

With So Much at Stake

Acts 20:27-38

The Eighth Sunday after Trinity, July 22, 2018

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

In the wilderness after the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt, Moses went up on Mount Sinai to receive instructions about building the tabernacle. While he was up there the people of Israel became restless. They went to Moses' brother Aaron and told him, "We do not know what has become of Moses. Make us gods to go before us." Aaron then told the people to bring him their gold jewelry which they did. He took it and fashioned it into the form of a calf. Once Aaron made the idol Israel proclaimed, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt." When Aaron saw this, he build an altar for the idol and proclaimed to Israel, "Tomorrow will be a festival to the Lord."

Now, what is so bad about this? After all Israel had experienced a miraculous redemption out of Egypt. Some supernatural power had saved them from the hand of Pharaoh. Some supernatural power had sent the plagues against Pharaoh and had sent Moses to demand Israel's release. Some supernatural power had opened the Red Sea in front of them so that they could escape the army of Egypt. Some supernatural power had closed the sea on the Egyptians so that they drowned. Obviously these supernatural powers were gods. The nations all had gods. Surely all of the nations could not be wrong about how many gods there were. If they held that there was more than one god, surely there was more than one god. So what is so wrong with saying that this golden calf represents the gods who brought Israel out of Egypt?

Furthermore when Aaron names the supernatural powers that brought them out of Egypt, he calls them, "the Lord." He specifically says that on the morrow after the calf was built that there would be a festival to the Lord. He does not announce a festival to a foreign god. He does not announce a festival to Baal or to Ra or any other god of the nations. He announces a festival to the Lord. See there, Aaron and Israel are worshipping the Lord the whole time! They are simply worshipping the Lord with a golden idol. That is all. They are simply ascribing the Lord the same supernatural qualities that the nations ascribe to their gods. Surely there should be some resemblance between the supernatural qualities of the gods of the nations and the supernatural qualities of the god of Israel.

But even you know this is not right. Even you know the covenant that the Lord made with Israel to which Israel had already agreed. Even you know that one of the stipulations of the covenant was that Israel was to have no other gods. If Israel was to have no other gods and the Lord was the only God of Israel, then Israel could not speak of "gods" that had saved them out of Egypt. Israel could only speak of "God" who saved them out of Egypt. So it is obviously wrong to speak of gods who brought them out of Egypt.

Furthermore the covenant to which Israel had already agreed stipulated that Israel shall make no graven images of God. They shall not make images of the fish of the sea or the birds of the air or the beasts of the field. Even if they did think like Aaron did that they were worshipping the Lord and they were just doing it with a golden calf, even though they have the

right God in their minds, a golden calf is an image of a beast of the field and is therefore forbidden in the covenant to which Israel had already agreed.

In spite of what Israel had agreed to she violated the covenant to which she had agreed by asserting that there were multiple gods when there were not and by asserting that the golden calf represented the one true God on earth.

But really no big whoop right? After all wasn't Israel's heart in the right place? They were simply trying to establish some worship form for the God who had saved them out of Egypt. That was what Moses was receiving. He just had not received it yet and Israel wanted to worship God. Is there anything so wrong with wanting to worship God? After all Israel did not invoke the names of foreign gods. Aaron still said that they would offer a sacrifice to the Lord. They would simply do it with this calf. As long as the true God's name is used surely it is no big deal how He is worshipped.

But that is not the case. While Aaron may have wanted to worship the Lord and was trying to make this calf ok by calling for a festival to the Lord, the people still referred to "gods" as if there were more than one God. Once they got the worship form wrong, they got God wrong. God knows this, and He was angry with them.

God planned to kill every Israelite there. He planned to put them all to death. They had broken the covenant to which they had agreed. He was no longer under any obligation to protect them or to preserve them. He planned to kill them all and being God He had the power to do it.

Moses talked him out of it, but when Moses saw what they had done, Moses burned the idol and ground it into powder, scattered it on a brook, and made the people drink the water. He asked for anyone who was on the Lord's side to come to him. In spite of the fact that Aaron had tried to make the idol worship into the worship of the Lord, only the tribe of Levi rallied to Moses when he asked who was for the Lord. Apparently the other tribes were not fooled by Aaron who tried to make it ok by calling it a festival to the Lord. The tribes knew that they were not worshipping the Lord. They did not rally to Moses. The Levites strapped on their swords and killed their neighbors. All of this was an effort on Moses' part to punish Israel sufficiently so that the Lord did not kill all of them. But the worst thing that God did was to withdraw His presence from Israel. He would send an angel in His place. Moses interceded and got the Lord to once again to reveal His glory to Israel, but it would take an entire sacrificial system to get His presence into Israel again.

So the golden calf in spite of it looking theologically ok in the sight of Israel was a great evil and it cost Israel dearly.

So also in our own day and age when it comes to the incarnate God, it is possible to get Him wrong.

Now first of all, Jesus is the incarnate God. He is the God of Israel come to the earth as a human being. He is the God of Israel come to earth in order to establish a new covenant that is not like the old covenant which Israel broke. This new covenant that God will establish in His own flesh is a covenant where He remembers our iniquities no more and forgives our sins.

Since Jesus is the incarnate God it is just as easy to get Him wrong as it was when He brought Israel out of Egypt. And the results are even more disastrous now than when He brought His people out of Egypt.

If you got God wrong under the old covenant there were a series of bad things with which God would punish you. All of these things had to do with the things of this life. None of them had to do with eternity. That is why so often it is hard for me the answer the question of the eternal salvation of certain Old Testament figures. But under the new covenant if you get Jesus wrong, you are eternally damned. Nothing might happen to you in this life, but then you will rise from the dead, and He will cast you into the lake of fire for everlasting ages. Get Jesus right and you receive eternal life. You will rise from the dead to live in righteousness and purity forever with Him.

There is much more at stake in the New Testament than there was in the Old. There is much more at stake now that the God of Sinai has been crucified and raised from the dead. You cannot afford to get Jesus wrong.

And yet just as it was easy to get God wrong for Israel in the wilderness of Sinai so it is easy for the new Israel to get Jesus wrong in the wilderness of this life. What I mean is this: there are so many false Jesus' out there. There are new false Jesus' every day. There are new false preachers who will claim to speak in the name of Jesus, but the things that they are telling you about Jesus are wrong. Sometimes a lot of what they say is wrong. Sometimes only a little of what they say is wrong. Sometimes they use the name Jesus and the Jesus that they describe has nothing to do with the real Jesus. Sometimes they quote the Bible to show that what they are saying is true and yet they do not quote the parts of the Bible that contradict what they are saying and they know that most people will never bother to actually read the Bible to find out whether or not what they are saying is true.

And whether they say a lot that is wrong or just a little that is wrong, it only takes a little to get you to trust in your own good deeds instead of Jesus for your salvation. Human beings are prone to believe that anyway. In our pride we human beings want to believe that we save ourselves. It is humiliating to believe that Jesus saved us and that we did not save ourselves. We want to take the credit and glory for our own salvation and we want credit and glory not only in the life to come but also in this life. There are so called Christian preachers who will gladly preach you a Jesus who wants you to save yourself by your good deeds, by your choices, and they will promise you whatever you want to hear in order to get you to listen to them. The goal of such preachers is to draw disciples away from Jesus to themselves. They want you to sing their praises. They want you to sing their glory. And if possible they want you to write them a nice paycheck. They will look righteous. They will sound righteous. They will quote the Bible, but not all of it. They will quote pagan thinkers and make them sound like the Bible in order to deceive you.

If they do deceive you, and they convince you through subtle means to trust in your good deeds or a decision of your will, then you are damned. Your good deeds and your decision for Christ are never good enough and sincere enough to appease God's wrath against your sin. If they deceive you into believing that the sacraments are vain, then they have

deceived you into despising what the Lord Himself instituted for your salvation so that it may be by gift and not by works and you are damned. If they deceive you into believing that Jesus is not God, then He cannot be your Savior and you are damned. If they deceive you into believing that Jesus is not human, then He did not shed His blood for you and you are damned. If they convince you that Jesus did not die or that He did not rise from the dead, then you are damned.

Even if they question only one part of the Bible, they set you on a path to question all of it. If one part can be questioned, then all of it can be questioned. And some of them will try to look innocent by questioning only one part of the Bible and not all of it to deceive you into believing that they are mostly good.

And yet even you are smart enough to know that when you visit someone in the hospital who has a broken arm, you do not tell them, "Well, at least your heart is working!" No! You pray that God would heal their arm. When someone teaches falsely you do not rejoice that most of what they say is true, you exhort them to teach the whole truth so that people may believe in Jesus. After all it is the word of Jesus that grants faith. Any adulteration of the word is an adulteration of faith. We have the ancient example of the golden calf where Israel got it partly right, but was condemned for having all of it wrong.

And this is why Saint Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders is so important and why it is in the Bible. Paul tells them that he is innocent of the blood of all men because he did not shrink back from proclaiming to them the whole will of God.

That means that if Paul had withheld part of the will of God and not told them the whole thing, he would have proclaimed falsehood to them. That falsehood would have directed them to rely on themselves and their own efforts to be saved rather than to rely on Jesus who had done everything necessary for their salvation. If Paul had done this, he would have led them into their damnation. If they had died in that damnation, they would be cast into hell on the last day. As an apostle who had taught them falsehood and not proclaimed to them the whole will of God when they were cast into hell, Paul would have been responsible for their damnation. He would be responsible for their blood before God because he failed to tell them the whole counsel of God. So Paul himself certifies to the Ephesian elders that he did not shrink back from declaring to them the whole counsel of God. That way if they are damned it is their own fault for not believing what Paul testified to them.

This means that in the epistles that Paul wrote he did not shrink back from testifying to you the whole counsel of God. The entire counsel of God is in the epistles that Saint Paul wrote. This is a biblical way of saying that the Bible is reliable. The apostles and the prophets did not leave anything out. You have everything you need and some more for salvation. They have taught you that Jesus did everything for you in His death and resurrection. Your sins are forgiven. They have pointed you to the places where God grants that forgiveness. Baptism is one of them that we celebrate today.

Now Paul could just be saying that. It is easy to say that you got the job done when really you didn't. Paul says that he proclaimed the whole counsel of God, but how do the Ephesian elders know that is true? Paul points to a few things to verify that he did the job the

Lord sent him to do. First of all, he reminds them of the exhortations that he gave to everyone while he was in Ephesus. The Ephesian elders would have then remembered all of the persecution that Paul endured for preaching Jesus. They would have remembered that he did not alter or change the message in order to avoid persecution. The persecutions of Paul serve as testimony that Paul was teaching them the whole truth of God. After all, why would he persevere in his message when it brought him persecution, if the message were not true?

Paul also points out to them how he did not covet the material possessions of anyone. Rather he worked with his own hands in Ephesus to provide his living. Most preachers of any religion even Christianity received their living from preaching whatever religion they preached. This leaves preachers open to the accusation that they say what they say to get paid because they aren't good at anything else. I am certainly open to that charge, but I am not an apostle. I can always point to the Bible as the source of the message that I bring and you can read the Bible and judge whether or not that is so. When it comes to the apostles, however, they are the authors of the Bible and they cannot point to it when they themselves wrote it. So Paul points out the Ephesians and to you that he coveted no one's money or clothing. He did not seek monetary reward for the message that he brought. The Ephesians never paid him to preach the Gospel. He made his own living in Ephesus making tents with Aquila and Priscilla. The Ephesian elders would therefore remember this and know that Paul preached what he preached because the Lord sent him to preach it and not to make a buck.

Therefore what Paul told them was reliable. Therefore what is in the Bible that Paul wrote is reliable. The Bible contains the whole council of God. Paul and his apostles did not fail to declare all of it.

This little speech of Saint Paul to the Ephesians is not just for the Ephesians it is also for you which is why it appears in the Bible at all. It is there so that you rely on Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God and not on yourselves and thus be saved.

Avoid the preachers who preach falsehood or something in addition to the Scriptures or something less than them. They are fierce wolves. They devour you.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.