historic monastery, something not normally offered to tourists, and had gone in to make additional arrangements with the powers-that-be, promising to be back shortly.

Well, before long, people started to complain. "*Where is he?*", they grumbled. "*When's this tour going to begin? I'm tired. I'm hot. What's he doing?*" We had been waiting a little less than one hour! And we're all clergy! I was a bit non-plussed by it all. Ken had done an outstanding job in making our arrangements; he had been an excellent and most accommodating tour guide. Yet people grumbled, people complained and seemed quick to forget all the good things he had arranged for us to date. It gave me a humbling insight into this Old Testament drama; it's hard to look smugly down the centuries at the Hebrew people. I mean, my tour group of pastors and pastor's spouses had trouble waiting forty *minutes* for our leader after a riding in an air-conditioned coach bus, sleeping in a three-star motel, having two hearty meals, and a moderate hike; the Israelites had waited forty *days* for Moses at Mt. Sinai, after an arduous and perilous and months-long trek on foot through desert wilderness.

Back to the story. So they turned to Moses' brother, the priest Aaron, and asked him to come up with a new god for them. We know the story. Aaron used (or, misused) his talents and skill to give them the kind of God they wanted, he used his talents and skill to fashion a God to their own liking, and apparently he even directed their worship to it. Aaron's failure wasn't just that he made the golden calf; it was that he used his God-given position of leadership and trust as well as his God-given skills and talent to propagate nothing but gold plated religious bull ... literally ... that was really no help to anyone! It had the appearance of value and substance, I'm sure it was beautifully crafted, and I'll bet people even ooo-ed and ahh-ed at the priest's artful religiosity. But at root, Aaron cynically mis-used his skills to give them the kind of "god" they wanted. He failed because he did nothing to help the people worship and wait for the true God whose ways are sometimes hard to understand, whose ways are not always our ways, whose ways do at times conflict with our tempers, our passions, our desires, our way of seeing things. He didn't help them to wait in faith for the God whose promises are sure, though they may seem delayed. Maybe Aaron assumed it was his job to give the people what they wanted. Unlike Justice Roberts, maybe Aaron assumed it was his assignment to take away their anxieties. Maybe he assumed it was his job to meet their needs, both real and perceived. Maybe he really cared about them and just wanted them to be happy. If we're honest, it's hard to be too hard on Aaron, isn't it? I've been there; so have many of you. We wouldn't be here this morning if we didn't want to help people. We want to respond. We want to DO something, fix something, make something happen, to help people with their complaints and hurts and anxieties and their conflicting emotions and passions. But note: in the long run, all Aaron ended up doing was to lead the people further away from their only real hope of salvation and deliverance. In the long run, he did more harm than good.

The Aaron school of compassion is alive and well in our churches today, but it works no better now than it did then. Our mission is not to provide people some false idol that promises quick fixes, grants blanket approval of all our desires, meets all our immediate needs, always sees to it we are treated fairly, keeps us from betrayal and loneliness and loss and pain. And it is certainly not our mission to be the Savior. Yes, we try and do those things the Savior would do, we try to do those things we believe our Savior would want us to do, but He is the Savior, not us ... and His ways are not always our ways; He can and often does use adversity to make us better, not bitter. Our mission is to direct people to the only Savior there is; our mission is to faithfully, consistently, patiently do what it takes to worship, honor, obey and wait for the only God Who alone truly and thoroughly saves ... and by word and example inspire others to do likewise.

Justice Roberts continued, and I close with this: "*Now commencement speakers are also expected to give some advice. They give grand advice, and they give some useful tips. The most common grand advice they give is for you to be yourself. It is an odd piece of advice to give people dressed identically, but you should — you should be yourself. But you should understand what that means. Unless you are perfect, it does not mean don't make any changes. In a certain sense, you should not be yourself. You should try to become something BETTER.*"

And we do become something better ... when we worship and serve and wait for the only God there is.