

## **Tide, Tigers, and True God**

### 6 – Strength for the Journey

Exodus 32:1-14

Psalm 106:1-6, 12-23

Matthew 22:1-14

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Dr. Edwin Gray Hurley

Tide, Tigers, and True God - I thought of beginning today by simply holding up a football and saying, “Behold your god, O South Highland!” But then I reconsidered – I do want to be able to make it through to the end of this sermon and this season. Football season in the South – there is nothing like it, and I love it, in spite of the beating my alma mater, Vanderbilt, took against the Tide last night. I love the excitement of this time of the year, the energy, the friendly rivalries.

But then sometime it gets not so friendly, in the extreme as in the retired Texas state trooper, of all things, who went down to Auburn and poisoned the trees because of his love for Alabama. Crazy! I once was driving to Auburn for a funeral and I asked someone in the Church here if they knew where the Episcopal Church is located in Auburn. This person asked, “Why would I ever go there?” They were not referring to the Episcopal Church!

We do take our football real seriously down here, and it is risky to say anything about it, and certainly to hint that it might be an idol, like the golden calf was for Israel. I can hear someone about now saying , “Now be careful preacher!”

Our own Neil Davis, an Auburn graduate, and his architecture firm had the honor of designing the big expansion of the Saturday Cathedral over in Tuscaloosa, Bryant-Denny Stadium, with its 101,821 seats. It is a magnificent structure with an almost worshipful grand entrance along the North Side. Under-stated it is not. I stood on those steps last night at the Walk of the Champions watching the Alabama team arrive for the game gazing at the five bronze statues for each Alabama coach who has led the Tide to a national championship. In addition, stones are laid in the pathway leading to the stadium recognizing all of Alabama's SEC and national championship teams throughout the years. Finally, there are also two bronze statues of Alabama football players at the entrance to the North end zone, and the two statues are holding a large Alabama flag.

Saturdays in Alabama and across the South are fantastic. Lots of fun. But this is serious religion for many, with of course its own set rituals, as the bands play, the National Anthem is sung, the coin is tossed, the cheerleaders cheer, and the game gets underway. This question, do their events take the place of primary loyalty and love that belongs to the Lord God alone? Adam Borneman asks, “What liturgy is setting the rhythm and tone of our lives? The one on Saturday afternoon or the one on Sunday morning?”<sup>1</sup> Adam goes on to identify when football becomes idolatry:

- If football on Saturday is the reason that we can't talk to a certain person during the following week, then it's an idol.
- If football on Saturday is the reason we're a jerk on Sunday, then it's an idol.
- If football is why we're upset with someone scheduling their wedding on Saturday, then it's an idol.
- If football on Saturday governs our emotions, disposition, and attitude in a way that the gospel does not, then it's an idol.
- If football on Saturday ultimately determines whether or not we have a good weekend (or a good fall!), then it's an idol.

You see, if football or anything other than the living God revealed at Sinai and the Cross is the object of our highest loyalty and love, then we better check ourselves. The story of the Golden Calf brings us a vivid dramatic reminder of how quickly we can forget the real God and go off after idols. And for football, you can substitute your idol dujour; money, sex, power, pleasure, cars, houses, anything other than God that commands your highest loyalty and love. The story of the golden calf unfolds in a series of three conversations.

## I

**First there is the conversation between Aaron and the people of Israel.** It only takes but a few days after Moses goes up the mountain alone to meet with God before the Israelites begin to grow bored with the covenant God has established with his people. He has led in leading them out of Egypt and through the Sea; he demands loyalty, the rejection of other gods and the worship only of the One God. God said, "Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples."<sup>ii</sup>

Ironically it is as Moses is up on the Mountain receiving the full game plan, the Ten Commandments, that the people break the first one, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." While the cat's away the mice start to play. The people grow restless and implore Aaron, Moses brother, the chief Levitical priest, God's number one representative, who has been left in charge, to make them a more accessible god, something more user-friendly, something they can touch and feel and see, something they can put on a stand and parade throughout the camp. "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us, as for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt – we do not know what has happened to him."<sup>iii</sup> And Aaron, high priest though he is, is spineless and agrees to do what the people want. "Sure fellows, whatever you say. Whatever makes you happy."

He calls the people to bring him all their gold, rings, bracelets, earrings, all that material wealth God alone provided for them from the Egyptians when they left in haste, gold to help them as they make their way through the desert until they get established in the Promised Land. Aaron takes what God gives, melts it all down and makes an immense molten calf idol. And they bow down to it and he says, "These are your gods, O Israel." You have to wonder what got into Aaron. Was the pressure on him really so intense that he not only takes the gold the Lord God had provided but molds this image, like unto a pagan Canaanite god and sets up idol worship? Aaron appears to lack character and courage.

Psalm 106 remembers this betrayal,

“They made a calf at Horeb and worshiped a cast image.  
They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass.  
They forgot God, their Savior.”<sup>iv</sup>

Paul in beginning his letter to the Romans, just to let you know this idolatry is not only a Jewish problem, but a universal human problem, sets the tendency toward idolatry in its most comprehensive form.

“For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.”<sup>v</sup>

Have you ever noticed what some people are putting on tombstones these days? I spend more time than most in cemeteries, and it is astonishing to see what some people put on these markers commemorating their loved ones. We generally expect to see a cross or a star of David, but I have seen pick-up trucks, and dollar signs, guitars. Idols. I would hate to depend on any of those things for my ultimate salvation. We are not far removed from Israel of old, are we?

I am reading a wonderful new biography of the German pastor and martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer by Eric Metaxis and he records how in the 1930's the German Protestant Churches, mostly Lutherans and Presbyterians, were co-opted by the Nazis into forming a state church under Hitler that would become a tool for Nazi propaganda. A man named Rosenberg was made the German Minister of Religion. Rosenberg's written plans for the National German Nazi Church included,

- the immediate cessation of publication and dissemination of the Bible in Germany.
- Hitler's Mein Kampf being declared the greatest document ever written.
- Churches clearing away from their altars all crucifixes, Bibles and pictures of saints
- On the altars there must be nothing but Mein Kampf, and to the left of the altar a sword.
- On the day of its formation the Christian cross must be removed from all churches, cathedrals and chapels and it must be superseded by the only unconquerable symbol, the swastika.<sup>vi</sup>

It is horrifying to remember how much of that was actually enacted in the cultured sophisticated land of Martin Luther's Reformation, and how quickly many in the churches turned

away from the teachings of the Bible. Likewise among Israel. The people forgot the covenant of the Lord and made manageable material gods in their own image. A cow! They put on a big self-serving religious pageant, like all the surrounding cultures, bowing before the pagan altar, and then breaking out the wine. “The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.”<sup>vii</sup> **First, there is the conversation between Aaron and the people of Israel resulting in the erection of this false idol.**

## II

**Second, there is the conversation between Moses and the Lord.** The Lord is livid with anger over what has happened in the camp down below, and commands Moses, “Go down at once! Your people,” (notice God tells Moses these are your folks), “Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them. . . . Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them.”<sup>viii</sup>

God is rightly angry with what the people have done. Divine Justice is in order, and God seems prepared to mete it out, and bring something on the order of another well-deserved Flood. But Moses suddenly intervenes. He stands between God and the people as the mediator. “Moses implored the Lord his God on behalf of the people. Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Moses reminds God these are God’s chosen.” Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants.”<sup>ix</sup> Moses demonstrates incredible courage and love for both his people and the Lord, and is willing to go to the mat for them.

Then this incredible response from God, “The Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.”<sup>x</sup> This is an immense turning point in how we understand the depth of divine compassion, and the power of faithful people to intervene. This should be a strong reminder to us of the importance and effectiveness of our prayers and our actions on behalf of others. Who are you praying for? Who are you speaking up for? Who are you standing in the gap for? Moses stands and prays for his people, and God’s wrath is transformed into mercy. They will get another chance. **Second, there is the conversation between Moses and the Lord.**

## III

**Third, there is the conversation between Moses and the People.** As Moses comes down the mountain, tablets of the Law in his arms, his plea for mercy turns to tough love, harsh rebuke, and severe discipline, as he addresses the revelers. Seeing the wild partying and the gross idol worship, Moses angrily throws down those tablets to the ground, reflecting visually in those broken tablets the covenant that the people have broken. He melts down that golden calf and makes the people drink it, a rather warm broth no doubt, as if to say, here is how effective the idol you have been worshipping is in saving you.

Moses demonstrates the sort of tough love, parents often have to give our children, because we love them so deeply. There are consequences to the sins the people have committed. But still there is forgiveness and another chance. Perhaps most amazing is that weak-willed Aaron, under whose watch all this idolatry happens, slips through, and he is given another chance. **Third, there is the conversation between Moses and the people.**

## IV

Moses then stands in the gate of the camp and asks, “Who is on the Lord’s side? Come to me!” And this leads to a fourth conversation. What do you do on the other side of idolatry? What do you do on the other side of willful defiance of God? What do you do after you have sinned? It is not enough to melt down your idols, you have to replace them with the true God. You have to repent, turn around and go in a new direction. You have to leave the way you are going and follow after the Lord. That is what our pattern of weekly worship is all about. We need to be here to say to God, you alone are our highest love and loyalty. You alone we will worship and serve. You who made us, and preserved us, and blessed us, are the only one to whom we will bow in humble praise and adoration. **This fourth conversation occurs between us – we the people – and God.**

Stewardship Season is an opportunity for us to have such a conversation. A time to reflect on the quality of our worship, and our relationship with God, and to answer with a response of faith, as we return to the Lord our Time, our Talents and our Treasure. It is a time to remember the promises of God, and make promises back to God. It has been said that the most accurate biography of our lives is written in our calendars and our check books. How we spend our time. How we spend our money.

Stewardship is not simply about enabling the church to pay its bills. It is much more than that. It is a statement about where God is in our lives. It is about becoming fully alive in our relationship with the Lord and his body on earth, the Church, in order that life may come to the earth. Jesus said, “I come that you may have life, and have it abundantly.”

When we offer God our Time, our Talents and our Treasure, we release them in order that God can take them and transform them to do amazing things. When we sign a pledge commitment card and promise to return to God a worthy portion of all which the Lord has entrusted to our care, we are building up a wall against idolatry. We are demonstrating we are on the Lord’s side. We are showing we will not cave into a culture that would make a god of politics or entertainment or pleasure, or football! We will worship, we will stand to build up the ways of the Lord as they are revealed to us in Holy Scripture. A verse from a wonderful old hymn “O For a Closer Walk With God” puts it,

“The dearest idol I have known, Whate’er that idol be,  
Help me to tear it from thy throne, And worship only thee.”<sup>xi</sup>

In one of the darkest periods of English history, during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century English Civil War between the Royalists and the Puritans, a country church was built. To this day you can see over its west door this inscription.

“When all things sacred were throughout the nation either destroyed or profaned, Sir Robert Shirley, Baronet, founded this church whose singular praise is to have done the best things in the worst of times, and hoped them in the most calamitous.”<sup>xii</sup>

That is what we are called to do, Saturday, Sunday, throughout the week. Enjoy your football – or your fishing, or you stamp collecting. But worship God alone. Return to God and keep your part of the Covenant. Remember the Lord. Repent of your Sin. Receive life that is truly life, fully alive with the passion of Christ.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Adam Borneman, Borno De Facto Blog, 10-5-11

<sup>ii</sup> Exodus 19:5

<sup>iii</sup> Exodus 32:1

<sup>iv</sup> Psalm 106:19-21

<sup>v</sup> Romans 1:20-23

<sup>vi</sup> Eric Metaxis, Bonhoeffer - Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy, p. 122

<sup>vii</sup> Exodus 32:6

<sup>viii</sup> Exodus 32:7,8,10

<sup>ix</sup> Exodus 32:12-13

<sup>x</sup> Exodus 32:14

<sup>xi</sup> The Hymnbook, “O For A Closer Walk With God,” p.391

<sup>xii</sup> Peter Gomes, Strength for the Journey, p. 186