

“No Substitutes”
Exodus 32:1-14
October 11, 2020
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There's no substitute for God.

But we substitute other things all the time.

People of faith often acknowledge that God is all powerful,

but we rely on powerful people - - to lead us and keep us safe.

We acknowledge that God is loving and loves us,

but we spend most of our energy on loving other people.

We describe God as the creator of all things,

but we put a lot of time into inventing our own creations,

and using creation for our own purposes.

So far - - this behavior is not necessarily - - good or bad.

But my starting point today is how we substitute human things for Godly things.

And the question is: does this get us into trouble?

And WHEN does it get us into trouble... and HOW?

I think the reason we make substitutes for God has to do with our senses. Because we don't experience God through our five senses - - we substitute things we can sense in the physical realm - - for God. / For example - - our experience of human love and human relationships becomes a substitute - - for God's love. / And the reason is - - it helps us understand what we mean - - by talking about a loving God. / We experience the love of a parent or a friend and we say - - God's love is LIKE THAT.

But is it?

Well - - yes and no - - right?

God's love is - - similar maybe

But we all know of broken relationships - - and love lost.

We know about broken hearts - - and hurting and being hurt.

So many times - - human love is imperfect - - and disappointing.

If God's love - - then - - is just a better more complete kind of love - - great.

But many times we people don't really experience that.

So we substitute human love and stop there.

We decide that just being loving toward others is the best we can do.

And frankly - - that is not such a bad thing!

But what if - - there really was more?

What if there were a - - perfectly complete love...

And what if we were missing out on that - - by substituting?

These are the questions for today - - which I think the Bible reading helps us think about:

Do we ever substitute things or people for God?

And when we do - - what are the consequences?

And is there another way to act - - or think - - that might be better?

Sometimes a substitute is the best way - - to come to appreciate how great the genuine article really is. / For example, during the last 6 months, during the Covid virus precautions, have any of you come to appreciate your preferred brand of something? / The way you would do this is to buy a substitute brand or a generic brand. / Say a substitute brand of soap - - or toilet paper - - or some kind of food - - maybe the store is out of your favorite cut of meat?

Or have any of you watched any sports lately? / I have to say that baseball without fans, and recorded background noise is strange.

As a church community - - we have done a great job of sticking together - - in prayer or on the phone - - with dozens connecting through zoom - - or outside with masks. / But can any of that REALLY substitute - - for a time when we can shake hands and hug and talk face to face again?

So these substitutes are important.

They serve a purpose.

But they are not totally adequate - - and we now it.

And they POINT us - - to the excellence - - of the genuine article.

They point us to - - the real deal - - for which they are only a substitute.

I think one thing I have come to appreciate recently - - is how much the church can mean to me and to you. / I have come to appreciate or faith more. / And so I am THANKFUL for the substitute forms we have been experiencing.

The danger would be - - maybe - - if we decided that because the substitute worked ok - - that the real thing was no longer important. / To a certain extent this WILL happen - - particularly with LESS important things. / We might discover that we REALLY DON'T need to drive a car as much - - or go out to eat as often - - or buy that really expensive soap.

We might find that electronic and virtual communication is not so difficult!

And it might even help us stay MORE connected in the future.

But - - there really is NO substitute for face to face relationship.

At least not in my opinion.

And THAT - - is NOT a reason to break protocol too SOON either!

We have to stay safe and help protect vulnerable people.

We don't know how LONG our time in the wilderness will be.

But the danger - - would be if we decided church just was not necessary any more.

Or that connecting with our friends and loved ones was just not important.

Instead - - let's STILL be STEWARDS and caretakers of a church that matters.

I remember when I was in Junior High and we had a substitute band director. / Some of us switched instruments - - and of course the substitute band director had no idea what instrument we really played. / But of course - - we could NOT play the instruments we substituted for our own very well - - if at all. / The resulting noise was not pretty!

One of the dangers of substitutes is illustrated by an old episode of This American Life - - an episode of that RADIO program that aired back in 2001. / Episode #185 is called: "The Golden Calf". / The host Ira Glass described it this way: "Today on our program, people worshipping the golden calf, bowing before worldly things when they should not." The episode had three acts, or interviews. / The first was called, "Bowing Before the Famous" and was about a man who let his devotion to the singer Willie Nelson get out of control.

The man's name was Josh, and when his roommate moved out, he called the phone company to get the name changed on the phone bill. / The telephone service person asked: "What name do you want your caller ID to be listed under?" / Josh replied: "Let's have it say Willie Nelson" / The operator responded: "No really, what name do you want?"

And Josh said: "Willie Nelson, really, that's one of my roommate's names"

So for three years, that's how it was.

He said he did it so he could prank people into thinking they were getting a call from Willie Nelson when he called and for a moment he pretended to be his MUSICAL IDOL.

But - - - what Josh didn't expect - - were all the incoming calls he would get.

He received 500 calls over the three years.

Finally he changed the name, and he saved all the messages - - because he thought that somehow he should let the REAL Willie Nelson hear them. / He was finally able to contact Willie Nelson and arrange a meeting. This is how the radio program described it:

“In a way this is a fan’s best AND worst case scenario, both at the same time.

Your idol wants to meet you, but he’s mad at you.

The nicest guy on earth hates one person - - and it’s you!

When the two actually spoke, Josh apologized, and Willie was polite.

But after that things changed for Josh...

As he described it:

“I guess I preferred the relationship we had prior to that - - where it was more of fan and icon. I could still look up to him - - and it was still an untouchable. / Certainly I got to meet him face to face, but WOULD I give that all up for a return to the fantasy - - maybe I would”.

The fact is Josh liked it better when he could see Willie as a legend.

And he discovered that he did not want to substitute himself for that.

So there are dangers involved in substituting.

Likewise on the Old Testament, the Israelites make a substitution for God and it causes problems. They say: "Hey, we have had a long WAIT in this wilderness and we just want a God we can SEE and TOUCH and worship...

We just COULDN'T WAIT.

We didn't know who TO TURN TO.

So they grew restless.

And in their restlessness - they made a golden calf to worship.

It might seem like a strange thing to do. / Especially if we DON'T understand the significance of a golden calf. / What in the WORLD . . . ? / Of all the things you could do . . .

As far as SINS go - - - sins like those which are being PROHIBITED by God in the ten commandments just up the mountain - - while all of this is going on down below - - - as far as SINS go - - making a graven image doesn't have all that much pull for me - - - at least on first glance.

Lying, envying, taking the Lord's name in vain, stealing, murder, adultery, THESE I understand - - - they are all around us.

But to make a golden calf and worship it?

For us it is difficult to understand.

In order TO understand it, we have to try to get back into the ancient world of the Hebrew people a bit. / For them a golden calf WAS a perfectly acceptable thing to worship - - in some circles. Other people of that time worshipped in this way.

And here the Israelites were - - wanting to worship - - unable to WAIT like Moses had told them - - and so they just looked around and did what everyone else was doing.

The PROBLEM with that - - is not as much with the Golden Calf - - as it is with what worshipping the calf has to do - - with their RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. / Yahweh. / The one who had CHOSEN them, and stuck by them while they complained about the food in the wilderness, and was looking down from the mountain at them. God had TURNED TO them - - out of all the other nations on earth - - turned to them to be THE GODLY NATION.

AND - they - had made a substitution.

They had chosen a familiar God - - who could be touched and seen - - instead of a God who lives on a mountain in a cloud - - and offers to be in a mutual relationship of trust.

Remember where we are in the story of their time in the wilderness...

This is chapter 33 and they have been at this for a while. / We have been reading through the book of Exodus for two months now. / The Hebrew people have been through a lot and have experienced a lot of trauma. / It makes sense that they would want a God they can SEE and TOUCH.

The problem is that this shortcut - - cuts them off from so much more.

Up to now they have had a TENT called the Tabernacle. / The book of Exodus has chapter after chapter about HOW to build this Tabernacle for God - - SO THAT God could REALLY be present with them. The TENT was a place for God to LIVE - - and to be CONCEALED from them - - but be with them. / The tent meant that God really WAS with them - - but they had to trust that based on their faith - - not their eyes.

So this Golden Calf is a building project of a different kind.

And it is RIGHT in the middle of the instructions for how to build the Tabernacle.

The Hebrew people URGE Aaron to start a SUBSTITUTE building project. / And instead of a Tabernacle that is built according to careful detailed instructions - - they do this RUSH JOB - - and quickly build a very public Golden Idol. / No more mystery and no more waiting - - just substitute a golden calf.

But the thing is - - it's not really a good substitute.

According to Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim, the people don't SIMPLY request a substitute for Moses - - nor even a substitute for Yahweh God - - it's even WORSE:

They ELEVATE the Golden Calf to the status OF God.

God has not been set ASIDE - - they just ADD another God and worship it!

They KNOW God is still up on the mountain, and may eventually come to be WITH them in the tent of the Tabernacle. / They just don't really care anymore.

That's the danger of this substitute.

The danger is that it becomes MORE than a substitute. / It becomes equal with God.

Madeleine L'Engle describes the difference between ICONS and IDOLS - - and I think it is helpful to consider her words at this point: "An ICON is an open window for God. But too often we are tempted to turn and worship the icon - - and that is idolatry. The golden calf of the Israelites in the wilderness is the prototypical idol - - a creature which is worshipped INSTEAD of the creator."

For her - - Penguins - - are an example of an icon. She writes:

"A penguin is an icon for me, because the penguin invites me to look through its odd little self and on to a God who demands of us that we be vulnerable. When I look at the ancient, ice-bound world of the penguin, I am totally aware of creation, of the majesty and glory of what the Maker God has wrought".

There really is no substitute for the beauty and majesty of a God who creates such beauty.

There's no substitute for a God who loves us through thick and thin - - out in the wilderness of life - - always in our midst - - but invisible to our eyes. / And we are stewards of THAT story - - and we bear witness - - to THAT God.

There's no substitute for God's love and mercy.

And I'm thankful we can STILL worship - - such a God.

Amen