

AMERICAN IDOLS – PART 2

TEXT: 2 Kings 18:1-6; Acts 19:23-41

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on August 14, 2022

HOW TO SPOT AN IDOL

Last week we began looking at what it might mean for those of us here in the 21st century to keep the commandment to stop making idols and keep God's priorities as our own. The main takeaway from last week is that, in the biblical context, an idol is about how something functions in our lives and not the thing itself. That means what might be an idol for one person could be perfectly fine for another.

It also means a thing that starts out functioning as God intended can take on outsized importance for us and turn into an idol. There is almost nothing in our lives that can't become an idol for us, given the right set of circumstances, so it's doubly important that we keep watch, not just out in the world but within ourselves. The perfect example of that is in the story from 2 Kings that Kim just read about Nehushtan. The bronze idol that King Hezekiah destroys somewhere in the late 8th century BCE was actually a historical relic from the days of Moses some 4-6 centuries earlier.

In the book of Numbers, notably *after* God has commanded the Israelites not to make graven images, God told them to make a snake out of bronze and put it up on a pole. God promised it would neutralize the venom from the snakes that were biting them in the wilderness. In the days of Moses, it was not an idol. God ordered its creation and then used it to heal those who were bitten.

Across the centuries, however, the Israelites came to believe in that bronze snake more than they believed in God. They gave it a name. They began to offer it gifts. They transferred the credit for their healing from God to the bronze snake; and, in that shift, it became an idol for them. The only way to get people to recognize that Nehushtan, which literally means "thing of bronze," was not the actual source of healing was to get rid of it so that people could refocus on what was true.

That story is a perfect example of how a perfectly good, even a God-ordained thing, can become an idol for us if we aren't paying attention. If this were a Sunday School class, I would ask you to break into groups and talk about the similarities and differences between what happened to the snake on the pole to the issues surrounding monuments around the United States that are being removed in some places or having laws passed to protect them in others. Does destroying a monument or re-naming a street really destroy history? Or is that like believing that destroying Nehushtan destroys healing? I imagine we would have a spirited discussion.

Nehushtan shows us one sign of idolatry—we begin to give credit for things God has done to something or someone else. It's not that others, human or otherwise, can't participate as a channel for God's work. To me, that's one of the most important points of the Incarnation: God works in and through the created order; the Word became flesh. But it's God's work nonetheless, and the virtue of humility begins there.

The second story that Kim read, the story of the riot in Ephesus in Acts 19, also would like a word here. While Nehushtan illustrates how the function of a thing can change over time, the riot in Ephesus gives us a close-up view of what happens when the power of an established idol is challenged.

For some context, most of the book of Acts is a chronicle of Paul's efforts to spread the gospel throughout as much of the world as he could get to; beginning in Jerusalem and going out from there.

While Paul's life initially was devoted to dragging out and killing the followers of Jesus, after his conversion, he realized that Jesus represented the God of the Exodus, the God of freedom and liberation, the God of love. And love could not be forced. So, when Paul undertook the various missionary journeys described in Acts, he didn't just flip who he was persecuting. He didn't go riding into cities to rail against whatever gods they

worshipped or otherwise persecute those who worshipped them. He went to represent in both word and deed the liberating God of Jesus who he claimed to represent.

That meant he presented an offer, not a demand. To be sure, he was willing to debate anyone about his claims and to do so without apology. But if his efforts to win people over failed, as they did in places like Athens, he didn't burn the place to the ground. He just left and went somewhere else. If enough people were convinced by his preaching that he could establish a church in the city, those converts were not instructed to overthrow the other religions around them. They were encouraged to share their faith, but it was just that—sharing. To say, "Here's why I believe this. Here's the difference it is making in my life." No force, no coercion, no violence. That is a mark of faith in the God of Jesus.

A sign of idolatry is the exact opposite, which brings us to the story of the riot in Ephesus. In the first part of Acts 19 we learn that Paul has been in Ephesus for a couple of years. There is a story of a major book burning, but it wasn't Paul calling for it. It was Ephesian citizens, who were converted by Paul, who decided to burn their own books. They didn't raid the library, sue teachers, or threaten scroll merchants to get rid of books that ran afoul of their newfound faith. They went through their own books and parchments and got rid of whatever they thought might hinder their own spiritual growth.

That first part of the chapter is also important because it tells us that Paul's efforts in Ephesus are working. People are changing their behavior in response to what they have heard from Paul. We know it lasted because Paul established a church in Ephesus and the book of Ephesians in the Bible is his letter back to them from a later time.

As Paul is feeling that the church in Ephesus is well-enough established that he can move on to other regions—a silversmith named Demetrius, who made his living selling silver replicas of the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus, gets nervous. If you remember your history, the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. That made Ephesus not only a religious hub, but a tourist hub as well; and Demetrius was one of many artisans in the city who made a very nice living making and selling merchandise to all of them.

With Paul's increasing success in convincing people that the true God is not made by human hands, Demetrius gathers his fellow artisans for an emergency meeting and says the quiet part out loud. This guy Paul is a threat to business. His teaching that gods made with hands are not real gods is catching on. Worse, it's not only catching on there in Ephesus but throughout Asia. Demetrius can see the writing on the wall. This new religion is a threat to their wealth and to the prominence of the city. If people come to believe that hand-made gods have no real power, it could negatively affect trade with worshippers and with tourists. Now it wasn't just Demetrius, but a group of tradesmen that were worried.

But they couldn't just go out to the people and say, "Hey, we're really worried about our revenue stream, would you please ignore this guy and keep buying our products?" No. Instead, they do what the protectors of idols always do—they sowed confusion and discord. Out into the streets they went, shouting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" That confused people, because nobody had heard anyone say that Artemis wasn't great. But, clearly, she must be under threat or these men would not be so upset. And soon everyone was angry and worried and ready for heads to roll. They gathered in the Ephesian theater, an outdoor venue that could hold up to 25,000 people. They're all feeding off each other and crying out "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

Paul wanted to go out to talk to them, but the crowd was so worked up, the officials told him it wasn't safe. Verse 32 sums it up, "Meanwhile, some were shouting one thing, some another; for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together." It went on for over two hours. This kind of violent, angry, confused chaos is a sign that an idol is under threat. The confusion is key in that. The vast majority of people shouting in the Ephesian theater thought Artemis was being attacked. But Artemis is not the idol in this story. The idol Demetrius and his buddies are trying to protect is their personal wealth, not the goddess of a city.

Finally, Demetrius met his match in a plain-old civil servant, the town clerk. It was that faithful member of the boring bureaucracy who went into the screaming mob and told them the simple truth. Nobody was attacking Artemis. It was Demetrius and the other artisans who had a problem, and they could deal with that through the court system if they wanted. The clerk says plainly, “There is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion.”

Once it’s clear that the threat to Artemis is a lie, and Demetrius is exposed as a guy who is just afraid of a threat to his business, all the people who had been rioting for two hours, and who would have killed Paul had he appeared before them, saw the truth and just said, “Oh. This isn’t any concern of mine;” and they went home willingly and peacefully.

We don’t know what happened to Demetrius after that. The Bible doesn’t mention him again. Maybe he brought a lawsuit, or maybe he just kept making little silver statues that likely continued to sell very well. The temple of Artemis in Ephesus continued to attract both tourists and worshippers until the Goths invaded and burned it in the year 268. And we know Paul’s church in Ephesus survived and grew.

The riot engulfing the whole city of Ephesus was based on a lie. The lie was told because those who had a financial stake in the worship of Artemis had made their wealth more important than the religious freedom of their fellow Ephesians to choose something else; more important than the lives of those whose teaching might impact their balance sheet; more important than the peace and security of the city. The idols were not the silver replicas of the temple they made and sold. The idol was the wealth of a small group of men and the status, power, and lifestyle that wealth provided. They were willing to risk the safety of the entire city and take the lives of Paul and his supporters to protect it.

Now imagine that Demetrius had access to social media or his own podcast. What if he owned a media empire that stretched throughout Asia and could have broadcast to millions of followers, “Artemis is under threat, and the guy who is trying to take her down is coming to your city next!” Or, once the riot was shut down by the simple truth, imagine that Demetrius could, within seconds, spread the word to those who weren’t there that the town clerk of Ephesus was allowing Artemis to be harmed and defamed and that he should be stopped at all costs.

The foundation of all idolatry is the lie, because that’s what an idol is by definition. It’s a *false* god. If left to its own devices, idols will eventually lead to divisions, anger, and ultimately violence and destruction, all in an effort to distract and prevent the exposure of the idol working behind the scenes. Just during my lifetime and just looking at this country there have been constant re-enactments of Demetrius and the Ephesian riot.

In the earliest version I remember, the role of Demetrius was played by Phillip Morris and the other tobacco companies. There is the now-infamous photo of the tobacco executives, in sworn testimony before Congress in 1994, claiming each in his turn that he did not believe cigarettes were addictive, while also acknowledging—to a man—that they did not want their children to smoke.

Meanwhile, out in the theater, they sowed division among the people, telling smokers that their enemies were non-smokers and vice versa. “They want to take your cigarettes away!” The companies suppressed the studies that had been coming out since the 1940’s about the connection of smoking to lung cancer as they protected their profits at the cost of millions of lives.

And then came the 1970’s when Exxon began doing important research on the effect of fossil fuels on the climate. By 1982 the evidence from their work was so decisive that—and I’m quoting from a 2015 article about it here--“Exxon’s environmental affairs office circulated an internal report to Exxon’s management which said that the consequences of climate change could be catastrophic, and that a significant reduction in fossil fuel consumption would be necessary to curtail future climate change.” It also said that—and here I’m quoting from that internal report—“there is concern among some scientific groups that once the effects are measurable, they might not be reversible.”

In 1989, when *that* news reached Exxon's board of directors, with the caveat that combatting climate change could lead to "irreversible and costly Draconian steps," the company took action. They went full-Demetrius, shifting their position to funding any and all efforts to publicly question, and eventually full-on deny, what their own research had been proving for decades. They pushed climate change denial not only here but internationally. They have poured millions into the effort, and we literally may not survive the fruit of their idolatry.

Since the Ephesian theater moment of January 6, 2021, a parade of civil servants, most of them Republicans, have been broadcast to the crowds to say, like the Ephesian town clerk, "There is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion." But Demetrius has more tools at his disposal this time, and the idol was allowed to grow much stronger. Many of the civil servants have felt the need to wait and exchange the truth for a lucrative publishing deal before stepping out to calm those in the theater.

I seriously doubt Demetrius died a poor man, but Acts 19 stands as a reminder that even a small group trying to protect an idol can put an entire city at risk; can put a country at risk; can put a planet at risk. It can also put the church at risk, which is where we'll go next week. Amen.