

**Let's Make a Deal
Exodus 32: 1-14
Don Lincoln**

When I was a young boy I loved sick days home from school. Not the REALLY sick days, but the ones that barely qualified. The rule in our house – you stayed home until you were fever free for 24 hours. Which meant if your fever broke at 10:00am one morning, you got a “get out of school free card” the next day.

And those were the great sick days! “Yeah mom.....I’m still feeling a little weak; I’ll stay on the sofa. Yes.....I think I could eat a poached egg on toast, Mom. That would be great.”

Then I would turn on the TV and watch all day long. My favorite sick day game show? “Let’s Make A Deal.” Monty Hall was the host – enticing hopeful guests in crazy costumes who shouted with glee when he paused at their seat and said, “Let’s make a deal!”

“Would you like to trade what you brought for this necklace on the stand here, or go for something behind the box that lovely Carol Merrill is pointing to?” Start with something you can see – then tempt something you can’t – possibilities of something better. Sometimes behind the box was a motor scooter. Sometimes it was a goat.

But it was the end of the show you hung on for. Monty would turn to whoever had won the biggest prize that day on the show, and ask if they wanted to gamble it for what was behind one of three curtains on the stage. I always wanted to see them trade – of course you wanted the suspense – but sometimes folks wouldn’t trade the motor scooter they had won for what could be either a fabulous trip to Italy, or a year’s supply of spaghetti.

“Let’s Make A Deal!” That’s what I thought of when I read this passage of the people of Israel in the wilderness.

The Israelites, saved by God from slavery in Egypt, carried through the Red Sea; fed with manna in the wilderness, and are now camped by God’s mountain – Mt. Sinai – from which they had heard God’s thundering voice a month ago.

Moses, their leader, has gone up on that mountain. Into the clouds. Disappeared behind the curtain. And he’s been gone the whole month. They don’t know he and God happen to be working out the legal system for this new nation. God is instructing Moses on the rules that will establish and protect the community and the individual – the Ten Commandments.

But down in the valley, the people have gotten worried. Moses has gone AWOL – and they’re anxious; they’re impatient. They don’t like uncertainty. They’ve forgotten already

what God has done to get them to this point. They want a God they can see. And if God or Moses can't be found, they'll figure it out themselves.

So they ask Aaron, Moses' brother – the one Moses left in charge – to make a god for them. A God they can see; a God they can touch. Who will be **with them** constantly and go **before them** when they move. In their spiritual anxiety they are willing to trade the **One** they've forgotten about behind the curtain – for something of their own making, their own creation, something less even than them, but tangible in their midst.

This is one of the most memorable stories I recall from Sunday School. **The golden calf.** I remember thinking back then, "How silly could the Israelites be? Can you believe it – they make a statue from their jewelry, and dance around it, instead of trusting in Almighty God?" Such a simple lesson!

Psalm 106, the source for our call to worship this morning, says it this way if we had read a little further:

"At Horeb (another name for Mt. Sinai) – at Horeb they made a calf; bowed low before cast metal. They exchanged their glory, for the image of a grass eating bull!" I think to myself, and maybe you do along with me, what IDIOTS these Israelites were. Who of us doesn't know that behind every grass eating bull is simply a large amount of recycled organic matter!

God's people were willing to trade – believing a bull in the hand is worth more than a mysterious God behind the curtain. A golden calf you can see, instead of a God whose ways are not always clear – a God who will not bend to our will – a God who is.....GOD.

I remember thinking as a young boy how foolish the Israelites were – trading the glory of God for a grass-eating bull. But like so many stories in Scripture, the older I get, the more I find the stories I thought very simple to be very self-convicting.

God invites you and me to give ourselves over to the ways of God in the world. God invites you and me, each day, to offer everything we have and everything we are – heart, mind, soul, treasure and talent – to the work of the kingdom, a kingdom bigger than we can comprehend – a kingdom more demanding than we might think, and yet a kingdom God promises will be more fulfilling than we dare to ask or imagine.

But you and I prefer to trade for what we can manage. What we can control. What we desire, what we admire, what we can acquire or manufacture. We trade for what we think will give us a settled life; what we think will eliminate our spiritual anxiety; what we hope will address our impatience with what's not right in our world and in our lives.

We will trade the God of the universe – and that God's ways in our lives – for a host of grass-eating bulls.....

Possessions. Houses. Cars. Portfolios.

We'll trade for today's pleasure; ignoring tomorrow's pain. We'll trade for addictions, entanglements, cutting corners when nobody's watching.

We'll worship the golden calf of national pride. The force of power. The mantra of "Not in my backyard." We'll forget what truth and honor and love and justice and Godliness might be behind the curtain. I'll just hang on to the golden calf of my racial advantage, an accident of birth that has become my God.

Or my heritage; my ancestry, my upbringing; my education – we can make any or every one of those things our idols.

Or we'll trade Almighty God for the golden calf of **this season**. **MY** political party. **MY** party's platform. **MY** party's candidate. As if any of those could equate with the LORD of the universe. And yet we will worship them; bow down before them; dance around them, and challenge anyone who doesn't believe in OUR God!

Like the Israelites we dance around them; we bow to them; we forget they are our own creation, our own devices – and will not, when it really gets down to it – will not be able to settle our spiritual anxiety – will not be able to speak to that deep uneasiness or emptiness inside – will not be able to answer the hardest, yet most important questions – who am I, why am I here, what is my purpose.....

.....and how is it I am to be part of a more flourishing, more loving humanity, that ALL lives might be fulfilled? So that this creation might become more and more like the kingdom of heaven, instead of a regular glimpse of hell?

It was in the wilderness, the Israelites began to truly understand they could not control God or contain God in any image. For years, in Egypt, they had seen gods worshipped that were visual and measurable – including cows. That's where they got the idea. Now, this God they were following in the wilderness was wild and unpredictable. In their uncertainty, they reached for what was familiar, and tried to make God more predictable. But a predictable God is not what they got.

And actually, a predictable God is not the deal they – or you and I – really want to trade for. "My ways are not your ways," says the Lord. **Thanks be to God**. Because our ways have us looking to one of the grass-eating bulls to which we have given ourselves to "save us" – and not one of them can.

An unpredictable God empties Himself, condescends to human form, and bears us up in His creative love, on the beams of a cross. And that ain't no bull!

Thanks be to God. AMEN.