

CASKET EMPTY

Part 3 – Sinai

Exodus 32:1-14

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ October 1, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹When 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.” ²Aaron 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.” ³So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. ⁴He 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!” ⁵When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.” ⁶They 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.

⁷The Lord said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸they 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!”” ⁹The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰Now 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.” (Exodus 32:1-10, NRSV)

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My favorite place to shop, maybe the only place I like to shop, is REI. Problem is that I can't afford to shop there very often. It's not what I'd call a bargain basement. But one of the things that first attracted me to REI years ago was their return policy. For many years it was the policy of that company to offer its customers “100% guaranteed satisfaction”, which meant that you could return any item at any time for any reason, no questions asked. And they meant it. There was the mom who returned an old stroller simply because her children outgrew it, or the man who returned a very used bike rack because the color now

clashed with his new car. Stories like this became abundant at REI, so much so that the company was mockingly nicknamed “Rental Equipment Inc.” It's not even renting! People were just borrowing gear and getting their “deposit” back when they got tired of it.¹

Well, REI changed their policy a couple of years ago. They still have a comparatively generous return policy, but no longer can you bring your beat-up, 25-year-old hiking boots back simply because you can't get them clean again. It makes sense, right, because when a customer purchases a product from a company you're entering into a contract of sorts. You give us this much money for these boots and if the boots perform the way we told you they would perform when you bought them then we're not giving your money back. That's how contracts or covenants have to work in our world. Both parties have to keep up their end of the bargain and one party can't just keep standing by if the other party is abusing their end of the deal. REI eventually figured that out, much to the chagrin of many of their freeloading customers.

I want you to keep this example in mind as we continue in our CASKET EMPTY sermon series this morning because in a moment we are going to talk about covenants, not the sort that companies make with their customers but the sort that God has makes with us, his people. I'll tell you this much up front, if you think that the arrangement REI at least tried to have with its customers was radical, wait until you see the arrangement God made with his people.

This fall we are walking through the story of the Bible with the help of an acronym developed by our Fall Retreat speaker, Carol Kaminski: CASKET EMPTY. The word CASKET outlines the story of the Old Testament, moving from Creation, to Abraham, to Sinai, to Kings, to Exile, to Temple. It's a morbid word, I know, but one that accurately captures that part of the story where sin has cut humanity off from God and the life that he intends for us in this world. However, the word EMPTY, a word of resurrection hope, then outlines the story as it continues in the New Testament, from Expectation, to Messiah, to Pentecost, to Teaching, and finally ending with Yet-to-Come. Part of

¹ <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/rei-now-limiting-returns-to-one-year/>

our goal is to understand the entire, overarching, redemptive narrative of scripture so that we can then better understand how each part fits into the larger story.

This is where we have come so far. As we looked at Creation we were reminded that the Lord alone is the abundant, generous creator of all that is, especially humanity which is made in God's image. Tragically, however, human sin has thoroughly corrupted God's creation. And yet, from the very moment sin entered the world, God has been at work enacting his redemptive plan to make everything right again. We watched that plan take shape last week as we looked at the story of Abraham and Sarah, of how God blessed this childless old man and his wife to be the headwaters of a great family, a family that God promised would one day be used to bless every other family on the earth. You see, even in the very moment we walk away from our Father in Heaven he is already actively pursuing us to bring us back home some day.

As the story continues through Genesis and on into Exodus, we see the fulfillment of God's promises begin to unfold. Many of you know the story. Abraham and Sarah do eventually have a son, who in turn has two sons, one of whom in turn has twelve sons after which the twelve tribes of Israel are eventually named. But through a wild set of divinely ordained circumstances, this family of Israel ends up as slaves in Egypt where they remain for 400 years. The circumstances are brutal, but nevertheless the family increases exponentially in number becoming, at one point, nearly as difficult to count as the stars in the night sky.

In the midst of their suffering, the Israelite slaves cry out to the Lord who, in response, chooses another unlikely man, Moses, to deliver them from captivity. Moses discovers that the one who called him is none other than the Lord, the one who created the cosmos, the one who first called Abraham and Sarah. By the Lord's power Moses performs miraculous signs, culminating in the Passover, and leads the people out of Egypt on a journey towards the very land of Canaan promised to Abraham all those years ago. Along the way, however, the people must pass through a wilderness called Sinai. At a mountain in that region known by the same name, God calls the nation he has chosen and now saved to be his people and to worship and serve him alone. That's the covenant God makes with them at Sinai. God has been their God and now they will be his people.

According to ancient treaty conventions in those days, before a great king would declare to his subjects what he demanded of them he would first identify himself and

remind his subjects of all that he had already done on their behalf. This was commonly referred to as the historical prologue.² A king would say, "Listen, I have protected you from your enemies. I have built you this kingdom. I have provided you with so much. Now listen to what I am asking from you."

In a similar way the Lord, who is about to give his people the law, first offers this historical prologue to them in Exodus 20:2, "**I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.**" And if nothing else this is just another reminder that grace comes before the law. God never expects his people to obey him as a way of earning his favor, but instead expects that obedience will be the natural response from his people after he has shown them his favor. God has saved us! How can we not now respond in grateful obedience!

Well, the law that God gives to his people at Sinai is summed up by the Ten Commandments and, even more than that, summed up by the great two commandments to love God above all else and love neighbors no matter who those neighbors happen to be. Because there is no other God besides the Lord, and because the Lord has saved his people and chosen to be their God, the Israelites are now called to worship and serve the Lord alone and reflect the Lord's character in the way they treat one another. God is a covenant-keeper, so keep the covenant of marriage. God is a God of truth, so speak honestly to each other. God is not a God of scarcity, so don't covet what others have. And as the Israelites continue to keep God's law in these ways, God will continue to treat the Israelites as his "treasured possession among all peoples."³

This covenant, known to us now as the Mosaic Covenant, was a serious covenant, deadly serious. In fact, in both the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the Lord painstakingly spells out the blessings which will result if the people keep their part of the covenant and the curses which will result if they do not.⁴ The blessings include sufficient rain, peace in the land, victory over enemies, abundance of crops, and the unceasing presence of God with them. The curses, on the other hand, include defeat at the hands of enemies, drought, the threat of wild animals, starvation, being scattered among the nations, destruction of the land, and the absence of God's presence. Understand, these are not threats from God as much as they are God's honest explanation of the consequences which will come

² Carol Kaminski, *Casket Empty (Old Testament Study Guide)* (Casket Empty Media, 2012), 64.

³ Exodus 19:5.

⁴ See Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 11, 27-29.

when people choose to turn against the one who is the only source of life and blessing in this world.

And in response the people say, “No problem. We’ve got this.” **“The people all answered as one, ‘Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do!’”**⁵ And I for one think they meant it, in the same way that we mean it when we make promises to God or to one another. You know, I have a picture in my mind of the sort of person I am called to be and I am often genuinely motivated to become that sort of person and will even pledge to God my intentions to do so. The problem is, you know what they say about good intentions. If you don’t, you’re about to find out.

Well, at one point in the story God calls Moses to climb back up Mount Sinai to meet with him. God is now going to give the Ten Commandments to Moses, the heart of the law which the people are to follow. Moses tells the Israelites to wait for him there at the bottom until he returns. But then he doesn’t return right away. In the past, when Moses went up the mountain to meet with God, he came back that same day. But this trip turns into far more than a day hike. In fact, Moses stays up the mountain for forty days, a number in the Bible that is often used to signify a time of waiting on God.

Well, the people get tired of waiting. “It’s been nearly six weeks. Where in the world is Moses!” In a word, they lose faith, faith in what Moses told them, *faith in what God told them through Moses*. This delay is not what they expected or wanted and so in response they do what people always do when they lose faith in God, they took things into their own hands.

You see, our problem – and see if you can relate – is that we have an inability to see that the spiritual world is primary, that what we see and touch is not all there is and, in fact, is not even what is most important. God does not want us to place our faith in what we see but in the One whom we cannot see, to worship the Creator and not the creation. But this is very hard for us because we want to be in control, to know the answers, to see the schedule and the plans in advance, to work things out the way we want them worked out.

Remember Abraham? God promised him that he would have a son. But when that son didn’t come when Abraham thought he should come, Abraham took things into his own hand by sleeping with his servant girl to bring about offspring himself. In doing so, Abraham placed his hope and faith in the boy instead of the Lord who had promised the boy, making the boy an

idol. It’s why when God eventually did provide Abraham with his son, Isaac, he tested Abraham one day by asking him to sacrifice Isaac. It was never God’s intention to see the boy killed but to see Abraham convinced that it was the Lord, and not the Lord’s gifts, that are to be worshipped.

When the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai lost faith in God and God’s promises they took things into their own hands by making a different sort of idol. And understand, the choice of a golden calf wasn’t random. Remember that these people had just spent 400 years as slaves to the Egyptians, an ancient culture that had long conceived of deity in the form of a young bull. Statues of golden cows were everywhere in Egypt in those days! It’s an example of what happens to us all the time. When we lose faith in the Lord, often because we don’t believe he is acting in the ways we expect him to act, our default is to turn and fashion idols in the shape of whatever idols are being worshipped in the surrounding culture of our day.

It’s no different today, though our idols don’t usually take the shape of golden cows. If you want to identify your preferred idols, honestly answer these questions. What do you daydream about? What do you habitually think about to get joy and comfort in the privacy of your own heart? How do you spend your money? It’s a good question because your money will flow most effortlessly towards that which is your heart’s greatest love. Most importantly, how do you respond when God is delayed in coming, when your prayers go unanswered, or your hopes are frustrated?⁶

Is it your career or your accomplishments in this life? Is it romantic love? Is it money or material possessions and the security you imagine they bring? Is it your family, maybe your children and their success? These are the things our culture worships, which means that when our faith in the Lord falters we, like the Israelites before us, will quickly turn to the gods of our culture as well. So I ask you again, is there is anything in this world which absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you are asking to give you that which only God can give you? That thing is in danger of becoming your idol. We all have them, or are at least drawn to them. John Calvin once said that the human heart is an idol factory! It just pumps them out.

I, for one, am stunned at just how quickly the affections of my heart can turn from Christ. Especially during times of unanswered prayer or frustrated hope, or times when I sense God calling me in a direction I don’t want

⁵ Exodus 19:8

⁶ These questions are posed by Timothy Keller in *Counterfeit Gods* (Riverhead Books, 2009), 168-9.

to go, I can so easily begin to look around for some idol I can create which will let me live as I wish to live, a god I can manufacture and put into my pocket to be the sort of god that better suits my needs.

It's stunning, really, how quickly Israel turns from God and breaks the covenant. In one fell swoop, in fact, they violate the first three of the Ten Commandments, placing other gods before the Lord, making for themselves an idol, and then profaning the name of the Lord by giving that name to the idol. This isn't just a misdemeanor but a major felony. Worse, this moment, one that is repeated over and over again in the Old Testament story, is *the defining moment* of God's people in the Old Testament, defining because it gives us the most accurate picture of who they truly are. This is who we are. We are idol worshippers. We are people who, given enough time, will always turn to worship the creation rather than the Creator.⁷

The consequences of this reality are stark. The Lord says to Moses, **"I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. 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."** God's wrath burns against his unfaithful and rebellious people, and rightly so. How could it not?

Imagine a bride at her wedding. She and her new husband have just made sacred covenant vows to one another, to love one another as husband and wife for better for worse, in sickness and health, for richer or poorer, as long as they both shall live. She has just given her heart and life exclusively to this man she loves. But then during the wedding reception, in a moment when she is caught up longer than expected greeting the guests, her impatient husband begins flirting with one of the bridesmaids and in the delay ends up inviting this other woman upstairs to the hotel room honeymoon suite which had been reserved for himself and his new bride.

Who in their right mind would ever question the anger that bride would feel after such a deep wound was inflicted on the covenant she had just made with her husband? There is no dismissing such a betrayal, no possibility that she can simply look past this injury and move on. And after all that the Lord has done for his people, how can we expect anything less when his people betray him in an even more grievous way?

And yet, pay close attention here. The Lord tells Moses to leave him alone, and I would suggest to you that the Lord is challenging Moses rather than

commanding him. God doesn't need Moses' permission to do anything. No, this is a rhetorical demand. The Lord knows that his people now need a mediator. That is their only hope, somebody to intercede on their behalf. Moses is God's choice and this is God's nudge to him to step into that role, which he immediately does.⁸

In the next verses we read,

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.⁹

Notice that Moses doesn't try to diminish the sin of his people, any more than you, if you were a friend of the bride, would try to diminish the sin of her new husband up in the bridal suite in bed with the bridesmaid. Instead, Moses simply articulates what God certainly must already know, that to give his people what they rightfully deserve for breaking the Mosaic Covenant would be a violation of the even more binding Covenant he made to Abraham all those years ago, that these very people would be richly blessed so that one day, through them, all people would be blessed.

And it is here that we see the *defining moment of the Lord* in the Old Testament, the moment when we are given the most accurate picture of who God truly is. Who is the Lord? **"The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin..."**¹⁰ We are defined by sin, yes.

⁸ This convincing argument is made by Douglas K. Stuart in *The New American Commentary: Exodus*, Volume II (B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 670. There are many Old Testament parallels, including Amos 7:1-6.

⁹ Exodus 32:11-14, NRSV

¹⁰ Exodus 34:6-7, NRSV

⁷ See Paul's powerful words in Romans 1:18-23.

But the Lord is defined by unconditional love and grace. This is what we find at the heart of God, a heart that certainly grieves our sin but is not diminished in love or grace because of it.

This does not mean that there are no consequences to our breaking of God's law. There are. All the curses which God promised the Israelites would be visited on them if they broke the Mosaic Law came to pass after they did. In fact, the wreckage we see all across the human family today is further evidence of those consequences. Exodus 34 acknowledges this when it continues, "...**yet by no means clearing the guilty but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation.**" Thankfully, however, though the consequences of our sin last for three or four generations, God's grace and favor and love extend – how long? – a thousand generations!

Our world, of course, along with each of our own personal lives, is still awash with the consequences of our worship of all things other than the Lord. And yet the defining moment of the Lord was most amplified in the moment that he, himself, came as a Mediator to stand in our place before the Lord. When Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, came into the world, he alone stood in our place and obeyed the stipulations of the Mosaic Covenant, fulfilling God's law in every aspect of his life and, thus, made himself rightfully ready to receive all the promised blessings of that Covenant. And yet – listen for it! – out of a love that runs far deeper than wrath, Christ chose instead to take on the curse of that Covenant which we stood rightfully ready to receive. As Jesus hung on the accursed cross, God's wrath against humanity was satisfied but so was his love, for this Son of God was also the Son of Man, the descendent of Abraham himself, through whose descendants the Lord promised to one day bless the whole world.

Do you see what it is that Jesus has done? We gather here every Sunday to proclaim what it is that Jesus has done. It is the historical prologue of our King that we are called to declare over and over again to the world, the good news of the Gospel that in Jesus Christ we are forgiven! In spite of our betrayal, God is faithful. In spite of our unwillingness to love, we are loved. In spite of our stubborn obsession with that which leads to death, God has not stripped life from us. The casket is empty!

Do you believe this? Do you? Once you do, Jesus will become more beautiful to your imagination, more attractive to your heart, than any idol in this world ever could.

And now, as we place our faith in Christ, and our lives in his hands, he comes to live within us, to dwell by his Spirit in our very hearts, and the grace which brings us life now enables us to live life as it was meant to be lived! As scripture puts it elsewhere, in Christ we become new creations, able by the power of Christ within us to begin to finally live as we were made to live. It doesn't happen all at once, of course, and in fact takes a lifetime, but day by day Jesus has the power to transform us to become like him, to make that which defines him, love and grace and faithfulness, define us as well.

You see, we are called to obey the law no less so than those Israelites were called to do so all those years ago. The difference is that now the Old Covenant is no longer binding. Yes, consequences will still naturally come when we reject God's law, but if we are in Christ we will not face God's wrath. For there is a New Covenant, sealed by the blood of Christ for the forgiveness of all our sins, which sets us free to live life as God intends it to be lived.

Do you believe this? Even after we do, our hearts remain fickle, always leaning towards worshipping the gods of the world around us, especially when God seems delayed in coming, when prayers seem to go unanswered, when hope seems unfulfilled. And so Sunday after Sunday, even day after day, we must rehearse the historical prologue of our King, gathered around his Word and his Table reminding ourselves of what Jesus Christ has done for us. Martin Luther once said that we must "beat it into our heads continually"¹¹, lest we forget and turn see the affections of our hearts captivated by the incomplete joys of this world which will never satisfy.

Amen.

¹¹ Full quote from Martin Luther (source unknown): "I must take counsel of the gospel. I must hearken to the gospel, which teaches me, not what I ought to do, (for that is the proper office of the law), but what Jesus Christ the Son of God hath done for me: to wit, that He suffered and died to deliver me from sin and death. The gospel wills me to receive this, and to believe it. And this is the truth of the gospel. It is also the principal article of all Christian doctrine, wherein the knowledge of all godliness consists. Most necessary it is, therefore, that we should know this article well, teach it unto others, and beat it into their heads continually."



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read the text from Exodus 32:1-14. What stands out to you from this passage? Why do you think you noticed this part?
2. Do you believe God expected his people to obey the law when he gave it to them? They said they would? Did God have confidence that they actually would?
3. A golden calf? Really? How could people make such a thing their object of worship?
4. How do you respond when you sense that God has “delayed in coming” (i.e. stopped speaking to you, left prayers unanswered, left hopes unfulfilled)?
5. What are the ‘golden calves’ (i.e. idols) of our day? Make it personal by asking yourself what idols you create when you want to take life into your own hands. Use these questions to get at the answer:
 - What do you daydream about habitually to get joy and comfort in the privacy of your own heart?
 - How do you spend your money? (Money flows effortlessly towards the which is our heart’s greatest love.)
 - Where do you turn when your prayers seem to go unanswered and your hopes are frustrated?
6. Is the following statement true? *The defining truth of humanity is that we are idol worshippers, but the defining truth of the Lord is that he is gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiveness.*
7. When you hear the church talk about the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, what do those words mean to you?
8. The French historian Alexis de Tocqueville once wrote, “The incomplete joys of this world will never satisfy the human heart.” What does this mean to you? Do you live as if this is true?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

The Lord gives us the law and we break the law. What does the Lord do after we break the law?