

Golden Calf Security (revised)  
Exodus 32:1-14  
October 19, 2008  
St. John United Methodist Church  
Anchorage, Alaska  
David Beckett, D.Min.

Unless you have seen firsthand the devastation caused by a hurricane, tornado, earthquake, flood, or fire, it may be difficult to comprehend what so many are experiencing as they return to their hurricane-damaged homes in the gulf coast. Imagine driving down the block to your home here in Anchorage after a massive earthquake. You turn the corner and lay your eyes upon your once-secure home, now shattered by the quake. The roof is on the ground...every window is smashed...and walls are collapsed. What is it that you feel at such a sight?

We have to admit that much of the security we feel in this life rests in having a house, a place to be, a home with food, family, and love. The loss of a physical house can instantly create deep feels of insecurity.

One dictionary defines insecurity as "the anxiety you experience when you feel vulnerable." Not having a home certainly puts you in a vulnerable position. For all human beings have a basic need to feel safe and secure. So what do you do when you suddenly are vulnerable, when your home is destroyed, when what you thought was solid and secure is gone?

The Old Man of the Mountain was a 40-foot tall natural outcropping of granite ledges in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, which looked like the profile of an old man. Two hundred years ago Nathaniel Hawthorn wrote a famous story about it: "The Great Stone Face." The image was on New Hampshire license plates and quarters and about a million souvenirs; it was the official state emblem.

Sometime on May 1 or 2, 2003, in a heavy fog, the 700-ton face broke apart and slid down the mountain in the dark. Steven Heath, one of the residents nearby, said, "It's something that has been a part of our lives forever. At first it was disbelief. No one could believe he came down. It's like a member of your family dying." Another man said, "I'm absolutely devastated by this. It makes you wonder if God is unhappy with what is going on." There are times when it seems the most dependable, reliable presence in your life disappears into the fog in the middle of the night.<sup>1</sup>

We all know about the ten commandments Moses brought to the Israelites from God. In giving these laws God is essentially saying, "Find your security, not in the things of this world, but in me." The Israelites were new to this concept and had a hard time with it. Neighboring nations all had visible gods fashioned from stone or metal. Now they were being asked to worship a relational God, a God who cared personally about them.

But Moses was in the mountains with God for a long time and they became insecure. They felt vulnerable and anxious. In their insecurity they turned away from God to something they could see and touch, something familiar from Egyptian captivity, something they thought would give them security...a golden calf. They gathered all of their gold, melted it down, and created a god they could touch and see.

Insecurity often tempts us to turn away from God and towards the things and powers of this world. This is one reason why corrupt leaders rise to political power in impoverished countries. They promise security to the people in the form of jobs, homes,

---

<sup>1</sup> "Visitors Mourn Loss of N.H. Mountain Icon" and "State Grieves Loss of Mountain Man," Chicago Tribune (5-05-03)

and health care. People who know the vulnerability of poverty on a daily basis probably don't care if their government is communist or fascist as long as their basic needs are met.

Another example of how people turn towards the things of this world is through the pursuit of wealth. When we acquire enough wealth we can afford to live in a neighborhood with an iron gate around it. It's just one of the many examples where people believe that wealth and walls will give them security.

The world is such an insecure place that we crave security. Security sells, even if it presents only the illusion of security. We want to feel secure even if there are still real risks. Dead bolt locks on our doors. Alarm systems on our homes and cars. Guns in the bedroom.

We live in an age of theological insecurity as well. This is one of the reasons why fundamentalist religion is on the rise. Whether it's Christian, Muslim, or Judaism, fundamentalism attempts to answer the basic questions about God and the world with black and white answers. Iraqi people and U.S. soldiers died because Islamic fundamentalism has promised suicide bombers a heavenly reward for their violence. In our country independent, fundamental Christian churches are growing partly because pastors are handing out black and white answers to life's basic questions. It's because of the insecurity of this world that people crave security. Many people have difficulty with issues being gray. They want and need them to be black and white.

This point was driven home to me years ago when I was a youth pastor. One senior girl in my youth group who had been through my confirmation class went one night to a friend's church. She said to me, "This pastor had answers to all my questions. I've never heard these answers before now." So she left me standing there tempted to feel guilty because our United Methodist Church had not given her the answers. But I believe it is better to struggle with the questions than blindly accept someone's black and white answers. The claim of fundamentalism is, "We have the answers!" We must admit that such a view helps people feel secure in an insecure world.

Another definition of insecurity is a feeling of apprehensiveness and uncertainty. What is it in your life that makes you feel apprehensive and uncertain? Is it the thought of the death of your spouse or family member? Is it the market crash that causes you to wonder about your financial future? Is it your own death that causes you to be insecure?

One of the major problems with insecurity is that it can create such strong feelings of anxiety and apprehensiveness that we often feel the need to act immediately to get rid of the feelings. And so we turn towards those people or products that promise instantaneous relief.

There is a religious group in Australia that sells bottles of spring water for \$80 each, claiming it cures everything from weak hearts, migraines and anxiety to drug dependence. Included in the 270 Infinity-brand "elixirs" are Heart Spider, Hallucinogenic Elixir and Puff the Magic Dragon. Infinity claims people can take the bottles away, drink the water, refill the bottle with tap water and still get the product's healing powers. But there is a catch — the healing powers only last for two or three refills of tap water before they run out, at which point the consumer has to fork over \$80 for a new supply!<sup>2</sup>

Whether it is a too-good-to-be-true product promise or mind-numbing drugs and alcohol we consume to relieve our anxiety, it seems that learning to live with some insecurity would be to our benefit. At the first sign of insecurity we don't have to be tempted to run to the bottle, or the store to shop away our anxiety, or the kitchen seeking comfort food. The truth is that these golden calves give us only temporary security.

---

<sup>2</sup> —Based on Internet sources, including [Rickross.com/reference/infinity/infinity2.html](http://Rickross.com/reference/infinity/infinity2.html). Retrieved February 11, 2004.

They will not last. Only a deep and abiding faith and trust in God will give us true security, a security that will last forever!

Like many in New Orleans who have withstood past hurricanes, 43-year old Jimmy Lewis didn't expect Katrina to deliver a major blow to his life. After all, throughout its history, New Orleans has weathered yellow fever, floods, wars, and other hurricanes. Since the Big Easy had been home for years, Jimmy said he just decided to weather out this storm too.

That Sunday night, the wind battered the house as Katrina unleashed her wrath on the Gulf Coast. Jimmy said he didn't worry, until water began flooding into his house. He began inching up his stairs toward the second story as the water filled the first floor. When the flood met him on the second story, Jimmy retreated to the attic. "Everything was floating, the freezer, the refrigerator, everything," he recalled.

Jimmy wasn't alone. Looking out the attic window, Jimmy spotted a neighbor struggling to stay on his roof. Jimmy found a torch, cut out the window, threw a makeshift rescue line in the form of an extension cord to his neighbor, and pulled his friend into his attic.

"I was just praying that the water would stop rising," Jimmy said. After a two-day wait, a Coast Guard boat rescued Jimmy and his neighbor, delivering them to the Superdome.

Perhaps we will see the day when our home is destroyed. Perhaps we will face someone who is in conflict with us. Perhaps we will deal with the rejection of divorce. Perhaps we will get that call informing us that a loved one has died. It is the nature of human life to be insecure and anxious. But we don't have to give in to the temptation to build golden calves. We don't have to give in to our desire to run from the insecurity. We don't have to demand immediate, black and white answers. We have God! We have a God who loves and cares for us. We have a God who wants us to place our faith and security, not in the golden calves of this world, but in the hands of God!