

“Gods and the Living God”

Psalm 115

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I have only a few more sermons to deliver as the pastor of this congregation and I am concentrating in them on fundamental perspectives. Last time we considered what it means to live between the times – between the demonstrations of God’s power and salvation in the past and the consummation of salvation and judgment when the Lord Jesus comes again. We Christians are like the Roman god Janus, with two faces, one looking backward and one looking forward and only by seeing both past and future can we live in faithful integrity in the present. All of that from Psalm 68, the Protestant “Psalm of Battles.”

This morning I want us to consider the great calling of our lives: to be in thought, word, and deed, as we are in fact, *the people of God*. And to that end we have before us Psalm 115.

Text Comment

- v.1 This is the original *Non Nobis Domine*, the great Christian hymn often sung in Christian worship but also sung at important landmarks and turning points in the history of the Christian Church. It was sung by John Sobieski, the King of Poland, and by his army who defeated the Turks outside Vienna on Sept. 12, 1683, the battle that saved European Christianity and European civilization from Turkish and Muslim domination, the battle that in effect rendered Islam a relatively minor force in world history until our own day.
- v.3 They wanted to know where Israel’s god was because they couldn’t see him. There was no image or idol of Yahweh!
- v.4 The idols were covered with silver or gold which hid the more common materials – wood or stone – of which they were made. In other words, their appearance was a façade; a false front. The ancients supposedly understood that the idol was a *representation* of a god, who was himself a spirit. But the fact is idolaters then, as now, rarely distinguished between the idol and the god it was to represent.
- v.8 This is hardly the only place where the Bible puts the idols of the world in their place by mocking the very idea of manufacturing an inanimate image, creating one’s god in other words, and then worshipping it. Idolatry is a high form of stupidity!
- v.11 It has been suggested that vv. 9-11 were intended to be sung antiphonally with one voice singing “O Israel trust in the Lord” and so on, and another responding in each case, “He is their help and their shield.” [Ross, vol. II, 417]
- v. 15 This is what the idols can’t do. This is what God can do, does, and will do for those who trust in him.

- v.16 A fascinating way of putting it, as if the Lord has handed the world over to man. Obviously, he has not surrendered his sovereignty over what he has made, but man is his vice-regent. So, the earth is at one and the same time God's realm, Satan's realm, and man's realm. All have authority in it and over it in varying degrees. Insofar as it is man's it is his stewardship.
- v.17 We have here one of those statements that seem odd to us from the vantage point of the NT. Surely the dead are in heaven praising the Lord. But it remains true! God deserves the praise of his people in the here and now. That is our calling, to praise *him*, not to invent false gods to praise. Of course we will praise him forever – they knew that already in those days, as read in the last verse – but it is our calling to do so now, with body and soul in this dying life. There is a certain kind of praise and worship that can be given God only here. You will never be able to give him *this praise* again. You will praise him forever, but it won't be the same. This praise counts for something greater because it has to be done against the influence of a sinful and selfish heart and amidst a sinful and selfish world. Such praise has a special quality!

There were gods everywhere in Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) world. Thousands of gods. As a result, there was a tremendous amount of uncertainty in ANE theology and ANE faith. Nobody knew which god mattered at any particular moment? Would he or she show me favor? No one could be sure. This uncertainty is reflected in the names of their gods. Marduk, a Babylonian god, had more than fifty names. Each name reflected some belief, or better, wishful thinking about him. In striking contrast Israel's God, Yahweh, had but one name and his name wasn't an invention; he had revealed his name to his people. Yahweh told Israel who he was and what he was like. The gods of the ANE were not predictable; they weren't even moral. They were not loved. They were feared but they were not admired. They were very human-like in fact: petulant, small minded, and selfish; as likely to fly off the handle as to respond to prayers and offerings with gratitude and blessing. The gods didn't care how you lived. There was no ethic in ANE worship. The idols only wanted your gifts.

Israel's God was altogether unlike the gods of the ANE. He cared that his people knew him and knew him by name. He was not powerless, as the gods of the ANE pantheon always eventually proved themselves to be. They had power, it was thought, at least until their nation was defeated in battle by another nation and the vanquished god was absorbed into the pantheon of the victorious nation; until the god was demoted, as it were. Yahweh, however, was all-powerful over all nations, the Lord of hosts. If his people were defeated it was because he had ordered that defeat, either for their judgment or their trial. His character was such that his people could confide in him, trust him, look to him in their troubles, and rely on him to act in justice, wisdom, and love. His character was such that he could tell his people that his fondest wish was that they become like him. "Be holy, for I am holy." No idol of the ancient world was imagined to want any such thing!

Yahweh would never have asked for, much less demanded the sacrifice of a child. Such a thought was repugnant to him and the attempt to buy his favor with expensive gifts equally so. He *gave* gifts and freely; he had no need of his people's gifts; and the gifts he asked for, they were to give to him because giving such gifts was good for them. Also, the gifts they gave to

him, satisfied the needs of others, both the priests and the poor. In every way Yahweh was utterly different from and utterly superior to the idols of the ANE.

You would have had to have lived in the ANE fully to appreciate what a universe of difference there was between Yahweh and the gods of Canaan and the rest of the ANE, between Israelite monotheism and ANE polytheism. Indeed, it has been observed that the 2nd commandment, forbidding idols was as unlikely a thing as has ever happened. It was a world of idols! The Mexican novelist, Carlos Fuentes, certainly no friend of Christianity or of the Spanish conquest, has nevertheless written of the astonishment of the hundreds and thousands of Indians – used to the cruel, feckless, and unpredictable gods of their Aztec heritage – gods very like the gods of ANE religion – who asked for Christian baptism because they were being asked to adore a God who sacrificed himself for men instead of asking men to sacrifice themselves or their children to him! [Cited by Robert Royal in *First Things* (May 1999) 37.]

As I pointed out last week, no one today worships the Aztec gods. No one worships the gods of the ANE. Who any longer prays to Baal or Chemosh or Marduk or Zeus or Jupiter? They are dead and forgotten, relics of the imaginations of foolish people, themselves long since dead and forgotten. As our psalm reminds us, “Those who make [such idols] become like them and so do all who trust in them.” History has proved it so. The peoples of the ANE have disappeared as well, apart from the Jews. The Jewish race remains but as national entities and, in most cases, even as specific ethnicities the peoples of the ANE have disappeared as have their gods. The people who are Egyptians today are not the descendants of the ancient Egyptians; they are Arabs, latter day invaders and conquerors of Egypt. The only place Ancient Egyptian actually can be heard in Egypt today is in the Sunday liturgy of the Coptic Christian Church.

It is this view of things, the terminal silliness of idolatry and its capacity to destroy the soul that accounts for the fact that idolatry is not only condemned in the Bible but mocked. Remember Elijah, atop Mt. Carmel, mocking the priests of Baal: “Call louder upon your god!” “Perhaps he is busy at something else, perhaps he is on a journey, or is asleep and needs to be awakened.” You remember that one medieval Jewish commentator, Rashi, took one of those Hebrew phrases to mean, “Perhaps he is relieving himself;” all in all perhaps not as likely a reading. But Rashi certainly captured with that translation the mockery in Elijah’s words. Or think of Isaiah asking the question: “How stupid does somebody have to be to make a god out of wood – “Be careful to cut and sand precisely so that when you stand it up it doesn’t topple over!” – then use the rest of the wood to warm oneself by the fire?

All of that is obvious to us. We read Psalm 115 with a quiet sense of vindication. Or we do until we remember that idols litter our modern world as surely as they were prevalent in the ANE and we, even we Christians, are just as tempted to take them seriously, to offer them our allegiance, worship and loyalty as Israel found herself tempted to do again and again. The human heart, Calvin said, is an idol factory and your heart and mine are creating idols every day. And now we live in a time in which idolatry, the making of idols, has been raised to an art form virtually unparalleled in human history. Consider this observation of Malcolm Muggeridge.

“In the twentieth century, man has created the most disastrous of all [idols], which is himself, and he falls down and worships him.... Never in human history have the

unworthwhile things of life been presented so alluringly, through advertising... This is Vanity Fair into every single person's sitting room, hours and hours of it, day after day." [Cited in *Touchstone* (Dec. 2003) 30]

More than that, modern secularism has made an idol of the self to a degree unprecedented in human history. The theory of evolution has eliminated God and left modern men and women only themselves to worship, and to trust.

In the ANE people went to the high place to worship their images. In the 21st century the high place comes to them. We live in a culture of images, images more alluring, more beguiling than the wood and stone idols of the ancient world. Modern people invest their hope in these gods, that they will provide them what they seek from them. The idols of modern life – money, sex, pleasure, sensual beauty, fame, power, celebrity, pleasure, comfort, security and the rest (all the things ancient people sought from their idols) – have never been presented so appealingly. Muggeridge is certainly right about that! You've seen pictures of ANE idols. Many of them were naked women. The worship of ANE idolatry was sexually charged. We refer to our present-day culture in America and Europe as the porn culture. ANE society was a porn culture too; worshipping idols was the pornography of that day.

And our idols are as unreal as the images of stone and wood. They cannot save us; they cannot even bless us, not really! And that is precisely what our psalm says. The one who worships false gods is a dupe. *And it is precisely this conviction that we must gain, keep, and strengthen as we live in our idolatrous world and precisely this conviction that we must instill in our children until they are so sharp-sighted that they can see through an idol immediately.* That is what this psalm is about. It is a call to the Israelite people not to be duped; to remember how absurd it is to worship something of man's own making, the creature instead of the creator. And the argument would not have been made, the mockery wouldn't have been recorded in Holy Scripture as often as it is, were God's people also not vulnerable to being duped in just this way.

We scorn the idea of bowing down to a block of wood, but somehow it does not occur to us to think that we can just as easily bow down to a piece of paper or a screen with numbers or pictures on it, a table laden with food, a job that pays more money and so on! The living God stands above all of that. He is not only worthy of all our praise and worship but will not fail to bless and reward those *who trust in him*. As surely today as when Psalm 115 was written, there is still this single alternative, one of only two choices: the stupidity and futility of idolatry or the worship of the living God of infinite power, wisdom, and love. You will do one or the other. Which will it be? You cannot serve both God and money, or God and sex, or God and pleasure, or God and anything else. *But if you don't trust and serve God, if he does not have your loyalty, you will trust and serve that something else!*

Now as then, if we do not stand against and push back against the forces of idolatry we will be swept away by the images of our time, beguiled by them, however empty they are, however worthless, however soon to be demonstrated to have been nothing at all. You will be swept away by them even if in the back of your mind you know full well that they are nothing. After all, the people of the ancient world had the evidence of the futility of idolatry, the stupidity of it, before

their eyes all the while, but it never sank in. What makes us think, then, that we are not ready to bow down to idols?

People worship the idols or images of modern life for the same reason people bowed down to wood and stone in the ancient world. *They hope to get something in return from these gods.* They invest in the worship of their idols in hopes of being favored by them in return. But it is perfectly obvious that our modern idols are no more capable of blessing human life than the ancient images were. Has our wealth made us a happier people? Has the possibility of sex with many partners ennobled and fulfilled us? Has education made us a wiser people? Has our vaunted technology made us a better people? Has any of these gods conquered death?

I mentioned the other evening that I had recently read Andrew Roberts' scintillating new biography of Winston Churchill. Churchill had his idols and they very definitely let him down, but he was perceptive enough to see and, indeed, often to say that while the scientific and technological advances of modern life were no doubt impressive, there had not been any noticeable improvement in the human heart. It remained as foolish, as selfish, as devoted to destructive behavior as it had always been! New technologies proved repeatedly to be new powers for people to misuse!

How many people nowadays even believe the propaganda anymore? Will the modern world really deliver its promised goods to the next generation of human beings? Is the world likely to be a calmer, more peaceful place over the next hundred years? Are the economic injustices of life likely to be eliminated? Will the terrible cruelties perpetrated by human beings against one another finally be seen for what they are and be universally rejected? It took the yeoman effort of some tireless social reformers and some very bloody wars to bring one form of slavery to an end in the 19th century. But it is estimated that there are considerably more slaves in the world today than there were in the 19th century, and among them many desperate people who live in even more inhumane conditions than did the slaves of the 19th century. Think, for example, of the sex slavery that can be found in virtually any country in the world – the modern ones included, the United States among them – in which kidnapped girls and women are forced to work in prostitution or face being beaten or killed.

A friend of mine worked for some years in the Justice Department's sex trafficking unit. He often says when speaking to groups, "Don't think of Julia Roberts in *Pretty Women*; it isn't like that at all. It is terror and depression and disease and utter hopelessness and self-loathing for millions of girls and young women stolen from their parents or tricked with false promises, whose lives are utterly destroyed before they have a chance really to begin." *That's what worshipping sex and money gets you.* You become as foul and as morally despicable as your gods. Think of the polite and well-dressed, urbane, successful Japanese or American businessman traveling to some Asian destination who pays a premium for a 13 or 14-year-old virgin. In worshipping your god you are led willingly to conspire, with scarcely a pang of conscience in the cold-hearted destruction of another human being. *How is this an improvement over child sacrifice among the Aztecs?* Worship the god of sexual pleasure; worship Eros and you become as loathsome a human being as there is, however expensive a suit you are wearing. At least when long ago an Aztec sacrificed his young daughter to the gods, it was over quickly. He didn't degrade her over months and years.

And I could go on and on. What has the worship of money got us? What is the difference between what lovers of money do today and what the Canaanites did when they went to the high place? The lesson has been taught times without number – our idols cannot save us – but back to the high place we go as quickly as we can get there. We may even scorn others debased and shrunk by their worship of these gods, but still can find ourselves shouldering them out of the way as we rush to the same high place to offer our allegiance to the same idols. Yes, even Christians can find themselves enthralled by what is, at last, nothing at all. There are a thousand examples of this for us to observe every day, but take this as an illustration.

I read several years ago of a thoughtful young woman at a Christian college who gathered with her friends week by week in the dorm to watch the reality show *The Bachelor*. I do not regret to say that I have never seen this show, but in typical reality format, a season of shows develops around the format of a group of attractive young women, each of whom is trying to win the hand of the single, always very attractive, sometimes wealthy or famous young man who is “the bachelor.”

The young woman reported that her friends invested in this show a significant measure of real emotion, to the point of shedding real tears in response to developments in the show week by week. She writes “They feel triumph, elation, pain, and sadness, when the handsome prince chooses or rejects the maiden (using that term very loosely!) that they’re rooting for.” [Matt Vos, “Postmodern Theories: Calling Meaning into Question.”] What is more, these young women, smart college girls, in tune with the American media, seem altogether to forget that they are watching a television show. They seem rather to think that the emotions they see on the screen and the developments that produce them are *real and serious*. Perhaps they really do know, in the back of their mind, that these shows are scripted, tightly controlled by the corporate medium producing the show for the sake of advertising dollars; that decisions about the progress of the plot are made in response to weekly ratings and focus group interactions. But fantasy, carefully crafted images were taken to be the real thing and heart and mind were devoted to them even though the young women would probably tell you, if asked, that they knew the show was staged.

This is a perfect picture of what all human beings do and do all the time. They may know that their idols are not real, that worshipping them will not secure good fortune; they may repeat the conventional wisdom about money not buying happiness or that what the world needs is love, true love. But they will act as if money does buy happiness and as if sex is as good as love, if not better. Like the young women watching *The Bachelor* they will invest themselves to a very significant degree in what they know in the back of their mind is nothing but a very fanciful, but attractive illusion.

And the Devil, of course, will make the idols as beguiling as he can. No pornographer, no sales executive ever promotes his or her product as a sure method of destroying human happiness, the security and blessedness of marriage, or the dignity of human life. No; they are packaged in terms of freedom, equality, and self-expression, popular virtues in our culture. But, of course, we now know, or we certainly should, that these gods give us nothing of the kind. We are seeing before our eyes something I think only the more far-sighted saw a generation ago. We are seeing paganism roaring back in our time. The naked idolatry of the ancient world. The ethics and

philosophy of life that lie behind modern American idolatries is not new, it is as old as the hills. As Abraham Kuyper put it more than a century ago,

“The fundamental problem has always been, is still and always will be till the end, Christianity or Paganism, the idols or the living God.”

So, let’s finish with this question: what is the remedy for this terrible tendency that human beings have, and we among them, to love, to worship, and to trust ourselves to what is not real, to invest in an illusion? Human beings are worshiping beings, *homo adorans*. We will always worship. Why are we so given to worshiping the wrong things, the empty things, the things that cannot help us?

According to Psalm 115, the answer is to make God himself the one in whom we live and move and have our being; to live in the active consciousness that God himself is with us, near to us, that he cares for us, that he alone can give us the life worthy to be called life. Idols hide God from us. We must rid ourselves of them so that we can concentrate on God himself. Perhaps we should take our cue from the Psalm and make it more of a practice to mock the idols that others worship. That is, remind ourselves and others of the folly of idolatry whenever and wherever we see it, and especially when we find it rising in our own hearts. “This is ridiculous; what am I thinking?” we are to say to ourselves. “What will I get, what can I possibly get for investing such hope and confidence in such a man-made thing? What do others get? Stop this daydreaming. Be a Christian for goodness sake! Use your mind and apply your knowledge. Don’t be a dolt. Don’t invest emotion in what is not real and what cannot save.” Say such things to yourself.

Remember the great early missionary, Boniface, who took the gospel to Germany in the 8th century, who cut down the large oak tree which the pagans at that time and place worshipped as a spirit. King Asa cut down his grandmother’s Asherah pole (2 Chron. 15:16); Jehoiada and Joash destroyed the temple of Baal – pulled it apart piece by piece – that had been set up in Jerusalem. Do the same to your idols; you know what they are. Let the idol prevent you if it can! But don’t expect the idol-loving heart to surrender without a fight. Remember, Boniface was murdered by a pagan mob. Expect push-back even from your own heart, but then push back yourself!

And, at the same time, confess the Lord every day: his majesty and power, his truth and wisdom, his grace and love in Jesus Christ his Son. Remember what he has done, what he has promised. Bring it to mind. Who are you? What has God done for you? Where are you going? Why? What are you do to while you are here these few days that remain before you are no longer in this world? Not a single human being who has made a life of concentrating upon God, not a single person – man or woman – who has made it the commitment of his or her life to be the son or the daughter of the Living God and to live as the son or daughter of the Living God has ever once regretted having done so. Idolaters invariably regret, and often bitterly regret their worship. Worshipers of the true God never regret their worship.

There should not be a day in our lives when we do not in one way or another make the argument of Psalm 115 over again to ourselves. John ends his first letter, written to a Christian congregation, not a one of whom was any longer tempted to bow down to wood or stone, with

the words: “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” John knew that the heart was an idol factory and he knew we had to work to keep our hearts free of idols. Be alert, thoughtful, intelligent; see through things. The argument is here in the psalm; use it.

Remember the haunting words of this psalm: “Those who make them will be like them.” You don’t want to be like an idol, you don’t want to be deaf, dumb, and powerless. Paganism dehumanizes us; renders us a mockery of our true selves. We are extraordinary beings, we human beings; and as Christians, God has added to what we already are unbelievable, marvelous gifts. Let us live worthy of all of that! Say what Jonah said from the belly of the whale:

“Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. But I with song of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you. Salvation comes from the Lord.” [2:8]