

19 Pentecost 2020

He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, [b] Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."

If you have ever been to the Reno NV area, you have probably been over Donner Pass. It sits at over 7,000 ft in the Sierra Nevada mountains, near Truckee, CA. It gets its name from the infamous Donner party who tried to cross there in 1846.

An article from the Los Angeles Times written in May of 1986 talks about the Donner party tragedy:

"It's the saga of a band of 82 emigrants reduced to cannibalism when they were trapped at Donner Lake by a 22-foot snowfall in the winter of 1846-47.

While some tales lose their power to captivate over time, people can't seem to forget the Donner party, which set out from Springfield, Ill., 140 years ago last month on what should have been a demanding but routine trip west. The episode, which has been called the most spectacular disaster in the history of Western migration, continues to captivate researchers, descendants of party members and amateur collectors of Donnerana who spend their free time exploring the mysteries and controversy that still surround the event...

Some of the questions are not isolated to the Donner situation, but have applications for families and individuals in crisis today, Lindstrom said. For instance, “What happens to people in the necessity of the moment? And at what point does the culture we think inbred in us break down?”

It all started with a very bad decision to take a Shortcut. The usual route to the west coast was by the well-traveled Oregon trail which ended in Portland Or.

“Bickering erupted among the Donner party several months into their journey when the leaders agreed to split off from the main westward route to try a little-traveled shortcut proposed by Lansford Hastings, author of the “Emigrant’s Guide to Oregon and California.”

It soon became clear that choosing the cutoff was the fatal decision. (Young Patty Reed would survive the horrid winter only to advise her friends in the East: “Never take no cutoffs and hurry along as fast as you can.”)

By the time the Donner party came to Truckee Meadows, where Reno is today, they were physically and emotionally depleted by the hardships of a long, dry desert crossing, and from building roads through the mountains when the promised trail turned out to be non-existent.

The party looked up at the Sierra and saw snow. There was nothing to go back to but starvation, thirst and Indian attacks on their weakened party. Ahead,

just over the mountains, lay Sutter's Fort and the mild, hospitable climate of the Sacramento Valley. The party started the climb up the pass, but was stalled by a snowstorm at Donner Lake on Oct. 28. One family took over an abandoned cabin. The others quickly built primitive lean-tos. Their supplies were nearly gone. What few oxen had survived the trip died standing up and were quickly covered by the snow that continued to fall.

Six weeks after they were trapped at the lake, the 10 men and five women who were still strong enough to walk left camp on snowshoes fashioned of oxbows and rawhide strips. Among them were two Indian guides who were traveling with the Donner party. Thirty-three days later, the two men and five women who had survived the journey reached a Sacramento Valley ranch where they found food and safety."

A similar bad decision occurred in 1856 in Wyoming. In August of that year in Nebraska Territory, two emigrant companies of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, left the Missouri River to start a late-season crossing of the plains. The Willie Company left Florence on August 17, the Martin Company on August 27. They had been warned of the possible dangers that awaited crossing this late in the year but they left anyway, heading to Salt Lake City.

They pulled handcarts because they were lighter and faster than oxen-led wagons. But to lighten their loads even more, the leaders ordered them to leave their heavier clothing and other items so they could travel easier.

Another bad decision.

The heavy snows in Wyoming had come earlier and the two companies of travelers were snowed in. Some were saved by rescue parties sent from Salt Lake City. But bad decisions led to the deaths of over 200 people.

The Israelites were not immune to the results of bad decision making. Moses had been up on the mountain communing with God for almost 6 weeks. There had been no word on when or if he would return. Looking at the situation from a purely human standpoint, 2 million people sitting around, in the desert with no movement, waiting on their leader probably caused some anxiety. Joshua had gone part way up the mountain with Moses so that left Aaron as the obvious go to guy. Despite the short period of time, the people grew restless. They told Aaron: "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." Rather than convincing the Israelites that Yahweh was still present and watching over them, he does what the people asked.

Once Aaron presented the people with the calf, they proceeded to worship it using the approved rites and rituals for the worship of the invisible God, at least at the beginning. They offered burnt sacrifices and well-being offerings just as prescribed for the worship of Yahweh. But eventually, with the calf and not the real God at the center of this worship, things went a little bit crazy. Following the sacrifices, "the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel" (v. 6). In some uses, "revel" can mean that people are engaging in something as inoffensive as dancing, but in this context, it more likely refers to some unholy carryings on. In fact, when Moses later returns to the camp, he finds some people "running wild" (32:25). Whatever was going on, it profaned the worship of God.

I can only surmise that Aaron felt a little intimidated, as you have to ask the question as to why he would agree to make an Idol for them. It doesn't make any sense. He knows that this was a bad decision because later when Moses confronts him, he says: 'Do not let the anger of my lord burn hot; you know the people, that they are bent on evil. 23They said to me, "Make us gods, 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." 24So I said to them,

“Whoever has gold, take it off”; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!

He quickly says that the golden calf just appeared but as we heard today, he poured the gold into a mold and made the calf for the people. God was furious and planned to kill all of the people but Moses reasoned with God and saved the people. Still, Moses ordered the Levites to strike down even their “brothers, friends, and neighbors. 3,000 people were killed, and later, God put a plague upon the Israelites for what they had done.

It was a disastrous decision all the way around.

More bad decisions take place in our gospel reading today.

Jesus tells a parable about a King who gave a wedding banquet for his son. The first group that was invited came up with all kinds of excuses not to attend. The King was not happy and sent his soldiers to burn their city. Then he sent his slaves out to gather everyone they could find, both good and bad. One man decided not to wear a wedding robe and the King had him bound and thrown out into the street.

The response does seem a little harsh but proper clothing was provided for guests that did not have them. However, for whatever reason, this gentleman

decided not to wear what was provided and he paid the price. We should take heed also.

There is more involved with accepting God's invitation than simply showing up. The first group rejects God's invitation by refusing to abandon their own agenda. God chose the Jews, but the Jews had other plans. Fine, then, invite the Gentiles.

The man who was thrown out is like those who are willing to accept the invitation and drop their other plans in principle, but who aren't willing to make the least exertion to pay reverence to the occasion and the person who invites them. These are those who only pay lip service to accepting the invitation, but in reality, show up in body only, yet they expect all the benefits of those who make the effort to serve God.

Now mind you, the king asked the man to explain himself, and the man had nothing to say. This isn't someone who would have liked to have done better, but did not have the means to do so. This is someone who couldn't be bothered to avail himself of the means that were available to him. He could have shown up properly dressed, but didn't bother himself to do it.

What is God saying to us this morning? Do we create self-made idols that take the place of God in our lives, be it the pursuit of money; jobs that require being

away from our families for long periods of time; words and actions that kill the spirit in others; activities that take the place of prayer, worship, and serving others? Yes, there are those who reject God outright and create their own gods. Those that reject the invitation of God to come to the banquet. Those who feel that they do not have to live the life that they are called to live by Jesus, but plan to come to the banquet anyway. None of these are wise decisions but ones that are made all of the time. I know that each of us falls into some of these categories at some point in our lives, but we repent and turn back towards God. I fully believe this. God's grace intervenes when we need it.

Grace is rightly defined as unmerited favor. It is the startling act of God working on behalf of the very ones who have violated his covenant and substituted gods of their own making for him. Grace can be understood by contrasting it to mercy, which is another divine attribute. Mercy is God withholding punishment that we deserve; grace is God giving us blessings we don't deserve.

Will we fail at times? Of course. It is part of being human. It is so very important that when **we have** failed to live up to our promises to him, that God will always keep her promises to us?

Yes, there's judgment. **Yes**, there's accountability. But there's also grace, and any image of God that leaves that out is no more than a calf of gold.

AMEN