

No False Images + Hear God's Word

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at Christchurcheastbay.org. Good morning, Christchurch.

My name is Suzy Shin and I'm part of the Monthly Oakland Family Community Group. Today's scripture is from the book of Exodus chapter 20 verses 1 to 6 and chapter 32 verses 1 to 9 as printed in your liturgy.

A reading from the book of Exodus. And God spoke all these words. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.

[1:09] For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, Come, make us gods who will go before us.

As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him. Aaron answered them, Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons, and your daughters are wearing and bring them to me.

So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol, cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.

When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord. So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings.

[2:12] Afterward, they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry. Then the Lord said to Moses, Go down, because your people whom you brought up out of Egypt have become corrupt.

They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol, cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.

I have seen these people, the Lord said to Moses, and they are a stiff-necked people. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.

Good morning. Thank you, Susie. Let's go to the Lord in prayer. Father, we ask that your spirit would fill this place, that you'd fill me as I preach your word, that you'd fill us as we hear and receive your word, and that in the preaching of your word, in the reception of your word, that you'd show yourself to us, that we'd behold you for who you are, the immortal, invisible, God-only wise, that we would turn our eyes upon Jesus and behold him in all of his glory.

We'd make that happen here in our hearts today, we pray. In Jesus' name, amen. All right, so we're continuing our series in the Ten Commandments. If I could just show you something really briefly to help you remember the Ten Commandments, it's been helpful for me.

[3:46] So last week, Jonathan, he went over commandment number one, okay? You shall have no other gods before me. Today is the second commandment. You shall have no graven images,

and you should not bow down to them, all right?

First commandment, second commandment. More to come later, all right? But today is the second commandment, all right? And at the same time, though, I'm pretty sure that very few of you woke up this morning feeling immensely guilty about breaking this second commandment, right?

Like, oh, shoot, I did it again. I just did it yesterday. I crafted an idol out of wood, and I bowed down to it. I fell for it again. I feel so guilty. Did anyone confess that this morning in our kind of silent time of confession of sin?

No one, right? As modern Western educated people, while sure we might struggle with some of the other Ten Commandments, thou shalt not covet, honor your father and your mother, this commandment, thou shalt not make graven images and bow down to them, it's probably not one of them, right?

Why would any of us be tempted to do such a thing? Maybe we should just skip the second commandment in this series because out of all of them, we got this one down, right? We got it down, easy peasy, no graven images, no problem.

[5:04] But what if the essence and the heart of the second commandment, what if God's intention in giving it to us wasn't simply for his people to not make little figurines as objects of worship?

Let me ask you this. Have you ever struggled to answer the question, whether for yourself or for your children or for your skeptical friend, why can't we just see God? Why can't he just let us see him so we can know he's real?

Or maybe more importantly, so we can know that he's here with us, present with us. Maybe you're like my children who are always asking me, Daddy, why can't we see God? And likely what's underneath this question is the more understandable question of how can we be sure that the invisible God is with us and for us?

How can we be sure that the invisible God is with us and for us? I mean, certainly if you're further along the agnostic or atheist spectrum, this is almost certainly a thought, right, that you've entertained and taken to heart.

Maybe it's one of your biggest stated obstacles and reasons for not believing in God. But you know what's interesting is that even for those of us who do believe in God, that atheist exists, it actually feels quite plausible still to many of us who do believe in God.

[6:17] Because seasons when God seems silent, hidden, and absent are real, right? Whether you call yourself a Christian or not, God's invisibility, his apparent absence, it's an uncomfortable and inconvenient feature of the Christian faith.

But you know, it wasn't always this way. It wasn't always this way, at least not according to the telling of the Christian, the telling of history according to the Christian scriptures. At the very beginning of the story of the scriptures, in the lived experience of Adam and Eve, you know, even for them, before the fall, it wasn't like God was continuously, visibly present with them.

Actually, he came and went. It's time for our walk, guys. Good walk. See you tomorrow, right? And what's so interesting about this to me is that this means that even before the fall, before humankind found ourselves at odds with our maker and sustainer because we went our own way instead of his, what's so interesting is that before the fall, there was actually a time when God could be out of our sight, and yet we could still somehow feel safe and secure and within his loving presence with no anxiety and certainly no need to go and manufacture his presence among us.

So what happened? What happened? How did we go from not needing God's continual, visible, tangible presence to feel safe and secure to feeling so anxious in God's apparent absence that we've felt the need to manufacture his presence and power for ourselves?

Well, according to the Bible, the answer's simple. We stopped trusting him. That's the key sin in the fall at Genesis chapter three. We stopped believing that this God we couldn't see, seemingly absent when the serpent entered the garden, we stopped believing that God was with us and for us.

[8:09] And so we reached out to secure for ourselves what we no longer trusted God to supply for us. And once that relationship broke, so did everything else in all of creation, thorns and thistles, sweat and suffering, death and despair.

We've become estranged from God, from one another, and even from the rest of God's good creation. So that now, ever since then, we've lived in a world constantly giving us reasons to be anxious and afraid and uncomfortable and insecure in the apparent absence of God.

And ever since, in our brokenness and insecurity, we, fallen human beings, have time and time again devoted ourselves to closing the gap, to addressing God's absence by producing his presence.

Let me say that again. The plight of fallen and fearful human beings is to address God's felt absence by producing his fabricated presence. And see that, that is the self-destructive impulse that the second commandment is given to protect God's people against.

And yet that is also what God's people have been prone to do again and again, even when freshly delivered from Egypt, after seeing all the plagues, the Passover, the crossing of the Red Sea, sweet manna falling down from heaven in our fallenness and insecurity, we become so prone to addressing God's absence by producing his presence.

[9:37] So what happened here in Exodus 32 at Mount Sinai when they make this golden calf? Because seriously, let's give them some respect, all right? This isn't a story about how some foolish, forgetful, primitive, ancient people out of nowhere decided, hey, I want to worship a golden cow today.

That's not what the story's about. No, we have to understand exactly what's going on. God has just met his people at Mount Sinai with a terrifying, you know, in a terrifying fire and with thunder and lightning, right?

His presence is so intense for them that they beg Moses to go and converse with God on their behalf. So Moses goes up the mountain and the last thing that they see up to this point is their fearless leader, their prophet, their representative, their mediator, right?

Go before God. They watch him enter into the thick darkness where God is, not knowing when he'll return, and then 40 days and 40 nights go by. That's six weeks.

And there they are, Moses-less, like sitting ducks in the wilderness, no direction other than to wait. So what do they do?

[10:41] Like most of us, their patience runs out and their anxieties kick in and they begin to doubt and wonder, where is Moses? Who will lead us? And is God still with us and for us?

You see, to understand the second commandment rightly, to understand this golden calf episode rightly, we need to understand that before the calf was an idol, it was actually a pining for God's presence, a search for security, an attempt to cure their fear.

Through the golden calf, these vulnerable, anxious people were looking to address the uncomfortable absence of God, looking for something to hold and carry along with them, something to look at and say, okay, we're not alone, God is with us.

Just like all the other surrounding nations in the ancient world of the Egyptians and all of Mesopotamia, what Israel did would have seemed completely normal.

Every other nation around them routinely carved out visible, tangible images of their God to locate and to access their God's presence and power. This was religious common sense in their world.

[11:49] Of course, your God has an image. How else can you guarantee and know that He's with you and for you? So really, the second commandment was quite strange and foreign, very counterintuitive to these Hebrews at Sinai.

In a world where everyone else could point to an object and say, there, there's our God, Israel's God says to them, you shall not make an image of me. Now, why not?

Why not? Well, because making an image of God doesn't simply make God visible, it also tries to make God manageable. That's the sin of the second commandment.

The moment that you make God something you can hold, you've also just made Him into something you can carry and when you make Him something that's carryable, you've also made Him deployable, an object at your disposal.

And thus, you've made God less than God. See, the second commandment is not some other, you know, or more specific way of reiterating the first commandment to have no other gods than the true God. No, it's just, it's not just a prohibition against making images of other false gods like the pagan nations.

[12:57] It's also, and probably more importantly, a prohibition against relating to the one true God falsely. It's a prohibition against objectifying, commoditizing the one true God.

Because see, to make a graven image even of the one true God is to misunderstand at least two major things about Him. First is to misunderstand the majesty of God. Because like, how could anything made by human hands adequately represent the whole essence of the one who made the

heavens and the earth by His divine hand?

You know, the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah chapter 44, he mocks the people of Israel for falling for this absolute absurdity. It's really quite funny. He has them consider the supply chain, all right?

He says, guys, hold up. Think about it. A man sweats and toils and cuts down a tree that he did not plant and that he did not make grow. He takes some of that wood and forces that dead piece of wood to serve him and to die for him.

And he uses that to warm himself and to cook his dinner. And then with the rest of that same wood, the same kind of wood, he fashions for himself a God and he bows down to it and he cries to it, save me, you are my God, oh piece of wood.

[14:16] It's ridiculous. The God had to be grown, chopped, measured, shaped, and then carried around by the man now asking it to save him. But isn't a God you can carve out too small to be your God?

Isn't a God that you have to lug around more of a burden than a blessing? And even if you're not seeing this figurine as God but as a sacred representative image of him, how could a piece of wood or even of gold or silver lift our eyes up to behold the fullness and the majesty and the glory of the creator and sustainer of the universe?

any and every graven image of God will always fall short and it will conceal far more than reveal the essence of who God is.

And it's not just that an image makes God smaller than he is but it also makes God more manageable than he is. It misunderstands not just his majesty but it misunderstands the freedom of God.

And if you could manufacture some kind of magical genie lamp to house him in take him wherever you want and if you just rub that lamp the right way you'll have all your wishes granted.

[15:27] No, God cannot be chained and contained. Heaven is his throne. The earth is his footstool. What house could contain him even when the highest heavens cannot? You know, there's this other episode later on in the history of Israel where they have this thing called the Ark of the Covenant which is definitely not God nor a graven image of God but it is a sign and symbol that God instituted and had them build and place at the center of their tabernacle to represent his presence amongst them.

It's the place where God said that's where I'm going to freely voluntarily and graciously meet you and it was called the mercy seat. But there's this place in 1 Samuel chapter 4 before Israel has a king there's a story where they're about to return to battle against the pagan Philistines after having just lost one of the battles they just lost 4,000 men so they are desperate and they are afraid it feels like God is not with them and the truth is God is withdrawn in this moment God is distant because he's disciplining them he's disciplining them because they've been neglecting him and doing what was right in their own eyes rather than in his so facing imminent defeat and being unsure if they could make a comeback against the Philistines I almost said the Philippines unsure if they could make a comeback against the Philistines being unsure if God was still with them and for them they try one last technique they try to weaponize

God they say to themselves go get the ark and in their minds they're bringing the presence of God onto the battlefield with them because they reason surely God would not let them be defeated God would not let their ark get captured right and initially this increases their morale gets them excited they let out a great shout as the ark comes into their camp and the Philistines here they begin to tremble when they hear about what is happening as if a weapon of mass destruction has been brought in against them but the thing is though Israel could make the ark stand among them they couldn't make Yahweh and so God let them get defeated he even let the Philistines capture the ark but lest the Philistines think that they'd defeated captured and harnessed the power of Yahweh God was about to show that no one can control or harness his presence and power when the ark was placed in the temple of the Philistines national god

Dagon what did they find the next day this graven image of Dagon is flat on its face and so the priests are like okay they strain themselves to lift up that big image they lift it back up here you go Dagon let's get you back up maybe it was a win maybe it was a fluke until they come back the next day and Dagon is face down again only this time his head is broken off and his arms are broken off and then after that we find that the presence of the ark of the covenant in the Philistine land leads to tumors and plagues across the land such that they send the ark back we don't want this thing amongst us this god is too powerful all this to show that god cannot and will not be used and

deployed like a dog on a leash or like a genie in a lamp not by Israel not by the Philistines not by anyone this was the thundering blazing god at Mount Sinai the uncontainable pillar of cloud and fire who cannot and will not be domesticated or handled or tamed or controlled and so for this reason god is not to be imaged and crafted by human hands for us to use him according to our own wills no it is we humans who were meant to be used by god according to his will why because he's the one who made us in his image the second commandment is a reminder to us that god makes us in his image and not the other way around this isn't some random ancient commandment only relevant for primitive people who bow down to blocks of wood it's a reminder of who god is and of who we are before him it's a warning against flipping that upside down dehumanizing ourselves de-godding god and dishonoring all of god's good reality idolatry us making god in our own image is the exact opposite of what god did when he made us in his image whether we make actual physical graven images of wood gold or stone or whether we entertain thoughts like you know i like to think of god as fill in the blank i like to think you know i prefer baby jesus in a manger right i prefer precious moments jesus i prefer you know two thumbs up winking charming jesus right or i like to think of god as more republican than democrat or as more democrat than republican as more forgiving than just or as more righteous than merciful at the heart of it whether thousands of years ago or today the agenda has remained the same god made us in his image but we keep trying to remake god in ours we all prefer a god who shares our priorities our projects our plans our politics and in those places where he doesn't agree with us we don't just want a carryable god but we also want a put awayable god too right again we want to we want a manageable god whom we can summon when we need him and silence when he becomes inconvenient maybe that's why you when you are about to go on that date planning to hook up you take off your cross necklace when you invite your boyfriend over a stay of the night at your apartment take off that cross necklace put it away maybe that's why when you're about to fire up your laptop to view porn you take the bible off your nightstand off your desk before you do it i'll just put god to the side for now right i'll put god to the side for now at work in this relationship or that because what i know god has to say about how i should be living my life is too inconvenient it's too troublesome so let me put him to the side we're happy to pray god please help me with this diagnosis with this job interview with this relational conflict but you know that relationship you can stay out of that one that career decision put your side for

that one how i spend my money what i do with my body we'd all rather have a god who agrees with us and affirms our every desire we'd all like a god we can both summon and silence but the thing is that's not who god is and if our agreeable gods never actually stand over us never contradict us never correct us never surprise us or tell us no have we not just fashioned gods after our own images and if we've reversed the roles if we've taken the role of image makers and reduced god to image bearer when by our idolatry we decide that we get to define who god is and we recast him after the image of our desires our values our plans our instincts when we place ourselves upon the throne that belongs to god it not only offends and objectifies god but it opens the door to us justifying all kinds of offenses against our neighbors as well you know when we get into the habit of objectifying god it's not long before we will feel comfortable and even justified in objectifying our neighbors relating to others as objects and commodities transactions tools and resources rather than fellow human beings made in the image of god right made not to be utilized but loved if god is just an object to us if we've subtly allowed ourselves to play the role of god the way we'll relate to everyone else is as their judge right every interaction will with you know a fellow human being will be an evaluation of how well this person fits my world my needs my goals my desires we'll turn our beloved wives and husbands into mere partners and utilities our children into trophies our church family into a social network walking a busy street we'll see the humans around us as inconvenient bodies obstacles to navigate around we'll see the homeless as nothing but uncomfortable threats on the street when we get slowed down and stuck on our commutes we don't realize that we aren't just in traffic we are the traffic the objectification and commodization of god leads to societies that objectify and commoditize the image of god just as easily and this is why we need the second commandment this is why we need to worship the true god rightly because of what false worship does to us in our call to worship this morning we read from psalm 115 and in psalm 115 the psalmist mocks and describes all idols as having eyes but no sight ears but no hearing mouths but no speech and then it says something super haunting it says those who make them become like them and so do all those who trust in them those who make them become like them those who make these commoditized impersonal objects they will become like them and the point is what and

how we worship will have an effect on how we relate to all the rest of reality and not just to god and so it's no wonder that you know stepford wives ai girlfriends and sex robots are suddenly far more plausible and understandable in our age than ever before right our culture is constantly developing technology after technology not simply to serve endless human progress but to serve bottomless human desire ever smoothing out ever curating customizing our experiences of this world reducing more and more friction all the time giving us more and more of what we desire but don't you see it's all motivated by the same agenda the worship of the self if I insist on a spouse who never disagrees with me never surprises me

[26:03] never has any desires that are independent or contrary to mine I'm not looking for a spouse I'm looking for a projection and isn't that increasingly what technology offers us and listen I'm not anti-tech I seriously love ai Jonathan will probably tell you too much but as with everything we need to pay attention to the ways our tools and techniques are forming and shaping our heads hearts and hands because think about it what does it do to a person to only have frictionless relationships only customizable companionship intimacy without vulnerability and actual like otherness real human relationship that we were created to enjoy and experience it requires real people and personal interaction to borrow from the philosopher Martin Buber he talks about how we must not substitute our I-thou relationships for I-it relationships to preserve the I-thou and not reduce others and God and ourselves to its it requires personal friction it requires uncertainty and risk and surprise and disagreement and sacrifice and inconvenience but that's what it means to be human that's what it means to be in relationship with a real life person rather than a plastic projection and I think this is why you know here in the second commandment you don't have this in all the other in all the ten commandments but here in the second commandment

God doesn't just give the command but he gives a reason for the command he gives the basis for the second commandment he says here in chapter 20 verse 4 you shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below you shall not bow down to them or worship them for I the Lord your God am a jealous God did you hear that what's the reason because Yahweh your God is a jealous God the reason why we are not to objectify God into a handheld handmade image is not simply because it dishonors all of who God is nor simply because it objectifies him and leads us to objectify others but because he is a jealous God and this word jealousy this is everything right here because think about it an object doesn't get jealous right and maybe that's what we like about objects your phone doesn't get jealous it doesn't care if you want to upgrade your iPhone to the next one your toaster doesn't get offended or get its feelings hurt when you upgrade to an air fryer a tool doesn't care if you only ever pull it out when you need it for something and then throw it back in the garage for next time whenever that may be but a person a person is not meant to be treated in that way a person can be jealous and even justifiably so a spouse is not meant to be treated interchangeably and transactionally but in loving covenantal communion so when

God says he's jealous this is not God saying I'm like that insecure teenager who's jealous of the person taking my crush to prom no when God says you shall not objectify me into an image because I'm a jealous God God's jealousy is actually good news about him and good news for us what he's saying is I have an earnest passionate pursuing and zealously jealous desire for a dynamic and personal relationship with my people and I will settle for nothing less I refuse to have an impersonal technical mechanical transactional relationship with you I will not be your tool your appliance your genie the object you summon when you need and silence when you don't I want more for our relationship than that because you are far more than that to me and I want to be far more than that to you like a husband in persistent passionate pursuit of his wife

God refuses to respond indifferently to his people objectifying themselves giving themselves to others going from object to object he's saying you were never made to be just an impersonal object at my disposal so don't treat me as one either I made you to love you and I made you to love me God's jealousy here is not a defect in him but a feature communicating his passionate loving intentions for his people and his insistence upon being an intimate God rather than an impersonal tool because see a golden calf can be used but Yahweh insists on being loved and not simply for what he can do but for who he is the second commandment forbids us from seeking God's power and presence while at the same time ignoring his personal passionate pursuing love and perhaps there's no more honest place to examine whether we actually want

God or just what he can do for us than in our prayer lives and listen God wants us to ask him for things he loves that but he wants us to ask him as children to a father and not as children to a gumball machine or imagine if the only time you ever talk to your spouse is when you needed something can you get this can you fix this can you help me with this that's not covenantal marriage that's transactional partnership see when we pray we always need to be asking ourselves is it actually that I desire God's personal presence or just his power do I want the giver or the gifts and do I will I still trust and follow this free personal God when he says no or wait or when he seems silent or are my prayers actually not so different from the pagans begging their graven images to grant their wishes are our prayers more for communion or for control see if they're for control then maybe we're not so different from those fearful anxious vulnerable

[32 : 22] Israelites looking for a golden calf at the foot of Mount Sinai they were trying to manufacture and secure for themselves the presence and power of God but they were trying to capture and harness what cannot be captured and harnessed God and this shouldn't be a bummer to us that we cannot control God alright I think sometimes we think that it's such a bummer that God doesn't do everything we want I can't control him but imagine you're on an airplane and you hit some terrifying turbulence and you think to yourself man I don't like feeling so out of control I wish!

I could take more control plane you want to switch places with the pilot how's that sound that sound better that sound safer you'd have more control right but would you be better off in the midst of turbulence your best shot is to trust in the expertise of the pilot so how much more for God you see the second commandment it wasn't just saying to God's people you may not make an image of God because he's free or you cannot make an image of God because he's majestic no the beautiful message of the second commandment is that you need not make an image of God because he's good because he's your covenant God he's promised to be your God the God who gave his people the second commandment is the same

God who says I am with you I will be your God you will be my people I will never leave you nor forsake you you need not make an image of me this is the gospel of the second commandment the good news that we don't need to craft an image to ensure that God is with us and for us he's promised it to us he's promised what we could never produce his power and presence are not objects to be captured their gifts to be received now here's the question though if every image we make if every image we make of God inevitably reduces and distorts him then how are we ever supposed to know what this invisible God is actually like are we just left with some distant you know abstraction some far off unknowable inaccessible out of touch

God that we're supposed to serve trust obey and adore no because get this and this is perhaps the most beautiful thing about the Christian faith the very heart of the gospel message we don't need to produce an artificial image of the invisible God to secure his power and presence because God gives us his own perfect image in his son Jesus God became flesh whereas the apostle Paul described him he is the image of the invisible God rather than some deadweight object we'd have to carve out and carry the living God freely comes to us and what's most astounding is what he does with his freedom because remember all sermon we've been talking about how you know our longing for a God we can get our hands on that's what we've been talking about like we all want this God that we can control manipulate with our hands deploy and summon or even silence ever since the fall we've wanted a God we can force to serve us like a genie immensely powerful but not free but see the gospel announces that God has given us something infinitely better he gives us his son who is both free and voluntarily the suffering servant at the same time not the slave of man but the son of

God slain for man Jesus said no one takes my life from me I lay it down of my own accord think about that combo complete freedom and the laying down of his life and not just any life the life of the God man the son of God this is the astonishing truth of the gospel the God we wanted to reduce into our hands he stretches out his hands and has them nailed to a cross for us freely in sacrificial love this image the image of the lamb of God is the image of the invisible God and that is how we know that this God so free can be at the same time 100% uncontrollable and 100% trustworthy and 100% for us this is the reason we need no golden calf or any other image this is the only image we need the ultimate answer to the question why can't

[37 : 28] I see God what does God look like is God really with me and for me the answer is Jesus! and if you have beheld him if you have really taken him in with your heart's eye and received him for who he is and not just who you want him to be then you know that even when God seems out of

sight he's certainly not absent and even when he seems silent he's certainly not indifferent and his freedom it isn't a threat but it's a force for his because in actuality we are the ones held in the palm of his nail pierced hands and people who know that they're held by these kinds of hands don't have to grip everything else so tightly we don't have to control our families our futures force everyone and everything around us into conformity unto our own images we can just finally be what we were created to be images of the image of

Christ the image of the invisible God free from Pharaoh free from slavery free from the wilderness anxieties that tempt us to cast our own golden calves when God seems absent free from having to produce the presence and power of God in hand held form for we need not painstakingly produce what he has gladly given us in Christ let's pray thank you Lord that we don't need to squeeze you into the palm of our hands because in Jesus we know that we're already safe in yours thank you for giving us something infinitely better than anything we could ever produce for ourselves you've given us yourself so help us to trust that to live in the light of your presence to behold the image of the invisible God your son Jesus in his name we pray amen