

16 January 2022

The Lure of Idolatry

Isaiah 44:9-20

The anonymous prophet who composed the latter sections of the Book of Isaiah had thoughts on those who worship idols. We read those thoughts in Isaiah 44, verses 9-20:

⁹All who make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit; their witnesses neither see nor know. And so they will be put to shame. ¹⁰Who would fashion a god or cast an image that can do no good? ¹¹Look, all its devotees shall be put to shame; the artisans too are merely human. Let them all assemble, let them stand up; they shall be terrified, they shall all be put to shame.

¹² The blacksmith fashions it and works it over the coals, shaping it with hammers, and forging it with his strong arm; he becomes hungry and his strength fails, he drinks no water and is faint. ¹³The carpenter stretches a line, marks it out with a stylus, fashions it with planes, and marks it with a compass; he makes it in human form, with human beauty, to be set up in a shrine. ¹⁴He cuts down cedars or chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. ¹⁵Then it can be used as fuel. Part of it he takes and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Then he makes a god and worships it, makes it a carved image and bows down before it. ¹⁶Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he roasts meat, eats it, and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, 'Ah, I am warm, I can feel the fire!' ¹⁷The rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, bows down to it, and worships it; he prays to it and says, 'Save me, for you are my god!'

¹⁸ They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand. ¹⁹No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, 'Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted meat and have eaten. Now shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?' ²⁰He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, 'Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?'

In my sermons leading up to Christmas, as I told the stories of the prophets, we ran into idolatry a lot. The people of Israel seemed to always be abandoning their God – the God of Abraham and Isaac, the God who led their ancestors out of Egypt – and worshipping idols instead. Some of these idols were intended to represent Canaanite gods, and others seemed to be just family idols that someone had bought or made. There was no end to it, and nothing that prophets like Elijah or Hosea could do or say seemed to make any difference.

This passage in Isaiah takes a different approach. The earlier prophets said worshipping idols was evil. This prophet says it's stupid. "Think about it for a second," the prophet says. "This block of wood that a weak human being carved into a shape is the other half of a piece of wood that you used to heat your house. Really? That's your god? At least the part you burned was useful. You got warm from it. Maybe you baked bread over it. But the part you shaped into an idol is deaf, dumb, helpless, blind, without speech or power. It can't help you; it's a freaking piece of lumber! And what shape did you carve it into? A human shape. Why would you bow down before a bad imitation of yourself?"

The prophet asks a good question. Have you ever wondered that? Given the obvious points that our passage makes, that idols are inanimate objects, why *did* people worship them? What was the appeal? Well, in a weird way, I think the very things that the prophet scoffs at *are* the appeal. Who among us has not wished that God were deaf sometimes? (“Oops, you didn’t hear that, God.”) Or again, a god that can’t move might seem fairly useless, if you think about it, but on the other hand, if the god can’t move unless we move it, that means we can set it up on a pedestal when we want to ask for something, then tuck it away in the hall closet when we’re done. And that was exactly how idols were worshiped: on demand. Idols had their own little shrines, which people went to when they wanted something. There, they would pay for the requested favors, in the form of sacrifices, and it was understood that the more costly the sacrifice, the better your chance of getting the favor granted. Then, when things were going fine, you could ignore the shrine, and the god would stay out of your business. An idol is a convenient deity.

And then there’s the part about the idol being carved in human shape. Our passage mocks the idea of worshipping something that is an imitation of a human, but that was what people seemed to want. Most of the ancient gods were conceived of as humans, just with more power. The stories of Baal and Asherah and Zeus and Isis and all those gods that were represented by idols were all pretty human. And by “human” I mean, filled with jealousy and anger and lust. Why would anyone want to worship a god who’s no better than we are? Well, for starters, you don’t feel so bad coming before that god, you know? Frankly, Zeus makes most of us look good. Dude had zero self-control. But more importantly, if gods have the same weaknesses that humans have, they can be manipulated. They can be bought. They can be lied to. They can be fooled by lip-service. You see the appeal? Sure, I have to convince myself that that particular block of wood is a god, but once I get there, I’ve got a convenient deity, who listens but never talks back, who can be used or set aside as I like, who has no plans for me beyond my own plans for myself. An idol is all about *me*. I like that in a god.

Compare that to the biblical God preached by the prophets: a God who cares about justice, especially for the weakest among us for the helpless, and who expects me to care as well, a God who cannot be bought or fooled or hidden away in the closet, a God who lays down commandments that, I’m sorry, are *not* always convenient, a God who has all sorts of plans for me that are not necessarily consistent with my own plans for myself. You understand why an idol might be more attractive? So what if it’s just lumber? It’s my lumber, and we get along fine. As for that biblical God, well, as the book of Hebrews reminds us, “A living God is a frightening thing.”

But, you might be wondering, if you don’t like the demanding God of scripture why go through all those mental gymnastics to invent one that you like better? Why not just reject all gods entirely? Wouldn’t that be a lot simpler and easier? Yes, it would. But people don’t seem to be able to do that. Oh, some do. True atheists exist. I’ve seen one in the wild. But not very many. In America at least, if you’ve followed the results of religious surveys over the last twenty years, you’ve seen a vast number of people leaving established religion. You would think those people are rejecting God entirely, but they’re not. Those same surveys show that the number of people who declare that they don’t believe in any God at all has stayed a steady 7%. There is something deeply ingrained in the human psyche that senses a reality beyond the one we live in – a reality above nature. As a Christian, I explain that ingrained tendency to believe as being placed in us by God. As Augustine puts it, “God made us for himself, and we are restless until we rest in

him.” It is our nature to believe, so when we don’t like one God, we usually feel compelled to turn out and find another one. That’s why Israelites turned to idols, and that’s what’s happening today, all around us: people are shopping for new gods.

And so long as we’re looking, why not find one that’s convenient, one that doesn’t make unreasonable demands, one that we can put in the closet when we’re not in the mood, that we can manipulate for our own purposes, one that fits our lifestyle? Let’s find a god that’s all about *me*. So, going back to that “vast number of people” who have left established religion, what are they doing with their spiritual unrest? What are they worshiping? Who are their new gods? For the next few weeks, we’re going to be looking at some of the gods that people today are setting up on the altars that were left vacant when they abandoned traditional religion. Some of my examples will come from the recent book *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*, by Tara Isabella Burton, but nothing that Burton describes in the contemporary world is that new. The prophets would recognize our idols, even under new names.

We’ll start looking at some of these idols next week, but I want to close today with a recap of where Isaiah led us, to serve as a sort of field guide to identifying idols. If the god that someone serves never challenges them to do what they don’t want to, you know that’s an idol, because – God knows! – we need to change. If the god is part-time; that is, if the god is reserved for only one area of a person’s life and excluded from the rest, that’s an idol. God doesn’t do gig work; it’s full time or nothing. If the worship of this god makes a person proud or indifferent to others or violent or selfish, that’s not a god. God does not diminish us. If our god likes all the things that we like and hates all the things that we hate, we invented that one; that’s an idol. If your God is convenient, I’m sorry. If your god is all about you . . . yeah, you got it. Idol.

In the process, I suspect that we’re going to learn some things. We’re going to discover that idols can be anything, even things that are otherwise good. I think we’ll find out that some of the idols are inside the church, and not all the worship outside the church is idolatrous. And I’m guessing that we’ll discover that all of us slip into idolatry on occasion. Living up to being the image of God is hard, and sometimes it’s just easier to remake God in the image of us. But maybe as we learn more about what is not God, we’ll become better at recognizing who God really is.

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Final word: The French philosopher Voltaire is supposed to have said, “God made man in his image, and ever since then he’s been returning the favor.” Maybe that’s our first step toward avoiding idolatry: to acknowledge that the God who is like me isn’t good enough. Certainly not worth worshiping. If we’re designed to look for God, we’re going to have to look farther than that. So let’s look. Everyone else is, after all.