



## ST. PAUL'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH - DELRAY BEACH, FLORIDA

22 Pentecost - Proper 23 - October 11/12, 2009 - Year A

**Exodus 32:1-14; Matthew 22: 1 - 14**

Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, Rector

### The Blame Game!

It has been a frightening, bleak several weeks, not only in our nation, but around the world. Markets, banks and a host of sectors have reeled and collapsed in the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression.

The cover of the most recent edition of *U.S. News Report*<sup>1</sup> asked, "How scared should you be?"<sup>1</sup> Well, I don't fully know the answer to that question. I'm not sure anybody does. But I know this: Lots of people are plenty scared and many have good reason to be. The savings and investments of many have been devastated by this crisis. I have already heard about several serious situations near to us from people in the parish. As a parish, we need to be concerned about our seniors on fixed incomes, about our families whose homes have lost tremendous values, about those whose credit is "maxed out" and who are finding themselves in deep trouble. And we need to be, not only concerned, but responsive.

We are in the process of putting together a group of people in the parish, mostly retired business people with financial knowledge and skills, who can be a resource to St. Paul's members who are worried, to help them examine their concerns with a knowledgeable and objective set of eyes. Our hope is that this group of people will help those who are frightened and/or in trouble keep perspective and do some problem solving.

I know this will not meet all the needs that exist in the parish, but it will help some. If you are a person who has skills that can help, I hope you will speak to me and let me know of your willingness to get involved. If you are a person who is in trouble because of this crisis, I strongly encourage you to speak to Kathleen or me, so that we can do what we can to direct you to this group of people or assist you in some other way.

Sadly, St. Paul's ability as a church to offer direct financial support to people is limited, very limited. The truth of the matter is that our funds for this kind of assistance, mostly the rector's and the curate's discretionary funds, have been needed by a lot of people this year and are more than exhausted.

Moreover, as our parish budget depends upon a draw down from investments, and these investments are in a loss position this year, as is everybody else's, the church is going to take a significant financial hit for 2008 and require us to make cuts in every area. There will also be a reduction in personnel in 2009, though we intend to keep this at a minimum.

I had some hesitation about whether or not to address this crisis in the sermon. This story has saturated the news and conversation, and has heightened our anxiety level across the nation and around the world. I was concerned that people wanted to come to church to find some relief, or even escape from this crisis. But the subject is too pervasive and too many people are being affected, even the church itself, for me not to speak directly to the issue.

Money is such a strange thing in our culture, and when people get in trouble, they are too often embarrassed and ashamed to talk about it or to seek help. I want to encourage people not to be embarrassed or ashamed. This can only lead to more trouble and greater sickness. Again,

if you are in trouble, please let Kathleen or me know so that we can get you to resources that will assist you practically, spiritually and emotionally.

It has been interesting, and more than a little infuriating to watch the “blame game” unfold. Washington blames Wall Street. Wall Street blames the Housing Sector. They all blame Washington. Of course, as many have pointed out, this crisis has been a long time building, and there is plenty of blame to be shared by everyone: Wall Street, the banks, other consumer lending agencies, Washington, and, truth be told, we consumers, ourselves. Our spending has been wild and unlimited. We need to examine what we have demanded of our economy and our politicians. We do not easily accept “no” from either and we tend to punish those who present hard truths.

Greed has been unchecked by sufficient discipline, oversight and regulation. Where greed is present and unchecked, corruption and abuse are sure to follow. The history of humanity has shown this over and over and over again. That has certainly happened in this crisis in “spades” and so now we are immersed in the “blame game.”

Finding someone to blame is a very human response and perhaps it makes us feel good or provides us some sense of satisfaction. Still, I’m not sure the blame game is especially helpful. When we engage in the blame game we tend to lose sight of deeper questions about meaning and especially those that tend to confront and challenge us and our own behaviors. We focus all our attention on finding persons to blame and put all the onus and responsibility on them. Consequently, we too often set ourselves up to repeat the whole cycle again.

I am not suggesting that there hasn’t been wrong, egregious wrong committed by many in the current crisis. No doubt there are those who should be held accountable and face serious consequences. Along with so many, I am disgusted by those executives who have been culpable in creating and fueling this crisis, but who have, nonetheless, walked away from it with rewards in the tens, even hundreds of millions of dollars.<sup>2</sup>

The “blame game” is a very natural response when things go wrong. Actually, as today’s reading in Exodus illustrates not even God is above engaging in the blame game. In order to understand today’s reading from Exodus, we need to know that Moses has been away from the people for a fairly long time, 40 days (See Exodus 24:18).

God is giving Moses very specific instructions up on the top of that Mountain: *40 days and 40 nights worth!* Moses is to learn these lessons and then return to the people and teach them God’s ways. (If you want to know what those instructions were, read chapters 24 - 31 of Exodus, they are all there). But now we are in chapter 32 of Exodus and it turns out, that while Moses was up on the mountain with God, God’s people at the bottom of the mountain have become unhappy and they have decided they are done with Moses and his God.

As our lesson from Exodus began, *“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’”* and they might have added, “and we don’t care!” (Exodus 32:1)

Aaron, poor, dumb, misguided Aaron, he falls right into it. It fed his ego, I guess. Perhaps he had always thought himself more of a leader than his brother, Moses. After all, Aaron was the more articulate one. Moses couldn’t communicate a thing without him. He took him everywhere to be his spokesman (See Exodus 4:10 - 17, 27-31).

Perhaps like so many in Washington and on Wall Street, Aaron began to think of himself as larger than life and above any constraints. Maybe he began to believe his own press, and, like so many Madison Avenue marketing and advertising executives, felt sure he could make a golden idol that people would fall down and worship. Of course, making such an idol wouldn't hurt him either. It would give him power and authority and advantage. It was all so heady.

There was, however, one slight problem. God, the real God, the one worthy of worship and affection and even fear, caught on to what the Israelites and Aaron were doing.

Aaron has instructed the people to give him all their gold, and he has molded it into a calf and the people have responded as though they were in a Mercedes Benz showroom, *"These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt"* (Exodus 32:2 - 4). Of course, this was totally false, because the calf was a totally false idol.

And Aaron, stupid Aaron, added insult to injury and built an altar before the golden calf and made proclamation and said, *"Tomorrow will be a festival to the Lord"* (Exodus 32:5) which of course, it wasn't. It was a festival to the "golden arches" uh, I mean golden idol.

*And the people rose the next morning, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink; and rose up to revel* (Exodus 32:6). And God, the real God, Yahweh; the one who had freed them the bondage of slavery and who had led them out of Egypt (Exodus 12:51); the one who had parted the waters for them to pass through (Exodus 14:19 - 31); the one who had fed them with manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16:4 - 15) and gave them water from a rock in the desert (Exodus 17:6); well this God, the real God, heard and saw what was going on, and he got angry. And in his anger, he did what human beings so often do: he engaged in the "blame game."

The Lord said to Moses, *"Go down at once! **YOUR** people, whom **YOU** brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; 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 God's, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt'"* (Exodus 32:7 - 8 - emphasis added).

*And the Lord said 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 consume them; and you and of you I will make a great nation"* (Exodus 32:9 - 10).

But bless Moses, as with all of the great leaders and prophets of Israel, he understands that his responsibility is not only to represent God's interest to the people. He is also to represent the people's interests to God. In this instance, Moses turns the "blame game" right around on God. *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 a mighty hand?"* (Exodus 32:11 - 12 - emphasis added).

And then, with cleverness and insight, Moses basically says to God, "If you destroy this people, who, after all, you chose, you'll look awfully silly to the Egyptians." Moses says to God, *"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.” Moses challenges God. “*Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people*” (Exodus 32:12).

Moses reminds God of God’s own promise, of his covenant to this people, this particular people. “*Remember,*” Moses says [that critically important biblical word, “Remember”], *Remember Abraham, remember Isaac and Israel, how YOU swore to them by your own self saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all of this land I have promised, I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever’*” (Exodus 32:13).

The book of Exodus then says something that should surprise and startle us all. It says, “*And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster he planned to bring o the people*” (Exodus 32:14).

*The Lord changed his mind!?* God, the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, impassible One, changed his mind? What does this mean? More important, what are the implications of this?

In his commentary on *Exodus*<sup>3</sup>, biblical scholar Terence Fretheim offers the following observation about this verse. Fretheim writes: “*The God of Israel is revealed as one who is open to change. God will move from decisions made, from course charted, in view of the ongoing interaction with those affected. God treats the relationship with the people with an integrity that is responsive to what they do and say. Hence human prayer...is honored by God as a contribution to a conversation that has the capacity to change future direction for God, people and world...*”<sup>4</sup> “*This means,*” Fretheim continues, “*that there is genuine openness to the future on God’s part...It is this openness to change that reveals what about God is unchangeable: God’s steadfastness has to do with God’s love; God’s faithfulness has to do with God’s promises; God’s will is always for the salvation of all. God will always act, even make changes in order to be true to these unchangeable ways and to accomplish unchangeable goals.*”<sup>5</sup>

You know, I can’t help thinking that for too long, we have been like those Israelites at the bottom of the mountain, or like those persons in today’s Gospel reading who were too busy, distracted, seduced, by other things, to accept God invitation to God’s banquet (Matthew 22:1 -14). And sadly, this banquet is intended for us. We are the invited ones today.

We are caught in a monumental financial crisis. As a result, the “blame game” is in full swing. Pursuing the “blame game” will not, I feel sure, be very productive. It may allow people a chance to channel some anger, but at the end of the day, it will not be very constructive or helpful in bringing about real change; change that helps us all get back on track; assess ourselves and our world; get our priorities straight.

Rather than engage in the “blame game,” it would serve us well to use this time and this crisis first, for those in real trouble to get the help they need, and then for all of us to examine ourselves and our lives and to ask where we have placed our affections and our priorities. It would do us better to search for understanding and meaning. Why did what happened happen? What role have we and our wants and desires played in this? What have we demanded from our politicians and our economy? What have our priorities been? How have we allowed ourselves to be misled? What is our meaning and purpose in life and are these of real value?

“These are you god’s, O Israel” the people said of the Golden Calf. “These are your gods, O America!” a host of voices have lied to us about our idols and false gods and we have believed them and listened to them, and even said it ourselves.

It is time for us to turn back and to listen to a different voice, a true voice. It is time to turn back to the God of unchangeable love; who invites us to his banquet; who calls us to love one another and care for one another; who beckons us to simpler lives and ways, and more solid values and priorities.

It is this God, the God of Israel, God the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and this God alone, who deserves our worship, our praise and our affections, though we have healed these on other gods. But only this God, the true God, can comfort us and lead us through the current crisis and every crisis. God is faithful to his promise and to his love. You can bank on this.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. News and World Report – October 13-20, 2008

2. According to CNN, Richard Fuld, former Chief Executive Officer of Lehman brothers was paid \$500 million (see “10 Most Wanted: Culprits of the Collapse” at <http://ac360.blogs.cnn.com/category/culprits-of-the-collapse/>). According to *U.S.A. Today*, former Merrill Lynch C.E.O. Stanley O’Neill’s exit package was valued at \$161 million, Washington Mutual’s C.E.O. Kerry Kellinger at \$44 million and former Citigroup C.E.O. Charles Prince’s was worth \$105 million (See “C.E.O. pay takes hit in the bailout” October 2, 2008 at: [http://www.usatoday.com/money/companies/management/2008-09-28-executive-pay-ceo\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/money/companies/management/2008-09-28-executive-pay-ceo_N.htm))

3. Fretheim, Terence E. *Exodus: Interpretation - A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991)

4. Fretheim, p. 287

5. Fretheim, p. 287