

“Time For Your Big Boy Pants” Exodus 32:1-14
St Marks UMC, Charleston, WV 18th Sunday After Pentecost (October 12,) 2014

Exodus 32: 1-14

¹ When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.” ² Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.” ³ So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” ⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.” ⁶ They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

⁷ The Lord said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸ they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’” ⁹ The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰ Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.”

¹¹ But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, “O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? ¹² Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³ Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’” ¹⁴ And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Good morning, Church. Today is the second of the sermon series for the month of October, that I affectionately call **“All Moses, All The Time.”** Last week, we looked at the TEN COMMANDMENTS, and realized how important it is to have a good foundation, as we grow in our faith, some principles from which to work.

Assisting me last week and today [point to a male mannequin clothed in a sport coat, dress shirt, tie and a diaper] is Manny Kinn. Last week, Manny wore a baby bonnet and diaper to represent both the very young nation of Israel, and the early stage of development, where good foundations are required.

Today Manny is wearing different clothing. He has grown up to wear a sport coat, dress shirt, and tie. But I notice that he’s still clinging to a diaper. He seems to be going

through the growth development, but also seems to have some serious developmental delay issues. That's what can happen in faith development, when we won't do the work of growing up, where we just rely upon others to tell us what to think.

Today's scripture can be disconcerting, perhaps. At least, some of the people in our wonderful Worship Committee discussions were bothered by this *portrayal of God as being angry and wanting to kill all of the Israelites, except Moses, and then starting over. But then Moses talks God in off the ledge, calms Him down, and gets God to repent of the disaster God was about to cause.*

Well, let me suggest that as we read scripture, we are blessed if we look at it on three levels of understanding. (Those who like to fill in the blanks from the tear off sheet of the bulletin – this is where you may begin:)

1. The first layer of scriptural understanding is MY PRIVATE STORY, my personal involvement in the story.

Where do I see my personal situation in the scripture? What character would I be in this story, and how would my conduct have been like, or not like, that character?

2. The second layer of scriptural understanding is what is MY TRIBE'S interpretation of this story?

Every single one of us is the product of our upbringing. We have been taught by our *parents*, our *contemporaries*, our *Sunday School or lack of Sunday School*, our *schooling*, our *culture, etc.* how to think. We cannot read scripture -- nor understand it -- in a vacuum, outside of the way we have been taught to think.

The Appalachian way. The American way. The Third World country understanding. The Communist way. The 10th century BC way. The 1st century AD Palestinian way.

This is one of the hardest ways to understand scripture, because it's hard to step out of ourselves. One of the ways to back into this is to try to

understand what was the TRIBE'S UNDERSTANDING who first read this scripture?

To begin to understand how WE have been taught to read it is to understand that THE ORIGINAL HEARERS OF THE WORD had a different understanding.

Certainly, at the very minimum, we need to remember that the people who wrote the scripture were not thinking in the same ways that we do today. Moses was not thinking about Jesus when he dealt with those petulant Israelites, nor was he thinking about iPad Tablets. If we were to think Moses got the Commandments on TWO IPAD TABLETS, instead of tablets of stone, then we have a notion of how silly it is to read 21st century understandings into the original telling of the story.

3. The third layer of scriptural understanding is **THE STORY**.

This is the BIG STORY, that is bigger than any religions, any culture, any private understanding.

These are things that **ALWAYS TRUE**.

For example, whether a Jew is talking about it, or a Christian, or a Buddhist or Muslim: there are certain goodness principles, like caring for the poor, telling the truth, working for justice, or (as I read into the sermon last week, from the book about the nine religions that are practiced in India)

surrender to the divine with total belief.

You see, **there is no UNIQUE UNITED METHODIST way to feed the hungry**. These are consistent with ALL HEALTHY RELIGIONS; those are consistent with **THE STORY**, irrespective of your PRIVATE PERSONAL perspective, or of the perspective of YOUR TRIBE.

4. There are some people who want folks, and try to teach folks, to jump over the first two levels of understanding – PRIVATE/PERSONAL and TRIBE:

**“Here, listen to me, I will tell you the ULTIMATE TRUTH HERE;
this is THE STORY. Just listen to me.”**

Such a jump over steps one and two, straight to step three is a symptom or sign of FUNDAMENTALISM. That is why Fundamentalism is so **superficial** and so **uncritical**, because it does not do the painful work of self-awareness and the labor intensive study of historical, cultural understandings which shape both the writers and the readers.

To illustrate how the very same words can lead to different understandings, listen to the following story and fill in the answers to the next questionsⁱ on your tear off sheet:

Once upon a time, there was a Pope who decided that all the Jews had to leave Rome. Naturally there was a big uproar in the Jewish community.

So the Pope made a deal. He would have a religious debate with a member of the Jewish community. If the Jew won, the Jews could stay. If the Pope won, the Jews would leave.

The Jews realized that they had no choice. They looked around for a champion who could defend their faith, but no one wanted to volunteer.

It was too risky. So they finally picked as their representative an old man named Moishe who spent his life sweeping up after people. Being old and poor, he had less to lose, so he agreed. He asked only for one addition to the debate.

Not being used to saying very much as he cleaned up around the settlement, he asked that **neither side be allowed to talk. The Pope agreed.**

The day of the great debate came. Moishe and the Pope sat opposite each other for a full minute before the Pope raised his hand and showed three fingers. Moishe looked back at him and raised one finger.

The Pope waved his fingers in a circle around his head. Moishe pointed to the ground where he sat.

The Pope pulled out a wafer and a glass of wine. Moishe pulled out an apple.

The Pope stood up and said, “I give up. This man is too good. The Jews can stay.”

An hour later, the cardinals were all around the Pope asking him what happened. The Pope said: “First I held up three fingers to represent the

Trinity. He responded by holding up one finger to remind me that there was still one God common to both our religions.

“Then I waved my finger around me to show him that God was all around us. He responded by pointing to the ground, showing that God was also right here with us.

“I pulled out the wine and the wafer to show that God absolves us from our sins. He pulled out an apple to remind me of original sin. He had an answer for everything. What could I do?”

Meanwhile, the Jewish community had crowded around Moishe, amazed that this old, almost feeble-minded man had done what all their scholars had insisted was impossible! “What happened?” they asked.

“Well,” said Moishe, “First he said to me that the Jews had three days to get out of here. I told him that not one of us was leaving.

“Then he told me that this whole city would be cleared of Jews. I let him know that we were staying right here.”

“And then?” asked a woman. “I don’t know,” said Moishe. “He took out his lunch and I took out mine.”

You see? We all enter into the story with our own PRIVATE STORY and with OUR TRIBE’S UNDERSTANDING of the story, in hopes that we can get a good view of THE STORY.

If we ignore and skip over the first two levels and think we can just jump to the third level -- THE STORY -- reading it literally and fundamentally, **WE ARE LIKE MANNY OVER THERE, NOT PUTTING ON OUR BIG BOY PANTS, AND TRYING TO LIVE IN A REAL WORLD WITH JUST THE FUNDAMENTALS OF OUR BABY LEARNING STEPS.**

On the PERSONAL, PRIVATE LEVEL, I am not able to say where you enter into this story.

- What is YOUR golden calf?
- How long do you have to feel like God has not answered your prayer, been present in ways you hitherto have understood, before you go off on your

own, making your own way in the wilderness of life, worshipping your own particular gods, like control, money, prestige, etc., etc.

Like I said before, dealing with the PRIVATE PERSONAL understanding of the story takes some hard, deep, mining of your own life.

On the level of **OUR TRIBE'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE STORY**, let me suggest that there might be more than one way to go, here.

Perhaps the **TRIBAL UNDERSTANDING OF GOD AT THE TIME THE ORIGINAL STORY WAS TOLD AROUND CAMPFIRES**, and later put in writing, would have been something like:

Our ancestors were saved from bondage by God in the Passover and delivered at the Red Sea. But they messed up, and still would sometimes worship cultic idols. Even our Israelite ancestors would be tempted by golden calves. And it made God very, very angry. And God would have destroyed them, but for Moses talking God out of His Anger.

ANOTHER TRIBAL UNDERSTANDING OF GOD MORE CONTEMPORARY TO OUR CULTURE TODAY would be something like this:

Just like our ancestors, we are sinful people, who too who are born in sin must be punished, even eternally punished by a God who cannot tolerate sin. But, like Moses before him, Jesus intercedes with God to provide a way out from eternal punishment.

And then, let me suggest one more **TRIBAL UNDERSTANDING OF GOD THAT I HEARD EXPLAINED MORE RECENTLY.**

For thousands of years, from early cultic rites of human sacrificial, up through some people's understanding of even Jesus, the notion has been that human sacrifices must be made to appease, or to satisfy a God, who requires sin offerings, in order for the human to be acceptable, to pay the price of satisfying God.

Then there came a new understanding.

When Jesus came into the Temple and overturned the sacrifice sellers, and money changers, He was announcing the undercutting of the whole nature of sacrificial appeasement of God. He is once and for all saying, “Blood Sacrifices are over!”

And then by the end of the week, Jesus – God’s son – was sacrificed to show that God does not need a sacrifice to reach God’s good graces. Instead, ***GOD spilled HIS blood to get to humanity, after humanity has been spilling blood for millennia to get to God.***

Here, Moses does not need to convince God. We understand that just because early storytellers did what they could to understand God by creating God in THEIR OWN IMAGE, such does not require us to be in relationship with their same limited description of God.

God understands that we mess up. After all, God made us. And God is willing to love us, even when we mess up. God gave us laws to help form us. And then God gives us forgiving love all along the way, in order to heal us from our sinfulness.

AND SO, HERE WE ARE – It’s time for us to put on our Big Boy pants (and I say big BOY only because that is the gender of the mannequin Jennifer found; Big GIRL is also appropriate) – let’s get past the Pablum of fundamentalist understanding. Let’s do the work of adults.

What is [YOUR PRIVATE PERSONAL INTERSECTION](#) with the story?

Which one of the [TRIBAL UNDERSTANDINGS](#) of the story has shaped you? Is there a better understanding?

And, then ULTIMATELY what is [THE STORY](#)?

- Is it that we are all doomed to hell if we can’t get it perfect, or unless something intercedes?

- Or is **THE STORY** ultimately that God loves us, and always is trying to give us the best way to live – even if it means shedding His own blood in order to do so, because we are precious in God’s sight, made lovingly in God’s very own image – and NEVER, NEVER, NEVER out of God’s compassion and care?

Well, you’d better work on it. Put on your Big Boy/Girl pants, and figure it out.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Three fingers in the air mean _____.

One finger in the air means _____.

Fingers waved in the air mean _____.

One finger pointed at the ground means _____.

Bread and wine, and apple, mean _____.