

“The Steel Calf”
Exodus 19:20; 20:1-5a; 32:1-6
Rev. Chris Mereschuk
October 8, 2017

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Moses led the Israelites out of a land of violence, oppression, and exploitation and into a wilderness with unknown dangers, but with the promise that they were moving toward the Promised Land — a place of boundless liberation and hope — if only they would be guided by the God who set them free.

In those days, God called Moses to the top of Mount Sinai so that God would proclaim the law to Moses and Moses would then proclaim the law to God's people. But after wandering the desert for 40 years without yet arriving at their home, not recognizing the presence of God around them and within them, forgetting that they had been saved from the Land of Bondage, the people grew impatient. They demanded to see God so that they could be assured of God's presence and promises.

So the people came to Aaron, Moses's brother who had been appointed as priest. "Moses has abandoned us," they said, "and along with Moses, so has this God." So Aaron instructed the people to gather all their wealth, all that they had for golden earrings, bracelets, necklaces — "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." And he melted down these treasures to forge a Golden Calf. Building an altar before the idol and proclaiming a festival day of worship, Aaron proclaimed, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

And so the people abandoned the God who truly led them out of the Land of Bondage, and they, “offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being.”

Every three years when this scripture about the Golden Calf comes around in the lectionary, preachers throughout the world ask their congregation: What is your Golden Calf? What do you worship in place of God? To what have you given over your devotion, your sacrifices, your offerings of well-being and gratitude in place of God?

It is a theologically sound question, if not a predictable one. And I would submit to you that in our time and place, in our country, we have abandoned the God that led us and leads us out of bondage for the (small g) gods of money and guns.

The United States does not worship God. At least, the United States does not worship the One God of the Abrahamic faiths that so many claim: the God who commanded that we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly. The United States does not worship the God who became flesh and dwelt among us: The God who proclaimed liberation and love, who decried violence and retaliation, the God who cried out “No more of this!” in the face of violence.¹

No, the United States does not worship that God.

In the United States, we worship two gods: money and guns. And they are inextricably linked. Honestly, I am not certain which one causes greater destruction, but I *am* certain that guns show us the greatest visible evil.

As a country, we have offered up countless sacrifices to the gun god: sacrificing our literal well-being and sacrificing in the vain hope that this gun god will ensure our well-being. We have sacrificed wives and girlfriends, co-workers and employers, bystanders, neighbors, music fans, restaurant patrons, people of faith in houses of worship, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer folx, Black body after Black body. We have sacrificed children. We have sacrificed children. We have sacrificed children. Young children in elementary schools, teenagers in high schools, toddlers in homes that with great curiosity stumble upon dad’s shiny steel toy. We have sacrificed children.

And it has been acceptable. It has been an acceptable and pleasing sacrifice to the gun god. It has been an acceptable sacrifice to maintain our devotion to the gun god.

For me, the question is not what we have chosen to replace God — that answer is quite clear to me and likely to many of you. The harder question is why have we chosen it? I believe the answer is fear.

The Israelites demanded to see God, to know that God was present and that they were protected. In the wilderness of the unknown filled with perils and the abundance of scarcity, they were afraid. It was fear that led them to place their faith and devotion in a Golden Calf. It was fear that drove the Israelites to abandon the God who led them from

¹ Luke 22:51

the Land of Bondage. It was fear that caused them to seek comfort, and protection, and wholeness in an idol: the Golden Calf crafted from the sacrifices of their greatest remaining wealth.

And we have done the same for the same reason by sacrificing our greatest wealth so that we might worship, and seek protection, and seek wholeness from an idol made of cold, hard steel. The gun god idol of the Steel Calf is fabricated by our fear, and it grows continuously and monstrosly larger, fed by our fear.

Our fear-based and fear-fed gun god has led us back into a land of bondage, injustice, and violence of our own making and maintenance. We exist in a deeply engrained culture of violence — from the acquisition and colonization of the land we live on, to the building of an economic empire on the backs of enslaved people, to the maintenance of that empire through brutality, war, and threats of war at home and abroad. As a country and culture, we are a belligerent, terrifying and terrorizing, vengeful, and violent people. As a country and culture, the United States has been a model faithful disciple of the gun god. Thriving and gorging on our offerings and sacrifices at the altar of the Steel Calf, the gun god is pleased, and has ensured us that we will continue to live in this creation so long as we continue to make these sacrifices.

But there is Good News: You can choose to refuse to worship the gun god. The Steel Calf idol of the gun god can be melted down. It will be melted down.

Each time you refuse to participate in a sacrifice to the gun god, you melt just a bit of the Steel Calf.

Each time you refuse to allow fear to be an act of worship, you melt just a bit of the Steel Calf.

Each time you reject the narrative that a mythical and archaic constitutional right to own a firearm means an inalienable right to unfettered access to military grade weapons, you melt just a bit of the Steel Calf.

Each time you reject the narrative that more guns means more safety, that only a “good guy with a gun can stop a bad guy with a gun,” that “criminals will get guns no matter the laws,” you melt just a bit of the Steel Calf.

Each time you call or petition legislators to care more about the literal survival of humans and less about their pockets being lined by the NRA, you melt just a bit of the Steel Calf.

Each time you refuse to allow children under your care to play with toy guns, or when you yourself refuse to play first-person-shooter video games or paintball or air-soft or some form of entertainment that for some morally incomprehensible reason simulates the sensation of taking another person’s life, you melt just a bit of the Steel Calf.

Little by little, each one of us can and will melt down the gun god idol of the Steel Calf.

And on that day when we finally have that cauldron of melted steel, we will fashion new tools. Tools that dismantle our Culture of Death and construct a Culture of Life. From that we will forge shovels to dig out from the rubble of earthquakes. We will forge hammers and nails to rebuild homes destroyed by hurricanes. We will forge beams and girders to build schools and hospitals and shelters and water treatment plants. We will forge stock pots to feed all who hunger. We will forge bridges to cross great divides over treacherous terrain.

That gun god idol of the Steel Calf will be melted down — by God — and each one of us will have a role in melting it.

It takes 2,500 degrees of heat to melt steel. So let's build a fire.

Let us gather together the embers of loss, grief, anger, sadness, and bewilderment from the 58 lives lost in Las Vegas and the hundreds of lives left deeply wounded, the 27 lives gunned down in Sandy Hook, the estimated 150,000 lives ended by gun violence since Sandy Hook, the shameful scores of mass shootings of indigenous people and People of Color throughout our country's history, combining our fires with the candles lit in their memory and in their honor to ignite a fire that will not be extinguished by fear and despair, a fire that will burn so hot that the gun god idol of the Steel Calf will have no option but to melt.

And on that day we will truly hear, truly believe, and truly live out the words of the Prophet Isaiah:

*they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.²*

Amen.

² Isaiah 2:4