

The God of Gold

September 14, 2025 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Exodus 32: 7-14

Like too many in the past few years, this day, this Sunday, when we gather for worship, seems loaded with particular weight.

There has been yet another murder of a political figure in our country,

ICE has an increased presence in the greater Boston area, and here at First Church we have had to take special precautions to continue our ministry of loving our immigrant neighbors as ourselves,

politically motivated famine continues in Gaza,

The President authorized the destruction of a boat in the Caribbean killing 11 people on board, with no reasonable claim of an imminent threat,

there have been seven mass shootings in our country in the past week, with 6 people dead and 32 injured,

the demonization of trans people, and carefully, but clearly, coded racism has been on full display,

leading into his ICE “Chipocalypse” action in the Chicago area, the President posted an image celebrating the depraved villain of the movie *Apocalypse Now*, of the character who said, “I love the smell of napalm in the morning,” and then, in light of the killing of Charlie Kirk, said his political opponents are the ones who need to tone down their rhetoric.

...you get the idea.

No one could be more naturally and theologically disposed to hopefulness and deep-seated peace than I am, but...(deep sigh)...if you are feeling the weight of all that, well, I am right there with you. Someone I know who is in close contact with Harvard undergrads told me this week about the students’ feelings after the murder of Mr. Kirk: “We just don’t want to grow up in a world like this,” they said. And I think that applies to all of us. We don’t want to grow up in, grow old in, or otherwise live in, a world like this.

As people gathered in the name of the Living God, it seems like we should have a word to say about this, and thus I feel the weight of all this in worship particularly. And indeed, I hear that longing not to grow up in a world like this, not as a political statement, and not primarily an emotional statement, but as a spiritual statement, a spiritual longing.

It’s not just pastors and theologians who are saying the same thing today. Figures as diverse as Ezra Klein, J.D. Vance, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Bill McKibben, Senator Chris Murphy, Ross Douthat, Elizabeth Bruenig, and yes, Charlie Kirk, have sometimes articulately, sometimes haltingly, couched the current disturbing reality of our days in spiritual terms.

The world we create reflects our gods, after all. The church has said for centuries, *lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*, which I will loosely translate as “how you worship shapes how you believe which shapes how you live.” So again, the world we create reflects the gods we worship. This is spiritual all the way down.

Of course, the scripture passage I read a bit ago is a cautionary tale in this regard. The passage reveals that if we don’t like the god before us, we are likely to create our own. The whole scene takes place not long after God, through Moses, has delivered the people from slavery in Egypt. In Egypt, there was no worship of, or even knowledge of, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Through generations of slavery, the very name of God disappeared, replaced with the seemingly unlimited power of Egyptian empire. The people cried out in their suffering, but they did not know to whom they cried out. In time, the God of their ancestors listened to their cry.

After God redeemed them from slavery and drew them out of Egypt, God gave Moses, and Moses gave the people, the Ten Commandments and the rest of the covenant that was supposed to guide their common life before God. Upon hearing the terms of their relationship with this new God, the people proclaimed, presumably in gratitude for their deliverance, “All the words that Yahweh has spoken we will do.”

And yet, of course, they don’t do all that Yahweh has spoken. In the Ten Commandments and the rest of the covenant they are presented with a God who has certain expectations of them. God basically says, “Look, you asked to be freed from bondage to Pharaoh. I have answered your cry. But here’s the thing, living as free people isn’t as easy as you might think. In fact, in order to be truly free you will need to learn to live as I call you to live. Otherwise, you will simply be slaves to yourselves, and soon enough slaves to some other empire.” In time, we learned a way to summarize the way of life which would lead to real freedom: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

But the people standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai have no way to fathom what this could mean. No way to fathom what it could mean to love a god. The only god they had ever known was the god of Egypt, the god of empire, the god of the oppressor. That god was not worthy of love, only fear. That god wasn’t leading them into freedom but crushing them. So when Moses, their only conduit to this so-called god of love, this god of loving expectations, is delayed in coming down from the mountain, they create a new god – one from their own hands, a god of gold, the gold which even then revealed their longing for power and wealth and greatness on the world’s terms.

Of course, God, with perhaps a little more human feeling than we are comfortable seeing in the Divine, wants to destroy them. Moses, get out the way, I’m gonna smoke these folks right now.” Moses, appealing not to God’s love, but to God’s ego, gets God to repent of the destruction, which I guess we’ll take as a win?

Today’s passage ends there, but of course the story doesn’t end there. In fact, the story just keeps repeating itself throughout scripture. God calls them to follow the covenant, they say “Yes, absolutely,” then at the first moment things get tough, and in fact also when things go well, they forget the whole Love God and love your neighbor thing, and build idols of gold, sometime literally, sometimes in the shape of armies, or massive inequality, or oppression of the foreigner in their land, or alliances with

empires that worship power.

And the through-line continues right through the New Testament, when the God of love is rejected by the combined force of the religious and political powers, but also by his own friends, all of whom forsook him and fled. The god of gold triumphed yet again.

But no. That triumph only lasted till the third day – when the God of love said, no, not this time, and not ever again. I reject your rejection. Just as I freed you from slavery in Egypt 1000 years ago, I free you now from your real oppressor. This god of gold is nothing but a mask for the god of fear, of death, of isolation, of lovelessness. No. No more. I, the God of love, am alive, and there is nothing you can do to banish me from the world.

We keep trying, of course. We humans that is. Making golden god after golden god. I'm not gonna both-sides this, though. With humility and even hesitancy, and always with confession and in need of forgiveness, there are some, and I hope we are among them, who are at least trying to worship the living God of love, and who want to live in a world which reflects that love. While a million miles from faithfulness, I dare to hope we are among them. There are some, though, who still seem to be at the foot of that mountain, thinking, well, this so-called god of love is taking too long and I don't see the results, so let's build another god of gold – the old god of power, and wealth, and greatness on the world's terms. Just look at all the gold the current president has put in the oval office.

And so many of our brothers and sisters of Christian faith, including Charlie Kirk, have gone right along. Repeating the failures of our sacred story again and again and again. It is despicable that someone decided to answer his hate with hate, his idolatry of exclusion with the idolatry of extermination. The god of gold won a double victory that day.

But this ain't over yet. This spiritual battle ain't over yet. The God of love came back, and keeps coming back. The very longing that those Harvard freshmen expressed: "We don't want to grow up in a world like this," shows that the God of love can break in with a better, fuller, indeed greater, vision of the life we can have together. They don't want to grow up in a world like this, and they don't have to. It's spiritual all the way down. And although the weight of it all is heavy right now (why would we expect anything else), we will continue to call out the god of gold, and worship the God of love, as best as we know how, now and forever.