

LIVING IN THE SHADOWS

The Shadow of Idols

Exodus 32:1-14

March 15, 2026

Moses has been gone way too long. That's how it all starts. The people camped at the base of the mountain. Somewhere up there, hidden in the clouds and the fire, Moses is with God. At first, that must have been thrilling to imagine. Their leader, Moses, communing face-to-face with God Almighty. But then some days pass. Weeks. It's all quiet on the mountain. No word. No sign that Moses will ever come back.

Perhaps you've noticed that waiting does something to people. Patience eventually gives way to dis-ease. Unanswered prayers provoke uncomfortable questions. *What if he isn't coming back? What if we misunderstood the whole thing? What if we are out here all alone?*

Aaron! Make us gods who will go before us. As for that man Moses, the one who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don't know what happened to him.

They don't disavow God. They don't abandon the exodus story. Not altogether. They're still using the language of faith. They just need something. Something solid. Something they can see with their eyes. Something they can touch. And perhaps most of all, something that will stay right where they put it.

Aaron—who should know better—doesn't even hesitate. He collects their gold. He melts it down. He shapes it into a calf. And then he says the most chilling words in the whole story: "This here is your god, who brought you out of the land of Egypt."

The words are chilling because they are the same words, the same story, the same name, *Elohim*, used to describe a lump of gold.

The shift is sly and subtle. Aaron simply meets the demands of his people, a god you can see. A god that

stays put. A god made with human hands that will go where you take it, that will silently assent to all your sin, and never once will this god make you wait.

The late theologian and beloved Wabash College professor William Placher called it the "domestication of transcendence," or the slow taming of a wild God. I think in Exodus 32 the sin is not atheism. I think it is domestication.

Aaron didn't lead his people away from religion. He simply shrank God down to a size they could manage. He gave them something to hold, something to cling to. And they were grateful. They held a festival in honor of this idol god and Aaron.

Perhaps this is how the faithful always lose their way. Not outright rejection, but reduction. Not "there is no God" but "this is **our** God." The one we possess. The one that's useful, predictable, and manageable. Confirms our arrangements. Will never surprise us or ask us to change.

But let me tell you something about the golden calf. It wears many disguises. They are rational. They are respectable. They even look like religious devotion. You don't set out to build an idol. You set out to feel a little safer. You set out to belong. To know the future is going to be okay. And slowly, quietly, the thing you built to secure your life begins to seduce you. And without even noticing, you stop ruling it, and it starts ruling you.

I watch it happen with political tribes. People I love—good people, faithful people, people who pray—who have slowly allowed a political identity to become the lens through which they read scripture rather than the other way around. Who find themselves defending things they once would have condemned because their

team is doing it now. Who have stopped asking what the gospel requires and started asking what my side needs. The writer Anne Lamott says you can safely assume you have created God in your image when it turns out your God hates all the same people you hate.

We craft gods who hate what we hate and bless what we bless. And the trick is that it doesn't feel like idolatry. It feels like loyalty. It doesn't look like a lump of melted gold. It looks like faithfulness. It is God, domesticated.

I'm watching it happen with this desperate need for certainty that fashions faith into a kind of fortress or turns scripture into a weapon. I'm listening to preachers who brick over every mystery, who treat every honest question as a threat. And I do not hear them proclaim the wild, free, mountain-shaking, untamable God of scripture. Their God is too small.

Friends, if you find that your God never challenges you, never unsettles you, never asks more of you than you are willing to give—your God is too small. And a small God cannot save you. You are bowing to an idol.

Different shapes. Same move. We all have our idols. We take the gold we love and twist it into the shape of God. We build these things because we think we need them, but they own us.

Someone wrote to me recently. He's been sitting in our pews off and on for a couple of years. And I can tell by the words in his email that he's been paying attention. Here's what he wrote: "I'm still waiting for one church leader to say the thing they believe. Not the careful version. The real one."

I read his words, and I felt something I didn't expect. Not defensiveness, but a kind of recognition because I knew what he meant. And I could point to the places where I had softened the edges, or changed the subject, or told myself it was pastoral wisdom, sensitivity, a matter of timing. And maybe that's true. But could it be Aaron casting a calf to calm the crowd?

Placher wrote that Christian faith is not usually a call to caution. So let me try to say the thing.

Followers of Jesus Christ are those who believe that the God of all creation took on human flesh. That in Jesus, God walked among the poor and the outcast. He taught in parables that turned the world upside down and upset the authorities of his time. We follow a God executed by empire. And we believe that the cross is not a symbol of power's triumph but a repudiation of it. That the resurrection is God's verdict on what we call strength. And if we believe this, it means that faith cannot be recruited to bless power's violence when our Lord condemned it.

We follow the Prince of Peace. He is our truth, our life, our way. This means that for those of us who follow Jesus, for those of us who belong to the Church, our way of being in the world must show that violence is never the Christlike answer.

When the name of God is used to justify the brutality of conquest, when the cross is planted in the soil of supremacy, when the bombardment of homes and displacement of families and sacrifice of sacred life is blessed in Jesus' name—we do not get to look away or turn down the volume. We do not get to choose a gospel that costs us nothing.

The church that falls before false gods where it is called to bear witness, the church that trades prophetic proclamation for cultural influence, the church that makes its peace with power because the alternative is too costly—that church has not only lost its way. It has lost its God.

Back up on the mountain, before Moses ever comes down, God sees what is happening below. And God is furious. God says to Moses, "Leave me alone. I'm going to consume them."

And that's when Moses does something truly extraordinary. Moses pushes back on God. Specifically, he reminds God of the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In fact, as you read the chapter, in the whole story, Moses is the only one who gets the history exactly right. "Your people, God, whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt, with your great power and

your mighty hand." In other words, Moses points the covenant back at God. *You promised. By your own name, you promised.*

And then, as if it is the most natural thing in all the world, the writer of Exodus simply reports, "And the Lord changed his mind."

The living God was moved. Changed. Responsive to the prayer of a stubborn man on behalf of a faithless people. Now this God, this is the God that no idol can imitate. This God is not static. Not predictable. Not managed. This God is alive. This God is in relationship. This God is capable of surprise. And most of all, this God is defined by grace.

So, Moses comes down the mountain. The calf shining in the sun. The people dancing in the field. And Moses—who has just fought for these people with everything he has—sees for the first time what they've been building in his absence. And the tablets he is carrying shatter on the ground. They are a symbol of a devastating truth. You cannot hold the covenant and the calf. You cannot serve two masters. You cannot worship God and your own creation. One must go.

And thank God this is not the end of the story. Those shattered tablets are rewritten. The people who danced are not consumed. They are forgiven. Like us, they are still stubborn. Still rebellious. Still prone to build new calves every time the mountain goes quiet.

And always held by a God who refuses to let us go. The God Moses argued with on the mountain. The God who heard. Who changed. Who kept the promise. Not the mascot of our preferences. Not the chaplain of our comforts. Not the patron saint of our side.

God Almighty. The wild, mountain-shaking God of the exodus, who keeps covenant with wandering people. Who will not be put in a box or carried into a battle or bless what God opposes.

That God is still alive. Still calling. Asking us right now to keep the covenant. To refuse the gilded calf, whatever shape it takes—our tribe, our certainty, our comfort,

our conquest. To bear witness in this moment to a Lord who finds the excluded, the vulnerable, the victims of violence whose names we will never know, and says, "You, child, you belong to me."

This morning, we baptized two babies into that very story. You heard the words. Child of the covenant. Grace embodied. And all of us, held not by what we build with our hands, but by the God who refuses to let us go. That is the covenant. And you just promised to keep it.

Now, it's time to choose. Amen.