I begin with three questions for you. First, are we certain about what is right in the eyes of God? Second, what is the holiest thing in this place? Third, do we see what God is creating in our world today?

The people of Israel were having difficulty seeing what God was creating as they wandered in the wilderness, so they created something very grand, a statue of a calf, made of solid gold. Let’s think back on the events that led to this point in the story.

The people of Israel were slaves in the land of Egypt for hundreds of years. Moses was called by God to lead the people out of slavery. In response to a sequence of 10 increasingly dangerous and deadly plagues, Pharaoh agreed to Moses’ demand to let the people leave. The people of Israel left Egypt, travelling east near the Mediterranean coast.

Several days later Pharaoh changed his mind and sent his army to re-capture the people of Israel. Moses and his people were conveniently camped near a marshy bay of the Mediterranean Sea. Moses saw Pharaoh’s army approaching. The waters of the bay were parted, or perhaps receded, and the people were able to cross to the other side. When Pharaoh’s army tried to follow, the horses and chariots became mired in the mud and they drowned in the rising waters.

The most direct route to the promised land would have been to continue east, along the coast, but Moses led his people south into the desert. There wasn’t much food or water in the desert. The people complained bitterly. God provided the people with water and a strange food called manna, which was like bread and which was probably gluten free.

After several months and hundreds of miles the people arrived at Mount Sinai. The Lord descended upon the mountain and the top of the mountain was covered in smoke. Moses revealed himself as uniquely powerful among all of the leaders of Israel; he went up into the cloud of smoke and talked directly with God. Moses received the 10 commandments and a larger set of laws of the covenant. Moses led the people in a covenant ceremony at the foot of the mountain.

Then Moses climbed back up the mountain one more time to be in the presence of God. At least, that is what it says in the 24th chapter of the book of Exodus. Between you and me I am thinking it was also true that Moses was exhausted and needed a good, long rest away from the people.

Back at the foot of the mountain the people were getting restless. They had just received the 10 commandments. But the people were not particularly impressed. Perhaps the idea of having 10 commandments to follow was just too new for them. They didn’t have the 10 commandments and the laws of the covenant for the hundreds of years when they were living in Egypt. So instead of rejoicing about having this direct guidance from God, instead of giving thanks for the fact that they are being led by the greatest leader in the history of the people of Israel, the people are once again grumbling and complaining among themselves.

We can imagine the complaints increasing until the day they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”

The fact that Aaron molds a golden calf for them out of their earrings and other jewelry makes it clear that the people’s greatest desire is for something familiar. The people want a golden statue of a calf because that is what is familiar to them. Back in Egypt the people were surrounded by statues and sacred jewelry that were thought to contain or represent the power of the gods. They watched the Egyptians say prayers in front of the statues or hold onto the jewelry as if it contained divine powers.

The people long for something familiar. The people long for something they can touch. The people long for something they can feel certain about.

This is the way idolatry works. Idolatry is all about our desire for certainty and familiarity. Idolatry is all about our feelings. I love the story of the golden calf because the idolatry is so obvious, but most cases of idolatry don’t involve gold statues. Most idolatry is different from the story of the golden calf in one important way; in most cases idolatry is about things that can be truly good and beautiful.
Idolatry is often about some of the best things in our lives. For instance, for me the greatest threat of idolatry would probably have to do with something about music. I could idolize a piece of music or a musical group or musical experience. The music or the musical group could be a very good, beautiful thing. That is why idolatry is often difficult to see and difficult to change. The objects at the center of the idolatry are often very good; it is the firmness of our attachment to them that is the problem.

Think again about the three questions I asked at the beginning. Are we certain about what is right in the eyes of God? What is the holiest thing in this place? Do we see what God is creating in our world today?

What is the holiest thing in this place? 30 years ago there was a group of people in the Episcopal Church that had an answer to this question. For these people, the holiest thing in the church seemed to be a book that looked sort of like this; it was the 1928 Book of Common Prayer. I suggest that the firmness, the certainty with which these people held onto the 1928 Book of Common Prayer is an example of idolatry. This might be a dangerous thing for me to say, not because I might get hurt, but because some of our members might feel hurt.

I think you know that I love the Book of Common Prayer. More than anything else, the Book of Common Prayer is why I became an Episcopalian 22 years ago. But there is a difference between thinking that the Book of Common Prayer is beautiful and powerful and setting it above everything else as something that is holy and perfect. Nothing that people create is perfect. Nothing that we create is holy. Only a power greater than ourselves can create something holy.

About 50 years ago the Episcopal Church began to implement new ideas that came from biblical studies and from historical research and archaeology into our prayers and worship texts. For instance, the idea of the Exchange of the Peace after the confession came from the 1873 discovery of what could be described as a church leaflet that was written less than 100 years after Jesus’ time. During the 1960s and 1970s ancient ideas were reintroduced into Episcopal worship in a series of trial worship services. In 1979 a new Book of Common Prayer was created. The 1979 prayer book included new texts in relatively modern language. In an unusual step, the Episcopal Church also included many of the texts of the 1928 prayer book in the new prayer book.

Yet many Episcopalians were deeply offended by the introduction of a new prayer book. Some people preferred the old language, which included words like vouchsafe, propitiation, innumerable, bounden and didst. Some priests objected to the ideas in the new prayer book. Some objected to the fact that some theological ideas, such as original sin and a medieval understanding of the atonement of Christ, were no longer the dominant ideas of worship.

I would suggest that most of the reasons for holding onto the 1928 prayer book can be summed up with seven words, “We have always done it this way.” I would point out that this statement is never true. The opposite is true: the way we have done things has always been changing. When people say, “We have always done it this way” they actually want to say, “I have always done it this way.” That can be true. It can be helpful to say, “I have always done it this way.” because it reminds us that we have put ourselves at the center of concern.

Moses’ people were saying “I have always done it this way.” “I have always prayed to statues of animals made of gold.” Moses’ people did not like the uncertainty, the newness of travelling through the desert, so they did not see that they were living in a most powerful, holy time. Moses’ people did not see the new work God was doing in their midst, like giving them the 10 commandments.

Do we see what God is creating in our world today? God’s new creation is not something that is very familiar to us. It just doesn’t seem to work that way in the Bible. Look at the stories about Jesus for example. Jesus revealed God’s grace because by doing things no one expected him to do.

What is the holiest thing in this place? Is it a book? Is it something made of stone? According to scripture it would seem that the holiest thing in this place is you, the people. You were created in the image of God. You were created by God. All of the rest was created by us. You might think that these stones are holy. They are not. You are holy. That does not mean that you are perfect. It means you carry the image of God inside you. And so does she. And so does he. And so does that 35 year old person outside this church who needs to hear the Good News of God’s love. I wonder if that person would have a chance of hearing the Good News if we kept using words like vouchsafe, propitiation, innumerable, bounden and didst.

Are we certain about what is right in the eyes of God? I hope not. I hope we understand God’s truth is bigger and more beautiful than we will ever fully understand. I hope we are certain about just one thing: the power of the Spirit that is the love that has been given to us.