

Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA

Homily for the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 11, 2016 (Year C)

Anne Goodrich Heck

Reflections on
Ex. 32: 7-14; 1Tim. 1:12-17; Lk 15:1-10

What an amazing image we have in today's readings: God rejoicing over finding a treasure she had lost and throwing a party to celebrate! Human analogies—this one and the shepherd with the lost sheep—are very helpful in our attempt to understand a God beyond our understanding. Jesus was good with these analogies; I think he must have been inspired by someone like Elvina or Harriet in his life, someone ready to organize a feast at the drop of a hat.

But how do you read our first reading, from the book of Exodus? Despite the obvious differences in tone, it too shows signs of being told by a very good storyteller! It was written down in this form centuries after the event itself. As it came down to us, it is a very *human* dialog between Moses and God on Mt. Sinai. God is frustrated and feels rejected; God is ready to throw in the towel and start all over, as happened in the time of Noah. This time, having given up on the descendants of Abraham, God intends to make a great nation out of Moses.

But Moses argues back: "You put so much effort into bringing us all out of Egypt; do you want really it all to go to waste? What will Egyptians say if you destroy Israel after going to all that trouble? What will this do to your reputation? Besides, you did make that promise to Abraham and Sarah!"

So God says, in effect, "OK, I guess you're right," and relents.

This story is not so much about what God is like, except in the largest sense, that God

has put up with a lot from us down the ages, and yet keeps on forgiving us. The story is about how many wrong turns we have made, as we struggle to grow into a mature relationship with God. The problem has been with us from the very beginning!

The context of this reading is important. It comes not only after God delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt, but at the very moment that a covenant is being shaped and brought into effect, a covenant to define the bond between God and God's people.

God and Moses are on top of Mt. Sinai, and Moses is about to receive the stone tablets of the law. These explain the rules by which the covenant relationship is to be lived out, the ethical principles of a truly good life. They are being inscribed by the very finger of God (according to our account), and Moses is getting ready to bring them back down the mountain to the people waiting below.

Meanwhile, the people are busy creating a lesser god for themselves to worship. What were they thinking?! Perhaps the best we can say of them is that they felt the need for a god to lead them. But what kind of a god did they come up with?!

The "golden calf," as the Hebrew word makes clear, was a young bull (not a heifer). We can only guess whether this god at least seemed somewhat similar to what they had experienced in the recent past. Maybe it seemed like the animal-headed gods of Egypt; at least it would be more tangible than this God YHWH, who came to them in fire and wind and cloud. We all understand the

desire for the familiar, even if it ends up putting limits on our understanding.

Perhaps they wanted a god similar to those of neighboring peoples. For centuries after the time of the Exodus, the neighbors would have been the powerful and successful Canaanites, whose god Baal was associated with bulls. Our storyteller was well aware of the danger this posed to Israelite religion. We, too, can understand the temptation to do whatever “everyone else” is doing, particularly if that “everyone else” seems successful.

Then there is that symbolic, but potent combination of wealth (gold) and strength (the brute force of a young bull). Even today, the temptation to ally ourselves with money and power is aptly symbolized, by the bronze statue of a charging bull in the heart of the financial district in New York City.

As the story continues beyond today’s reading, Moses comes down the mountain with the stone tablets, breaks them in disgust when he sees the golden calf, and then has to make a second trip up the mountain to get a new copy. There he has a powerful new experience of God, who is proclaimed to be *a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness . . .* I believe that that is the real, and final message of this story.

All of these stories, the account from Exodus and the two parables of Jesus, tell us how greatly God wants a relationship with us. God keeps trying to draw us onward into greater maturity, and God works strenuously to bring us back when we fail.

Our second reading gives us the same message, this time in the words of Paul, whose experience of this God was both personal and intense: *I used to be a blasphemer, a persecutor, violent man; but because in my unbelief I did not know what I was doing, I have been treated mercifully . . . Christ Jesus*

came into the world to save sinners, of whom I myself am the worst.

A thousand years after the Exodus story, at the time of Jesus and Paul, the followers of YHWH have made a lot of progress. They are faithful monotheists, after all, with a high ethical standard. But they still get stuck with a too-small god. Paul had tried to force his interpretation of the faith on others with a fanatic’s zeal. Less forcefully, the Pharisees and religious scholars in Luke’s gospel despise Jesus and the people with whom he is associating. So they miss the wider, deeper reality within their own tradition of a boundlessly merciful God, with a wide-open invitation to everyone.

We in the 21st century are not off the hook either. Looking back on our religious history, from Moses through to today, it seems that God is always trying to draw us forward, beyond what we have previously known, in Egypt, Palestine, Rome, and America; beyond what has become socially acceptable, “what everybody thinks,” in our neighborhood, our country, or our ethnic or religious group; beyond what serves our personal or national economic interests or power politics.

It is hard for us to allow ourselves to be called, continually called, beyond borders that we are afraid to cross, beyond the comfort zone of what is familiar and safe, into the challenging, but so rewarding, “promised lands” into which God invites us.

The good news for today is that God notices when any one of us goes missing! God is not happy until every last one has been gathered in: Tax collectors and “sinners,” of course, but also Pharisees like Paul and the religious scholars, and also us good religious folk that who do not always acknowledge how much we do not know, nor recognize a God who is infinitely bigger than all our ideas about God.