

The people of Israel were having a cow. Remember that saying? It’s been around since the 1950’s and Homer Simpson made it a catch-phrase. For a while, whenever we got upset, someone would tell us to settle down; “don’t have a cow.”

Israel was having a cow. Moses was gone. He’d been gone for a long time – too long. He went up on Mt. Sinai, and he hadn’t come back. Israel was at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Looking up, all they could see was smoke, and where there’s smoke; there’s fire; fire consumes; fire kills; human beings burn in fire.

So, Israel is in the wilderness. They don’t know where they are. They don’t know where they’re going – some “Promised Land.” And now, the man who was their leader, Moses, is gone. They don’t know what’s become of him. They don’t know what will become of them, and they are having a cow.

You’d think they’d know better. These are the folks who saw the plagues; they walked through the Red Sea on dry ground. They’ve seen God do amazing things; how can they turn away from God and demand a new god? How can they lose their faith so quickly?

“Fear makes fools of us all.” We’ve had our cows too. The familiar flees. Certainty evaporates. We’re in the wilderness, wandering through the unknown, hoping, (and all we have is hope; we stake everything on promise) hoping that there’s a Promised Land for us out there somewhere. So long as we have something tangible, something we can see and touch and hear, we can keep it together, but when that is taken away, the fear may become too much; the herd stampedes; holy cow!

⌘ STAMPEDE!

Hanging in my office is a picture of the running of the bulls at Pamplona, Spain. It reads, “Tradition – Just because we’ve always done it that way doesn’t mean it’s not incredibly stupid.”

Somewhere I read, “We prefer known hells to unknown heavens.” It’s what keeps us in unhealthy, abusive relationships. It’s what keeps us from taking the steps we need to take to move from the life we know to the life we dream of. But those are big steps; it’s one thing to dream; it’s another thing to commit, to be the change we seek. So we stay where we are. We surround ourselves with reasons to maintain the status quo and tell ourselves “this is as good as it gets.” “It’s the way we’ve always done it.”

When something happens that disturbs our status quo, our first impulse is to restore it. We stampede toward anything and anyone who can lead us from our present discomfort to the comfort we knew, even if it wasn’t that comfortable. We gather around Aaron, and we say, “Hey boy, make us a god who’ll get us through it. Make it now. Make it right, because the herd is on the move, and if you don’t, it just might stampede over you.”

Isn’t that what’s happening in our politics right now? Isn’t that what prompted the rise of the Tea Party on the right and the Wall Street protests on the left? We’re looking for a savior who will lead us back to where we were. We’ll stampede toward anyone or anything that promises that “happy days are here again.”

But how happy are those days? Is our partner still abusive? Is our neighbor still hungry? Are we turning away from a Promised Land tomorrow for the sake of security and stability today?

If so, we turn away from the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God of Exodus and resurrection and stampede toward a golden calf; a god we create; a god we control; a god who ultimately cannot save. “Just because it’s the way we’ve always done it doesn’t mean it’s not really, really stupid.”

Stop the stampede. Face your fear with faith; faith in the God who’s brought you thus far; faith in the God who will see you through. Face your fear with faith, and commit to be the change you seek.

✦ HOLY COW!

Reading the various obituaries for Steven Jobs, founder of Apple, creator of the iMac, iPod, iPad, iPhone, and so much more, evoked in me a sense of what it was like to be an Israelite at the foot of that mountain; what it's like to mark the departure of a Moses. He led us into a new world. How many of us have an iSomething?

From Thursday's *Washington Post*: Under his leadership, Apple's subliminal selling point was: *Let it go*. Let go of the uneasiness about computers. Let go of ugly, antique technology. Let go of the fantasy future of personal rocketships. Let go of the expensive, shiny new phone that you bought last year for the slightly less expensive, shiny new phone that's coming out this year. But let go of something deeper, something resistant in you that romanticizes the past.

In 2011, so much of our culture — as well as our politics — feels as though we're losing grip on the old, beloved things. Where did record stores go? What happened to letters that come in the mail? Where did movie theaters go? What about the books? Where is my Main Street? Where is my America?

Jobs had been teaching us to say goodbye to all that for decades — we just didn't know it. Some of us said goodbye to typewriters in the 1980s when we finished term papers using MacWrite on a Macintosh Plus for the first time. Some of us said goodbye when we made PTA fliers and “Lost Dog” posters that were far and away better than their Sharpie-scrawled predecessors. Let it go, let it go: Take your CDs to Goodwill; give your books to the library sale.

It was therefore an irresistible metaphor, in these final years, when the auditorium lights would go down and the crowd would go wild for Jobs, who increasingly greeted his followers and touted the latest neat, new thing even as he wore the look of a person who was not going into that future with us. He would be getting off here; we were to proceed without him into the unknown. Let it go and look ahead was the message all along.¹

¹ http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/steve-jobs-and-the-idea-of-letting-go/2011/10/05/gIQAWxNqOL_story.html

“Let it go and look ahead” is the difference between faith and religion. Religion looks back. Religion holds on. Religion sacrifices the future for the sake of security in the here and now. If we just get “it” right, we’ll be all right. That’s the promise of religion; that’s the premise that crafts golden calves. Faith invites us to consider new possibilities, what could be. Faith reminds us that “sacred cows make gourmet hamburgers.” Holy cow!

Religion seeks salvation through what we do; we control our fate. All we have to do is keep that Golden Calf shiny. Faith receives salvation; faith accepts that we cannot save ourselves. For Israel, it was Moses interceding up on that mountain, daring to stand in God’s way and say, “God, for your sake, remember your promise! Change your mind! Be great enough to swallow your anger and save your people.” For us, it is Jesus, crucified and risen, who ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God. He is our intercessor. He is the one who prays on our behalf, “God, for your sake, remember your promise! Change your mind! Be great enough to swallow your anger and save your people.”

In these uncertain, anxious times, the appeal of Golden Calves is hard to resist! They promise what we want. Idols always do. That’s why we make them. “Just because it’s what we’ve always done it that way doesn’t make it really, really stupid.”

Don’t have a cow. “Let it go and look ahead.” “Sacred cows make gourmet hamburgers.” Don’t let fear make a fool out of you! Face your fear! Face it with faith! Face it with hope – not in yourself, not in what you can create and control, but in the Lord Jesus Christ who prays for you! He is the way through this wilderness. He is the truth that exposes idolatries lies. He is the life we long for. Until he comes, “Let it go and look ahead.” Commit to be the change you seek. God has more in store than a holy cow. Amen.