

Trying to Sculpt the Sculptor Palm Sunday

Exodus 32: 1-7

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.” Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD.” They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

Moses has been inaccessible for a while by now. For 40 days the people have been waiting. As they wait, fear-based rumors spread: “What if Moses isn’t coming back?” “What if God isn’t coming back?” “What if God ate Moses?” Sensing all the anxious energy, Aaron, who is second in command, offers a quick fix solution: he takes up an offering of all the gold and molds it into the famous golden calf. Some say the people turned away from God at this moment and chose to worship a different god, but I’m not so sure. You see, I think Aaron molds a golden calf, not because they maliciously want to worship another deity, but because they want to know that the God who brought them this far was still there with them.

I think we can all relate to the situation. We want to know that the God who brought us this far is still with us. There have been times in my life when faith was thin and I have needed God to show up, but instead God stayed invisible. And it is hard to follow an invisible God. I don’t talk about it much, but I almost gave up on this ministry calling once. It was when I was a chaplain at the Trauma One hospital. My supervisor went home for the night leaving all twelve floors of the hospital in my care. It was time to turn in for the night so I said my prayers asking God to take it easy on me. Just as I was about to fall asleep in the tiny chaplain bed—which felt like it only had four springs in it, when the overhead speaker in the room clicked and the voice on the intercom boomed, “CODE BLUE IN THE EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT! CODE BLUE!”

For those who don’t know, a code blue is where those who are on call drop whatever they are doing—including those trying to sleep on a four-spring-mattress—because a patient has coded and is in need of resuscitation. The chaplain is required to go to a Code Blue in case there is family present, to provide them some comfort. So I hopped out of the bed, got dressed, and walked down to the ER. When I arrived, I started looking around, scanning for the colony of scrubs clustered around a body, but there was no one there. “*Phew*” I thought to myself, “*Maybe I arrived on the scene too late. I’ll just go back to my four-spring mattress.*” But then I looked outside and that’s when I saw him. A young African American man who had collapsed just outside the Emergency Room’s sliding glass doors. Doctors were performing CPR, doing

rhythmic compressions on his chest as the family, who had dropped him off and went to go park in the garage, came around the bend. Seeing what had happened to their child, they began to run toward him screaming, "Please, Jesus Please!" I remember standing out there shaking in the cold, praying that same prayer: "Please, Jesus, Please!"

Now you should know: they teach us in our pastoral education courses that we aren't to insert ourselves in any way that tries to fix the situation. Our purpose is to be as they call it a, "non-anxious presence." But I can testify, as the moon as my witness, I was terrified and it was only about to get worse.

Eventually, the young man got carted in for surgery and the family got ushered into a waiting room with some chairs and a coffee table with some magazines scattered on top. It was protocol for the on-duty chaplain to go in the room with them...again, as a "non-anxious presence." So I sat there, my hands trembling. Most of the time they just sat there, not saying a word. The only thing they said to me entire time was when the mother looked me straight in the eyes with a penetrating stare contesting, "He's only twenty-seven years old. How could this happen? Tell me: Where is God?" I said to them the same thing Aaron had to confess to his people when they asked him the same question: "Where is God?" He had to be honest and say, "I don't know." After an hour or so, the doctors came in and told the family that there was nothing more they could do, and that their twenty-seven-year-old child was gone. I will never forget the sound of the mother wailing or the sight of the father pounding his knee with his fist. The doctor didn't have much of a bedside manner, so after he dropped the news, he pointed at me and said, "We have a chaplain right here if you need someone to talk to."

Now answer me this: what kind of comfort could I offer a family who just lost their child? I remember I tried to say a prayer. I tried to bring words of comfort, but there weren't any words. The mother's question, "Where is God?" kept pinballing around in my head. I'm sorry to admit it, but in that moment, I would have given anything to provide them with the comfort of knowing God was there with them. If I could've molded them a monument with my own two hands, I would've done it.

It is what Aaron is trying to do for his people. He's not being malicious. He was supposed to be a non-anxious presence in a highly anxious situation. He was supposed to have some answers. When the people asked him, "Where is God?" I bet he just wanted to say, "God is here!" but he couldn't say it with absolute certainty. After all, what good is a minister if they can't bring their people some comfort? So he tried by creating them a god they could put their eyes on. He gave into his anxiety. We can't blame him. It is hard following an invisible God.

I bet that is why some treat the bible as God's flawless operation manual for life. Because people need comfort in an uncertain world. And they get anxious needing something to cling to ease the anxiety. But this is how the bible becomes a golden calf.

I bet it is why the name of Jesus, in relationship to the church, comes with all sorts of heavy baggage these days. Because the church has molded Jesus into a version that fits their need for comfort; and as a result they sculpt a golden calf Jesus who needs to be defended, or who already believes what they believe. Anne Lamott said it best when she wrote, "You can safely assume

you've created God in your own image when it turns out that *God hates all the same people you do.*"

It is not a new thing. It's what the crowd did on Palm Sunday, as Jesus marches into Jerusalem. They are anticipating a social justice warrior who dethrones the empire because God is on his side. But we all know what happens next. As the week progresses and the "Hosannas" fall silent; as he is made an example of on the cross, his followers walk away wondering "Where is God?" And they didn't realize that God was right there, on the cross.

It makes we wonder how often we miss Jesus. I mean, he could be right there in front of us and we wouldn't see him because who he is doesn't line up with the version we've sculpted in our minds.

We used to attend a quirky little downtown church in Seattle. When I say little I mean it encompassed an entire city block, but today it's only about twenty-five members. When I say quirky it's because they now have a 24 hour a day, seven days a week homeless shelter in their basement. On Sunday mornings they get a lot of visitors on vacation wanting to experience the big downtown church only to find themselves in the company of a handful of people including the homeless with their dogs and drug addicts who scratch at their itchy veins. They have to keep a doorgreeter stationed in the back because often visitors sit through the first hymn and then decide they don't want to waste an hour feeling uncomfortable. So they get up to leave asking the doorgreeter, "Is there another downtown church close by?" One Sunday morning the pastor noticed a loner talking to himself, with ratty hair and soiled clothing—clearly he came off the street. She approached the man and said, "Good morning, I'm Pastor Heidi, what is your name?" He gave her an ornery look and said, "My name is Jesus Christ." She said her first instinct was to laugh and discount him, but then she remembered what Jesus told his disciples when he said: "Do you want to know what I look like? I'm the face of the thirsty and the hungry; I'm the face of the incarcerated and the cast away; I'm the face of the homeless and the sick." So the pastor held out her hand and said, "It is nice to see you again Jesus, we could really use your help."

You see, I'm afraid the church keeps wanting Jesus to save them, but they keep missing him because they have sculpted him into a golden calf version of what they think he should look or act like. But God can't be sculpted. Jesus could be a single mother with eight children. Jesus could be queer. Jesus would probably be diagnosed with schizophrenia these days for some of the things he says: "I'm the way, the truth, and the life." "If you've seen me, you've seen God." "My kingdom isn't of this world." I mean, the man sounds delusional! But you know what? It is him. Something deep inside of us knows it is him.

A golden calf might provide temporary comfort, but it is not going to offer true healing or joy; it won't bring equity into our communities or offer love to a broken world. That work Jesus leaves to us, who are sculpted in the image of the Body of Christ. Those who dare to recognize God's image in the most unlikely of characters and places, saying, "It is nice to see you again Jesus, we could really use your help."