

**Fools' Gold**  
**A Sermon by Louise F. Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
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**Text: Exodus 32:1-14**

A telling moment in the most recent presidential debate occurred in the last two minutes as the candidates were asked a question selected from several million posed through e-mail. The question was “What do you *not* know, and what will you do to come to know it?” Both candidates fumbled with a response, lamely making jokes to avoid actually identifying an area that might possibly be perceived as a weakness. I sat watching, weary of political posturing, thinking there was simple, true answer that would have resonated with every single human being. Not one of us knows the future. We don't know what will happen tomorrow or next year or what will befall our beloved ones or ourselves. We can predict and plan and pray, but we can't know. And it's the uncertainty that lies like a seismic fault line straight through our hearts, a hidden but potentially deadly threat to our wellbeing—an earthquake waiting to happen.

Being resilient and resourceful, we humans expend a lot of energy seeking to secure our lives against the unknown. We save and invest and insure and calculate the odds so that we can rest a little easier at night; so we can achieve “peace of mind.” The current crisis in financial markets, however, suggests the inadequacy of even large amounts of capital as a fortress of protection from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. The glittering lure of high-yield investments and untold wealth has become—in the unsparing scales of *worth* assessment---fools' gold.

Perhaps we can understand with more empathy today the defensive steps taken by the people of Israel in our morning text. They too were worried about the future. A crisis of confidence had been ignited by the absence of their leader

Moses who had ascended Mount Sinai and had not returned. Fear and a sense of vulnerability prompted them to take matters into their own hands. Listen for God's Word to the Church in the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, the book of Exodus, in the 32<sup>nd</sup> chapter, at the first verse.

[EXODUS 32:1-14]

*Due to recent budget constraints and rising costs of electricity, gas, and oil, the light at the end of the tunnel has been turned off. We apologize for any inconvenience.* Several of you sent me this "sign of the times," and I thought it was pretty much 50-50 as to whether it would make you would laugh or cry. Hope is in short supply, and like the Israelites of old, we're straining hard to overcome the deficit. Make no mistake—it was not evil intent that turned the people of God to idolatry: it was fear. They could hope that something good was happening above them, far up on the mountain. But all that was beyond their control, and they wanted some relief right here, right now.

For anyone who has seen the Cecil B. DeMille version of *The Ten Commandments*, the golden calf scene is unforgettable. Despite their anxiety, these people throw one heck of a party. The text's modest description "the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel," becomes in the film maker's hands a veritable orgy of excess and unrestrained behavior. At the center of their celebration is the object of their veneration, a statue created from their gold jewelry, to symbolize "the gods who brought us up out of slavery." It's easy to scorn the lack of sophistication exhibited in that scene and to feel superior to people who would worship the image of a calf.

....but isn't that precisely what you and I tend towards when we replace spiritual intangibles with material reality? When we place our security in that which can be measured, counted, compounded with interest? When we imagine we can trust the smile on future's face only when we greet it with a hefty 401K?

Aren't the Israelites of this text our spiritual kin because we share vulnerability to the temptation to substitute gold's transience for God's transcendence?

In some ways, the financial nightmare gripping us might be an easy target for comparison with the golden calf. I've read articles and talked with colleagues near and far suggesting this crisis comprises an unprecedented opportunity to call our nation to repent its worship of wealth, and return to the worship of God alone. Certainly the first of the Ten Commandments is unambiguous: I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before me. No other gods. Not money. But also not any of those other idols we have crafted to reduce the terror of the unknown. Success. Military might. Capitalism. Nationalism. God knows we need security, peace, family, home, a livelihood. But God also knows we need more. And when we stake our lives on something less than the real deal, we'll end up with bags of fools' gold—shiny, captivating, attractive---but not what we were really seeking, and not what will ultimately satisfy the yearning of our hearts for meaning, for truth, for light in the dark tunnels through which we all travel.

But I guess I want to say something more today than simply remind us *not* to worship anything beside the Lord God. While wealth—and one hundred other things--- will always be alluring competitors to an invisible Deity, there is a positive reason why we should worship and serve nothing less than the God of our ancestors. It's a simple reason, and one we teach our youngest children. *We love because God first loved us.* The Creator and Ruler of the Universe has reached out to us and claimed us as beloved children. God's impulse has always been toward connection, and when the connection is broken, toward reconciliation; God forever mending, healing, saving, redeeming until it is on earth as it already is in heaven.

It's about remembering—who God is and all that God has done. Fear crowded out the Israelites' memory of God's liberating power freeing them from slavery in Egypt, and their

deliverance from re-capture by the miraculous parting of the Red Sea. God had guided them by day and by night in their trek through wilderness and desert, providing food and drink to sustain them. “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” God had established a covenant of love with the people, and promised them a bright future in a land flowing with abundance. Yet the crisis of the present moment produced spiritual amnesia and turned their fear into faithlessness.

The first commandment asks us to remember God. And this God is a God of abundance; a God whose creativity knows no bounds, a God who loves without limit, who gives generously, and whose promises are absolutely reliable. This is the God who frees us from slavery of every kind, who pours blessings without number upon us, and whose hope for us is abundant life, here and now, and eternally. This is the God of boundless grace whom we’ve come to know most clearly in Jesus Christ. Jesus’ demonstrated a theology of abundance throughout his life and ministry. He witnessed to God’s generosity by removing barriers of class and race and religious orthodoxy to bring people to eat together. He challenged notions of “scarcity” by breaking bread and sharing it and showing how there is enough and more than enough for everyone to eat their fill and still have leftovers. In the end, he refused to pass the buck on the world’s pain and brokenness, but absorbed it all in his body on the cross, dying and rising to show how God’s abundant grace transforms even a shadowy grave into a doorway to life. *[I am indebted to Walter Brueggeman, emeritus professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, for the comparison between “abundance” and “scarcity.”]*

Friends, the God of abundance calls us to live abundantly. What does that mean exactly? It doesn’t mean that God wants us to be wealthy and if we have faith we’ll be blessed with material abundance. It doesn’t mean that God rewards your worship with an increased bank account, or that we can believe our way to riches. The abundance of God means we can live

joyfully and with less fear because we trust in divine goodness, and God's good intent for us and for everyone. We can worry less and live more purposefully because we trust God makes good on God's promises, however distant their fulfillment. We can counter disappointing news with the assurance of grace to deal with whatever consequences. We can face a future we don't know in the knowledge of God's continuing presence and never-failing love.

A theology of abundance provides the foundation of our annual stewardship campaign because it reflects the high and holy mission to which God calls this church, and each one of us. All we do and all we hope to do flows from God's abundant Spirit, and when we trust that Spirit, we will fulfill our mission abundantly. Over the next few weeks, you'll hear from Fairmounters witnessing to the ways God's abundant grace has been shown in ministries of caring to one another, through ministries that help nurture faith across the life span, and through ministries of service and outreach to our city and to people in need everywhere.

The theme of our annual stewardship campaign "Sharing Abundance" was chosen several months ago, certainly before the worst of the financial news hit. When it did, we considered changing the theme because we knew that some Fairmounters would be severely affected, and that all of us would absorb some loss. It was Elder Jim Dakin, stewardship committee chair, who changed our minds. He said, "I can't think of a better time to remind each other of the abundance God has showered upon us. When we remember that, how can we keep from sharing?"

How can we keep from sharing? Even before we think about our financial commitment to the ministry of this church, let us remember the God who founded it, and the host of members and leaders across 92 years whose faithfulness has helped it thrive. Even before we fill out the card, let us remember how God has so loved the world. Remember how God sent Jesus to live among us to show us a way even death could not destroy.

Remember that God is always near. Remember the abundance of God's grace and choose to live in faith, not fear. Remember the abundance of God's grace and choose to live generously and justly and joyfully.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GOD'S ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER. AMEN.

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