

# "THE FIRE AND THE CALF"

a sermon

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by

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Scripture Lesson--Exodus 32: 1-5; 15-24

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Along with the notables who have come to this pulpit over the years "trailing clouds of glory," perhaps it is proper that there should be an occasional import from the ranks of mediocrity. In preparing to make what I hope will be the right kind of holy noises for this occasion I recalled the remark of Dr. Samuel Johnson in the 18th century concerning those who must work toward a deadline: "He will labor on a barren topic until it is too late to change it or, in the ardor of invention, will diffuse into wild exuberance."

Hidden away in the book of Exodus is a story that brings to focus the theme of our sermon today. Moses, the great leader of Israel, had gone up into a mountain to commune with God. He and his people had been called to commission by the divine promise, "I will be your God, and you shall be my people," and in their wilderness sojourn Moses had kicked their reluctant feet along the road to their heavenly destiny. When he delayed to come down from the mountain the people began to murmur and complain. They came to Aaron their priest and asked him to make them gods. Aaron became the willing barometer of their opinion, and in seeking to define God's nature and way according to their desires, he fashioned for them a golden calf. Moses arrived from his sojourn on the mountain to find the people deep in idolatry, dancing like aborigenes around their idol. He was indignant and in his anger destroyed the calf, had it ground into powder, put it into the water, and made the people drink it. Then in a dramatic reckoning he turned to Aaron to ask: why have you brought this great sin upon the people? Aaron's reply is a classic in the art of evasion:

You know the people how they are set on mischief...I said to them, Whosoever hath any gold, let them break it off. Then I cast it into the fire, and there came out this calf.

That answer hardly has the dignity of Flip Wilson's "The devil made me do it." Despite his disclaimer, the record is very clear: with his own hand Aaron had fashioned the golden calf with a graving tool. Here we have a curious, ingenious, transparent lie. His is the sole responsibility, yet the claim, "I cast it into the fire, and out came this calf."

But I am old, and good and bad  
Are woven in a crazy plaid.  
I sit and say, "The world is so;  
And he is wise who lets it go.  
A battle lost, a battle won--  
The difference is small, my son."

But is our only valid response to the human dilemma nothing more than cynical detachment or some dispirited "waiting for Godot"? Walt Whitman once remarked that "Music is what awakens in a person when the instruments remind him." The Christian faith provides both the music and the instruments that can speak to this noon-day torpor of the human spirit. Religion comes to life in us when we turn from the endless distractions of the outer world to the deepest center of human life, there to face the fact that so long as we live we are in control of some measure of potency. We all have the power to stand on our few inches of earth as persons who are distinct and separate beings in whom is lodged a unit of life, people called of God to stand up and stand out. Robert Frost puts the question in his poem, "Reluctance":

When to the heart of man  
Was it ever less than a treason  
To go with the drift of things  
And yield with a grace to reason  
And bow and accept the end  
Of a love or a season?

Since I believe that a valid function of Christian proclamation is to see that some things are not forgotten, let me suggest that at two points in particular our faith challenges our detachment and cynicism. (1) Our life in Christ calls us beyond pedantry or sleek adventures in shrewdness and self-interest to a rebirth of compassion that will match the vast and imponderable agony of our world. The heart of the human venture is the enlargement of sensibility to a great bond of union. The compassion of which we speak is a communion of being, the sense of the human burden and the burden of being human. Perhaps all that self was ever meant to be is life in touch with life.

I have often recalled Camus' ringing indictment that the church in our time has lost its prophetic vigor and the virtues of revolt and indignation that marked its earliest days. Who will label our glib heresies and our cultural idolatries poisonous if Christians have neither the sensitivity nor the wisdom to do so? The massive injustices of our day call us to be crusaders against the trivializing of life, the dehumanizing of the human creature, and the false orders that pretend to give meaning to existence. I believe that the great tragedy of life is in that which dies inside us while we live--the death of faith, hope, love, and awareness. We have no control over the fact of our existence, but we do hold supreme command over the meaning of that existence for us.

(2) The New Testament clearly reveals that a foundational attribute of a Christian life style is the freedom and willingness to risk life. This is set forth in our Lord's familiar paradox: "Whoever would save his life shall lose it. And whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's shall find it." True Christian pilgrimage always involves a going out, not knowing where, asking no security save the garrisoning of grace. Luther voiced this in his great hymn:

"Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also." I fear that those of us who live and work in an academic community face a particular peril. The real treason in the life of scholarship is not the failure to maintain our minds in a quest for truth nor the use of knowledge for brutish ends but the surrender of the best our minds have told us--our ignoble reticence and the refusal to serve and fight for loyalties which the pursuit of truth has given us. Can it be that our age has experienced tragic enslavements of the mind because of our indifference to great values and high passions?

In the venture and risk of the Christian pilgrimage we are sustained by that divine power that works through all the drab and hubbub of life. As we move toward our homeland let us remember that colloquial rendering of John 1: 14, "God pitched his tent among us." He has joined our journey. Our Lord left home to go on the road with the strange good news of God's love for us all. There came the day in little Nazareth when he cleared the bench and walked out into the world to call humble folk to the only thing that finally matters. Even when his life was finally destroyed the Jesus journey went on--on the Emmaeus road, to Saul on the Damascus road, to the disciples after the resurrection, and to countless others down the centuries. We, too, have heard the good tidings and have joined the great company. And the strength of our pilgrimage is that we never walk alone. God is going home with us. So thus can we pray in the words of the villager from Maxwell Anderson's "Lost in the Stars":

Lord of the heart, look down upon  
Our earthly pilgrimage.  
Look down upon us where we walk  
From bright dawn to old age,  
And give us light not shed by any sun.