



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Out Came This Calf (of course that's not true)

SCRIPTURE:
Exodus 32: 1-6,
15-24

September 18, 2022 – Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Moses comes down the mountain after meeting with God. It was no ordinary meeting with God, if such a thing can ever be ordinary. No, this was the definitive conversation with God. The one where God gives God's people the 10 Commandments. These foundational laws describe how we are to live in God's world. The commandments are not just rules; they are descriptions of what it is to be a child of God. How one who belongs to God lives in God's world. They speak the truth of who we are.

The first commandment is: "You shall have no other gods before me." Meanwhile, as this holy meeting is taking place on the top of the mountain, down in the valley, people are growing impatient, wondering if Moses is ever going to come back. People fresh from being freed from Egypt are now enamored with their freedom and ready to build their lives. Who could blame them?

While Moses is receiving truth from God, they begin to create their own truth, their own world, their own god. When creatures believe we can become the creator, truth is the first casualty. To create your own god, is to create your own world and worldview. The ancients called this idolatry. It is what happens when truth is something we create rather than something we discern.

When Moses finally comes down the mountain, he loses it. He breaks the tablets on which the commandments are written—giving visible expression to what the people are already doing: breaking commandments. They can't get past the first one. They are worshiping a statue. It is made of gold, but it's a statue, nevertheless.

Moses looks to Aaron, the way older brothers can look at younger brothers, as if to ask, "What in the world is going on?" Aaron, who was vice president

while Moses was away, shrugs his shoulders and says, "You know, it's the strangest thing. We tossed some gold into the fire and out came this calf."

Here's the thing. What Aaron says is not true, but we can't tell if Aaron knows he's lying or if Aaron believes this alternative god did indeed just show up. Deceit works like that. Say it long enough and loudly enough and pretty soon it seems true.

If I understand the text, one of the teachings is this: Truth cannot be created. It must be discerned. Because, at the end of the day, God is truth. And we don't create God; truth is discerned.

We are asking ourselves, "What must we do to try to grow our faith in these days?" Last week we talked about reading scripture. Next Sunday, Rodger will speak of prayer. Later we will reflect on service. Practices like these you expect to be part of such a series because they are staples of Christian living—foundational practices for the life of faith.

But some practices rise in importance for us, not only because they are part of the tradition, but because of the days in which we live. Such is the case for our conversation today. People of faith are called to discern the truth. Not to create our own truth, but to discern the truth and to not settle for false narratives of reality. But truth is a slippery commodity these days.

In 1972, NASA launched Pioneer 10, a spacecraft with the power to escape the solar system. Eighteen months later, it was sending pictures of Jupiter. But it kept going. It is on its way to the Aldebaran star (part of the Taurus constellation). It will take two million years to reach Aldebaran. In a first for NASA, Pioneer 10 was prepared for the possibility that she might be intercepted by intelligent life. An aluminum plaque was attached to the spacecraft with messages for whomever might be out there. Of course,

it is unlikely that intelligent life beyond the solar system would be fluent in English, so how would we communicate? Is there a language that would be recognized across the universe? NASA thought so.

The plaque showed the layout of our solar system, our location in the Milky Way galaxy, and the structure of the hydrogen atom. Why? As Neil deGrasse Tyson says in his book, “Astrophysics for People in a Hurry,” science is the universal language—literally. The laws of science are the same on distant planets as they are here. If there is a way to communicate with alien life, it will begin with the truth we know through science.¹

Facts matter. If fact is the basis of communication with alien life, it is also the building block for communication with each other. Truth is the mortar that holds communities together.

But increasingly, facts are under assault. Science facts are questioned, whether related to climate or creation. When elections are lost, just say they are stolen; it doesn’t need to be true. Vladimir Putin launched a war to drive the Nazis out of Ukraine. Of course, it wasn’t true. But say it long enough and loud enough and people will turn from the truth.

I think God wants us to pursue truth and that takes work. It starts with accepting facts as facts.

A few years ago, the cover of Time magazine asked, “Is Truth Dead?”² The article chronicled the frequent public statements, asserted as fact, that had no basis in fact. Several years ago, The Rand Corporation released a report which they titled “Truth Decay.” Michael Rich, president of the Rand Corporation said, “This is... a dangerous and unusual time. Americans not only feel entitled to their opinions—but... a growing number of them... also feel entitled to cherry-pick facts to support their opinion, or even commission new ‘facts’ if necessary. ... When everyone has their own facts, then nobody really has any facts at all.”³

We see the consequences of the truth decay in our communities. When truth is not pursued, communities break down. We must pursue truth in order for

families, church families and nations to hold together. When the truth is something that we create rather than discern, relationships erode.

Years ago, I was driving home. As I turned onto my street, I saw a yard sign: “Village Church: Respect Thy Neighbor.” If you were around then, you know what I’m talking about. We were preparing to build the Meneilly Center and there were some in our community who organized to stop the construction. They didn’t object to the day care center; it was the Food Pantry they didn’t want in their neighborhood.

So, neighbor talked with neighbor and yard signs began to emerge. Almost overnight, it seemed they were everywhere. My neighbor, whom I had not met, was mowing his lawn. I stopped my car.

“Hi. I’m Tom Are. I live down the street and noticed your sign. Sounds like you are concerned about what Village Church is doing. Can you tell me about that?” He said, “Sure.” He went into a list of complaints including, he had heard from a good friend, there would be more than 100 semi-trucks bringing deliveries to the Food Pantry every week. “We just don’t need that kind of traffic.” I said, “I wouldn’t want that either.” He said, “You want a sign?” I said, “No. I’m the pastor of Village Church. I wonder if I could bring by the plans and share them with you because some of what you heard is not accurate.”

Now I don’t blame him. He had a friend tell him things that weren’t true, and that friend got it from probably another friend who believed it was true. There were very few people who were intentionally misleading. That’s the way golden calves work. You say it long enough, you think it’s true. But there is a cost because communities can’t hold together without truth.

You have no doubt seen in the recent news the case regarding Alex Jones. He is the one, who on his atrocious radio show “Info Wars,” declared that the atrocity that occurred at Sandy Hook never happened. Jumping on the bandwagon of those who proclaim that the government is the source of every problem, he declared that it was all a hoax organized

1 Neil deGrasse Tyson, *Astrophysics for People in a Hurry* (2017) pp. 38-40. (This citation is for all the information regarding Pioneer 10 and Voyager.)

2 *Time* magazine, April 3, 2017.

3 Rand.org “Truth Decay”

by those who want to take away your guns. Parents, grieving the loss of their elementary-aged children, were accosted and trolled on social media by those who listened to Mr. Jones and took him at his word. When we create a narrative, a world that is not true, it's idolatry.

Jia Tolentino is a writer for *The New Yorker* and other magazines. She's a 30-something thinker. She's written a book titled "Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion." She speaks to this idolatry, although I don't think she uses that word.

As a 30-something, she writes about the power of social media and its power over us. She says social media—Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, the platforms are ever-changing—has some dangers. In her own experience, the primary danger is that social media teaches us to overvalue our own opinions. I can post my thought and if I garner enough likes and responses, particularly responses of outrage, then I can tell myself I have actually done something.

She says social media can teach us that the only things that really matter are the things that matter to me. She quotes Mark Zuckerberg, who in the early days of the development of Facebook said, "Here you can determine what matters." And the truth is, a squirrel dying in your front yard may be more important to you than people dying in Africa.⁴

This is what Tolentino calls the overvaluing of

our opinions. We can overvalue our opinions to the point that we deem them true—whether they are or not. This is commonplace in our culture and it's hurting us.

I wish I had a simple fix for you. I wish this were easy. But it isn't. People create their own truth, their own world, their own gods all the time. So, we need to start by knowing that truth is something we have to discern. As people of faith, we seek to respect truth, be careful with our view, and remember that we are not God, so humility is always in order.

I asked my neighbor, "Would it be okay if I brought some of the plans for the Meneilly Center and let you see them?" "Why do you want to take the time to do that?" "Well, because I think you have some bad information." "I do? What?" I said, "Well, about everything you have heard." "It's not true?" "I'm afraid it's not. I'd like to show you." I did.

To his credit, he said to me, "I think I need to do two things. The first is to take down my sign. The second is to ask you to tell your congregation that they are doing a good thing. I am glad to have this ministry in my community. Tell them I am sorry. I was misinformed." He was misinformed. But he also forgot: We live in a world where truth must be pursued.

Jesus taught us to love our neighbors. If you love your neighbor, pursue truth, discern truth. Because we can't have one without the other.

4 Jia Tolentino, *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion* (2020) p. 29.