

October 11, 28A (Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23)

## **The golden calf isn't a terrible idea. It's just not God's idea.**

by [Kathryn Z. Johnston](#) in the [September 23, 2020](#) issue

I've always had a heart for Aaron. Even the best of us can forget to aim before we fire; especially when people are clamoring for decisions to be made and a job to get done. Sometimes the results of quick, high-pressure decisions are full of affirmation. Other times, as in Aaron's case, they are full of bull.

I feel for the guy. He's been left with no timetable for the return of Moses, and the people are starting to get seriously restless. "Come, make gods for us," they say to Aaron. "As for this Moses . . . we do not know what has become of him."

How quickly the crowd turns on Moses. Their lack of trust in him, and therefore in God, continues to astound. A burning bush, a walking stick that turns into a snake and then back into a stick again, ten plagues, release from captivity, the Red Sea parted and Pharaoh's army destroyed, daily food and water provided in the wilderness, and all the respect that Moses gets from the people is "we do not know what has become of him." Tough crowd.

Their fickle ways aren't news to Aaron; he's been with them this entire time. So either he's chomping at the bit to finally have his chance to lead or he's doing what he can to appease the masses because he doesn't want them to turn on him next.

I think a case can be made that Aaron is showing good leadership skills, even if his response is a little "ready, fire, aim." There is a problem, and he fixes it. And when he has the Israelites go collect all the gold jewelry, he really might just be trying to buy time. It's a pretty decent stall tactic; maybe he hopes people won't want to give up the jewelry they faithfully took from the Egyptians (Exod. 12:35). And with so many people, the gathering of gold rings would take a while.

But according to the narrative, the time lapse doesn't matter. In two verses, Aaron goes from requesting the gold to casting the calf. (Who brings a casting mold of a

calf with them into the wilderness, anyway?)

Aaron does what the people ask him to do, although he tells them: “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.” He is not playing their “other gods” game. But the people take the party over, eating and drinking. According to scripture they “rose up to revel.”

No wonder God pulls out the line I used to hear my mom use with my dad when I had done something she didn’t approve of: “Look what *your* daughter did.”

God says to Moses, “Your people, whom you brought out of Egypt, have acted perversely.”

God is angry, and it takes Moses’ quick thinking to save the very lives of the people God has saved from Egypt.

From the outside looking in, it looks like Aaron comes up with a pretty sound solution. The people miss Moses, and they feel they should be worshipping some sort of god like they watched the Egyptians do their entire lives. If you wanted to survive in the world as they knew it, you had to sacrifice to gods.

So he stalls for a bit, makes the people pay up for what they want, provides them with something to focus their anxiety on, and gives them a reason to have a huge party to take their mind off of things. It’s a great idea.

But it isn’t God’s idea—and it goes horribly, horribly wrong.

This week’s psalm recounts the tale: “They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt.”

Sometimes what really feels like the right decision—one that may have been made for all of the earthly kingdom right reasons—is the wrong one in God’s eyes. This is the challenge of the “ready, fire, aim” strategy. A godly decision, more often than not, requires time and thought, prayer and discernment—and a willingness to let go of our great idea in order to make room for God’s best idea.

On a podcast with David Axelrod, Lin-Manuel Miranda talks about the time Stephen Sondheim visited his high school classroom and told the story about creating the opening of *West Side Story*. Sondheim talked about lyrics that Miranda knew didn’t appear in the show. Then he revealed that they had done weeks and weeks of work

on lyrics to this one song, only for choreographer Jerome Robbins to say, "I can dance all of that better." So they threw out all of those lyrics, all of those weeks of work.

Sometimes you throw out great stuff so you can get to the best stuff.

Sometimes we have to throw out our great stuff so we can get to God's best stuff. We have to stop worshiping the idol in the mirror and trust in God's promises. And sometimes, as Moses says to Aaron, we've gotta let go of the bull.