

“Tourist Traps”

Exodus 32: 1-14

As you may be able to tell, we’ve skipped a head a bit on our journey. To fill us in on what we missed, in the last few chapters, the people have continued to wonder on their journey. They have learned more about their God, learned more about who God calls them to be as the people of God. In the last few chapters, the people have continued their journey while discovering their identity and how this holy identity will shape their faith.

At this point on the journey, the people have entered into the covenantal agreement with God. They have promised to be God’s people and all that entails. If you want to know more about that means, just read from Exodus 20 up to this particular chapter.

Here is the cliff note version of what took place: God has spoken to the people, spoken the Ten Commandments. God has given them in detail, I might add. In the chapters up to this point, God has lined out all the ways this group of people are to be a community with one another and with God. It is all there for them to read and understand. It’s twelve chapters worth of materials.

Through these laws and rituals, all of which direct their lives together as the people of God, God tells the people more than once that 1) I am the Lord our God,

who brought you out of Egypt, who brought you out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me. And 2) God tells the people you shall not make for yourself an idol, going as far as saying do not make gods of silver, gods of gold and set them alongside of me. More than once, God has shown the people how to be in relationship with their God.

And yet, and yet, the first time God brings Moses up to the mountaintop to write everything down, to write down the covenant which both sides agreed to uphold...what happens? The people forget their God. The people forget the power and might which brought them out of Egypt. The people forget that God brought forth life for them time and time again, making a way out of no way, bringing forth the water of life from a dry and desolate place. The first time God trusts God's people to wait upon the Lord, what happens? They forget all that God has done for them and turn to another.

The people ask Aaron to fashion for them an idol. They ask him to create a god which they can see, which they can hold, and more importantly, they ask Aaron to create for them a god which they can control. When it appears Moses has lingered too long on the mountaintop, the people create their own gods, transferring their experiences and knowledge of God to inanimate objects. For forty days and forty nights, Moses is on the mountaintop and during that time the covenant is broken. Sound familiar?

Usually when we as readers hear the term: “forty days and forty nights”, it is never a good sign. Because it means chaos is taking over. Broken relationships are the norm for the people of God. It means that the people are ignoring the promises given to them by their God, falling for the quick fixes promised to them by the systems of wealth and greed. Any time we hear forty days and forty nights, or forty years of wandering in the wilderness, it becomes a signal for us to pay attention because something is not right. The people have turned away from their God, buying into the slick advertisements which promise everything will be alright if they just ignore the hurt and brokenness these systems need to survive. Any time we hear the term “forty”, it is a clue to us as readers chaos is taking over and destinations of hope have been forgotten.

In our text today, we soon discover the people have turned away from their God. And in doing so, have become distracted from their journey of becoming the people God created and calls them to be.

Now let me clarify something here. During this series, we’ve talked about detours and road blocks, those things on our journey which prevent us from moving forward. In this text, that is not what we are talking about when it comes to this golden calf. This thing is a tourist trap. You know, objects and places which distract us from our journey ahead. Those shiny things which are seemingly

impressive, which promise a quick way to easy street, when all they do is lead us astray.

We've all seen the signs for these things on our road trips...Stop here to see the Biggest Ball of Twine in the United States. Or come see the largest collection of spoons... all those roadside museums which promise a quick stop for something amazing and life changing when in reality all it does is take away precious time from our journeys. We soon find ourselves farther behind than we were, getting to our final destination later than we all hoped. These tourist traps promise so many things but all they really do is distract us from where we really need to be, making us forget where we hoped to be by now on our journey. These tourist traps main purpose is to get us to stop and ignore reality for a while.

Now again, let me clarify. I will be the first to admit that there is a fine line between must see attractions and overrated tourist traps. Tourist traps are easy to spot. They are flashy and tacky. We find ourselves questioning why anyone thought this would be a good idea and why anyone would stop for us a ridiculous idea. For example, in South Carolina, on 1-95, there is an infamous tourist trap called South of the Border. It was and still is an overpriced gift shop featuring a guy in a large sombrero. Its only claim to fame is that it sits south of the North Carolina border. It is intentionally tacky and if you stop there, be prepared to lose hours and hours on your journey. One would think people would see this guy in a

sombrero and keep going, realizing how tacky this thing really is but daily, daily...thousands of people stop at this place. We can dress it up however we like, but it is still a tourist trap. It distracts people from where they want to go, where they need to go as they journey towards their hoped for destination.

Which brings us back to this golden calf. It gets a lot of blame but in reality, its creation was the people's choice. They wanted it. They asked for it. And Aaron, the one who should have known better as Moses' right hand man, the one who has heard God speak, the one who has dwelled in the presence of God time and time again, Aaron, as the one who should have known better than to stop at this tourist trap, is quick to fashion it for the people, just to keep them happy and in ignorant bliss for a while.

Aaron tells the people, "Take the gold from your ears, take all the plunder you took from Egypt, take all the signs of oppression, and give them to me. I will fashion for you gods. We are told he crafts it, forms it into a mold. This process of creating the gold calf did not happen instantaneously. It took time to create. This creation of the golden calf, this tangible symbol of the people's oppression took time to make and build.

And then Aaron, realizing what he has done at this point, places the idol beside the altar of the Lord. He coops the rituals and rites of worship to the Lord

and transfers them to this golden calf, this idol. In doing so, he hopes that this will cover his basis...you know worship God on Sunday for an hour and then worship the gods of the world the rest of the time.

We read ahead a bit and learn that when Moses does finally come down off the mountain, he is furious. He realizes what chaos has ensued. It is a free for all. No rules. No regulations. Everyone looking out for his or her own self interest. People are partying like there is no tomorrow. They are ignoring the very ways of community and authentic relationship with one another, turning their back on God even more.

Moses becomes angry and destroys the golden calf. He melts it down, and makes the people drink this water which is scattered with the ashes of their deception. Then he turns to Aaron who simply says... "The people made me do it. I did nothing wrong. They wanted a god so I took their gold, gold which they forced upon me and threw it into fire. And poof, out popped this golden calf. What was I supposed to do? Aaron complete ignores the fact that he was complicit in the building and making of this tangible sign of the people's oppression.

It is easy for us to sit back some two thousand years later and say we would never fall for any of false idols, that we can spot tourist traps and imitations a mile away. It is easy for us to say that nothing would ever distract us from our journey

as we strive to become the people God created and calls us to be. Yet, I'm also sure that all of us, whether we want to admit it or not, know that this is not true 100 percent of the time.

If we are honest with ourselves, we know that we can and do make idols out of just about anything...money, jobs, certain people, power, might, popularity, the comfortable position of not wanting to make anyone mad, the hope that we don't make waves, the idea that we just want to stay in our bubble while the rest of the world falls apart. All these things are just empty imitations of the real deal, yet place all our hopes and trust in them and are surprised, hurt, and disappointed each and every time when these things fail to live up to their promises of quick fixes and easy solutions.

Please don't hear me say that I have all the answers or that I am saying that I have never fallen for tourist traps along my journey through life. What I will say is that maybe it is time we as humanity, as people of faith, stop settling for empty promises. Maybe it's time we stop settling for poor imitations of the real deal. Maybe it's time we as people of faith admit that we have become distracted from our journey, that we have become complicit in the making of the systems which oppress, that we have forgotten our destination of making the Kingdom of God a reality here on earth for all of God's people. Maybe its time to see the tourist traps for what they really are...shiny objects which promises a lot but fail to deliver

every single time and get back to our task at hand...keeping our destination in mind, keeping the vision of God's Kingdom alive and more importantly, working together to make it a reality here on earth just as it is in heaven. After all, we all know that there is no replacement for the real deal. Thanks be to God. Amen.