

“Dousing the Dumpster Fire”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
October 11, 2020 – Proper 23A/19th Sunday after Pentecost
Exodus 32:1-14; Philippians 4:1-9

Dumpster fire: This term could refer to a large trash receptacle that has burning contents inside of it, or as Merriam-Webster defines this since adding the term to their dictionary in 2018: “An utterly calamitous or mismanaged situation or occurrence: disaster”

(<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/03/05/590919849/a-phrase-for-our-time-merriam-webster-adds-dumpster-fire-to-dictionary>). I have heard the Year of Our Lord 2020 being described

many times as this kind of dumpster fire. Some think that there should be a picture of 2020 next to Dumpster Fire in the dictionary. It is very true that much of what we’ve experienced this year has been a flaming disaster. So much of the world this year is seemingly on fire, but even so, dear friends, we should not let a dumpster fire blaze within our hearts.

Please pray with me: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer” (Psalm 19:14 NRSV). Amen.

As we heard in our first scripture reading from the Book of Exodus, a big ol’ dumpster fire was blazing among the people of Israel as they worshipped and partied before an image of gold on the dusty Sinai plain while their leader Moses was hanging out with God, *their God*, elsewhere, high on a mountaintop. Moses had been apart from the people for some time, quarantined with God for 40 days and 40 nights. The whole while, Moses had been receiving from God instructions for the people’s living and acts of worship. It was not long before this time that God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, the foundational rules

guiding the people to enjoy right relationships with their God and one another. And it was not long before this that the people eagerly accepted these God's rules as their Law, stating, and I quote: "Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do" (Exodus 19:8 NRSV).

Well, their commitment to doing everything that the LORD had spoken certainly didn't last very long, and they decided to forsake not only those first rules given to them, but also the God who provided these rules and God's servant Moses, the one who led them out of bondage in Egypt. "Moses, who?" they asked.

In today's episode from Exodus, we read of how the people, led by Moses' own brother Aaron, broke Rule Number One, "You shall have no other gods before me (Exodus 20:3)," which doesn't mean that it was OK to have other gods as long as none of them were "ahead" of their God, but literally in Hebrew, it means "you shall have no other gods *in my face*," meaning in my sight or in my presence. In other words, "I don't want to see you worshipping any other gods." Well, God did see them worshipping another god.

And they broke Rule Number Two: "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them" (Exodus 20:4-5). Having forgotten who Moses was and who their God was, as well as all that God and Moses had done for them, they had Aaron, the brother of Moses and priest of God, who also somehow forgot who they were, what they had done, and his commitment to them, fashion an idol for them, before which they bowed down and worshipped. And then they engaged in a wild party during which I'm guessing a few other commandments were broken. So much for doing what the LORD had spoken.

Taking a look at the formation of these words from the Hebrew Bible as well as the religion of ancient Canaan would help us better understand this Dumpster Fire on the Desert Plane. The Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, is a collection of material gathered from many different sources over many different generations of people. The Book of Exodus, like the others of the first five books of Hebrew scripture, known as the Torah, or Law, was formed over the course of centuries, with its various parts being collected and edited by many different hands. Today's reading likely comes from the oldest of these parts, known by scholars as the Yahwist (Jahwist) source. In these parts, Israel's God is named Yahweh, which is what is translated as LORD in all-caps in our Bibles, and Yahweh is contrasted with the gods of the land where these writings were formed, which was likely the land of Canaan north of Jerusalem. This Yahwist literature was likely written at the time after Kings David and Solomon had a united kingdom, when there was a divided kingdom of Israel in the north and Judah in the south, and this literature likely came from the northern kingdom of Israel and the realities of life for the people of Israel living in that place and time influenced how their stories, passed down by spoken word for generations, were put into writing.

In the religion of the Canaanites, the non-Israelites who also lived in this land north of Jerusalem, the bull calf was an image representing their god El, who was their chief god, the creator of all. And you may be familiar with the names of some of the other Canaanite gods, such as Asherah, who was El's wife, and Baal, who was one of El's many children (Baal made his way into the news this week in the form of Beelzebub, meaning Lord of the Flies). Israel's religious leaders were always trying to get their people to turn from worshipping these gods, the gods of their neighbors, and to worship Yahweh, their God, and Yahweh alone.

And so the scene on the desert plane, of Israel's ancient ones worshipping a golden calf, likely would have been understood as the people replacing Yahweh with a Canaanite deity, rejecting their unique identity as a people of Yahweh, and embracing the religion and ways of their neighbors. The gods around them became their gods. The dumpster fire burned.

One of the problems with the worshipping of other gods, in ancient times and in our time, is that you become like that which you worship. New Testament scholar and Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright puts it this way: "When human beings give their heartfelt allegiance to and worship that which is not God, they progressively cease to reflect the image of God. One of the primary laws of human life is that you become like what you worship; what's more, you reflect what you worship not only to the object itself but also outward to the world around."

As we become like that which we worship, so we continue to emphasize the need to focus our eyes upon God and not the idols around us. This is our tradition here at the First Congregational Church in Stoneham. In 1729, our congregation was formed, and we covenanted together to hold these things to be sacred:

1. We avouch ye Lord to be our God, and give up our selves, with our seed after us in their generations, to be his people in ye truth and Sincerity of our hearts.
2. We give up our selves to ye Lord Jesus Christ to be ruled and guided by him in ye matters of his worship & in our whole conversation; Acknowledging Him not only our alone Saviour, but also our King to reigne & rule over us, & our Prophet & teacher by his word & Spirit; forsaking all other Teachers & Doctrines which he has not commanded... (*The Church Book: A Book of Records of Things Relating to ye Church in*

Stoneham, Ma., 1728-1798, pg. 12, in the Congregational Library and Archives,
<http://www.congregationallibrary.org/nehh/series1/StonehamMAFirst5190>).

Our Rules, number one and number two, are that we worship God alone and submit ourselves to Christ. There may not be golden calves or other Canaanite gods being worshipped in our midst, but there are a whole host of other gleaming gods that beckon for us to bow down before them. Our way, the way of this church, is to be the way that God laid out for Israel: That we do not bow down before these gods, seen or unseen, but that we worship the creator alone.

What is the object of our worship this day? What is the focus of your attention? What do you hold most dear in your heart?

For us, let the answer to all these questions be God and God's ways. Friends, if we keep God as the object of our worship, and fix our gaze on the things of God, we will become more like the One who is the focus of our worship, and we will be blessed with God's peace.

The Apostle Paul knew this. He lived through many a dumpster fire and was living in one when he wrote the words we read today from his letter to the Philippians, which he wrote while in chains in a Roman prison. In spite of all difficulties, however, Paul didn't turn from his trust in the unseen God, but found peace by paying attention to God and that which of God. He writes, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Philippians 4:8). And if we do this, we will find peace, even peace amidst the dumpster fire.

I, for one, pay way too much attention not to God or the excellent things of God, but to the fires burning around me. One of the shiny gods that I bow down before way too much is the bad news of the day. Perhaps you're like I am in this. Take care in how you consume the news of the day, for if you consume too much of this, it will consume you. Rather, let's let those things that are excellent and praiseworthy be more on our minds and in our hearts.

During this week's Friday Fellowship time on Zoom, I asked the group, what practices helped them to focus on the excellent things and to find God's peace. Here are some of the things that our members found to be helpful: Meditation and being mindful; being by the ocean, watching waves coming and going; playing with our pets; reading inspirational books; paying attention to God's gifts; doing little things for others; praying; listening to beautiful music; reading Jan Droz's Facebook feed, which she loads up each day with positive and encouraging messages; and being amazed at the beauty of God's creatures. This week, I found that watching videos of baby goats and following Fat Bear Week sparked great joy in my life.

Intentionally paying more attention to God and the things of God – all that is beautiful and good – can help us deal with all that is ugly and bad and can help us find peace amidst the difficulties life and douse the dumpster fires burning in our hearts. May God be our vision and the ruler of our hearts this day. Amen.