

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

Pastor Adam Parker

12/1/24

Sermon Title: The Problem with Idols

Sermon Text: Daniel 3:1-7

Dan. 3:1 ¶ King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, whose height was sixty cubits and its breadth six cubits. He set it up on the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon.

Dan. 3:2 Then King Nebuchadnezzar sent to gather the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces to come to the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Dan. 3:3 Then the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, the counselors, the treasurers, the justices, the magistrates, and all the officials of the provinces gathered for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. And they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Dan. 3:4 And the herald proclaimed aloud, “You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages,

Dan. 3:5 that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up.

Dan. 3:6 And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace.”

Dan. 3:7 Therefore, as soon as all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshiped the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

Main Point: Idolatry replaces the living God with a dumb, helpless, created thing that cannot save or satisfy.

Outline:

1. Idols are Man-Made (3:3)
2. Idols are Man-Centered (3:5)

Introduction

If you have ever been in a Sunday School class in your life, today's passage is probably familiar to you. Except we're not going to get to the part of the story with the fire and the flames and the things I always loved as a kid. That's next week.

At first, I *was* prepared to cover the entire story in chapter 3 with one sermon, but as I looked at it, I realized there is something important we need to do. We need to actually look at this thing Nebuchadnezzar is calling the exiles to participate in here, and take it seriously. If we're going to understand the bind that the exiles are in here, we need to appreciate the subject of idolatry.

And so today, I only want to look at Nebuchadnezzar and his idol, and then next week we will look at how Daniel and his friends faithfully navigate this position they find themselves in.

This is a familiar story to many of us. My plan here is not to do something innovative, but to see what the Scriptures teach us about idols and why idols are so destructive – why they are simply not an option for a faithful Hebrew living in Babylon, or for a Christian today.

And so I want us to see two reasons why idols are so destructive. First, idols are man-made. Second, Idols are man-centered.

1. Idols are Man-Made (3:3)

First today, we should see that idols are man-made.

This idol that Nebuchadnezzar sets up did not come from the mind of God. It came from the mind of a human being – a mere mortal who wanted to give expression in some way to his own yearning for the divine, and probably in this case from his own desire to be seen as divine.

When Paul encounters idols in Athens, his first reaction is, “Wow. These are really religious people. They just don’t know the true God.”

So when Paul looks around Athens, what does he say about the idols? He doesn’t say that the idols are teaching him anything about God. Instead, who does Paul learn about by looking at the idols? He learns nothing about God. He learns alot about the Athenians! “These idols you made tell me x y and z about you...You are a very religious people.”

Idols are man-made, and so we learn far more about the idol-maker by looking at an idol than we do about the actual creator.

If you’ve been around the church long enough, you know that idols are bad. I might not need to make that argument to you. And yet, please think of just why it is that idols are such a serious offense to God. Think of what it is to make an idol.

In the beginning, God, who has no body, created the heavens and the earth. In the beginning, all of reality was divided between creation, and creator. God was on one side of that line, everything else was on the other.

The living God created all things from nothing. Merely by the word of his power, he called into existence everything besides himself. God is so powerful that he cast the stars into the heavens... he filled the roiling oceans with water and life... he painted the clouds into the sky and set all of them dancing over the face of the earth, both to water us, and to delight our eyes. They were his. He made them. And he was not them. He is the creator, not the creation.

And he made us – mankind – and placed us in this physical world, and in that we learn that the physical world matters. It’s good. It’s not an illusion. It’s not sinful.

It's not something to be despised. We learn that we are embodied souls, made in God's image. That's what it means to be human. And even though the physical world is good, God is very insistent that – to quote Moses – “there is no one like our God.”

We creatures are not the creator.

It's what makes him different from the creation, that he is Spirit and we are body and soul. God is different from us and different from the world because he has no body because He is not a created thing. God is Spirit and insists on being worshiped exclusively in spirit and truth.

Deut. 4:15 is a passage where God warns Israel why not to make images of him. He says this: “Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire.”

(Deuteronomy 4:15). God is like, “You never saw me for a reason: not only do I not have a body, but I didn't want you to see anything to make an image of.” And then he tells them to watch themselves, because they absolutely will want to make images of him. He says, “watch yourselves *very carefully*.”

Psalm after Psalm lay forth this vision of God that is so breathtaking, so magnificent, that it's hard to overstate the greatness of the creator, who made all things, and was himself not made. Our God is pure uncreated Being. And he is invisible. Which is hard for us. We are so physically bound that God knows what we crave. Therefore he says, “watch yourselves very carefully.”

Because of who God truly is, it is one of the greatest insults and disservices to Him is when human beings either attempt to *replace him* with false gods (as seems to be happening in today's passage), or to *misrepresent him* with images even though He cannot be depicted. This is why he reminds us, “watch yourselves *very carefully*.”

I don't have to run through human history to prove to you that people do try to replace or misrepresent God. Practically the entire old testament is a record of idol makers. Even the new testament is God's people struggling against the idol makers.

But why do human beings do this? Why do we naturally and reflexively and irrationally take the immense, invisible, magnificent and holy one who made all things, and try to contain him within created things even though he wasn't made and has no body?

Either we are trying to make him simpler to our minds and more like his creation. We want him to be comprehensible, so we make him small and domesticated... or we misrepresent him with our own imaginations, believing that really the creator is this *other* being who is far less wild, far more limited, far more predictable, and far closer to my own ideas.

Either way, when we make idols and images of him, we are hoping that God will be more like we want him to be, and less like He has told us that He is.

But human beings don't just worship false gods in false ways, we also worship the true God in false ways. One of the first things God's people reflexively did at Mt. Sinai, after being rescued from Egypt, was that they created a physical image meant to represent Yahweh so that they could localize and focus their worship on some physical space in the world. "We need a place to look. We need something to look at." Think of what happens in Exodus 32:4: after they make the image of the Calf, the NASB translation gets this exactly right when Aaron says to Israel, "This is your god, Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt."

You see, Israel couldn't bear worshiping the invisible God without *something* to fixate on. After all, it's what they were used to seeing in Egypt.

And so after Aaron makes the golden calf for Israel, they have a feast supposedly dedicated to Yahweh. What are they doing? Well first, they don't think they're worshiping other gods here. I'm really unhappy with the ESV translation here for linguistic and theological reasons. But notice they aren't worshiping other gods, and we know they aren't worshiping other gods through this calf image because the text tells us that they then have a feast for Yahweh. So they aren't worshiping other gods here, they are inventing their own ideas about Yahweh their God, and how they should worship him, but in the process, just like the Egyptians, they domesticate, localize, and reduce him.

Every effort that human beings make from their own impulses and ideas, independent of God's self-revelation is to create something that can be contained, something that can be explained, something that can be understood and comprehended. That's what human hearts yearn for: a small god. The smaller He is, the more in control we are. The smaller he is, the bigger are. It's far easier to point either at a flat icon or to a statue, or a moving image, and say, "Here. Look here at this and worship God by using this." It's a natural human impulse. And for 21st century image-obsessed moderns, it's catnip for us. This is why we still need to hear those words: "watch yourselves very carefully."

The Jewish people throughout their history were absolutely opposed to making images of God. And that did not stop after the incarnation of Christ. This making of images is something that the early church fathers also universally rejected. Even after the incarnation, they were still opposed to making images of God.

There are no examples of early church fathers commending the use of images of Christ at all, because an image of Christ was an image of God. Instead, what you find is early church writers like Origen and Eusebius, or Fathers like Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, Lactantius, Arnobius, Epiphanius, Justin Martyr, and many others... all of them to a man saying, "This is what makes us *unlike* the pagans: you cannot see our God, and that's why we don't have or use images of him."

The earliest image depicting Christ that has ever been found is a piece of graffiti, and it's known as the Alexaminos graffiti. It's an image mocking Christ as a donkey being crucified. And next to the image of this crucified donkey are these words: "Alexamenos worships his god." This tells us that the pagans, as far as we have found, were the first to make images of Jesus. Why did they do it? They knew that Christians weren't willing to depict their God. And if they could reduce him, contain him, and shrink him, then they could mock him. How do you mock an invisible, glorified, ascended God unless you reduce, contain or constrain him?

Instead of making images of their God, the early Christians used symbols of fish and crosses to indicate the tombs of believers. But they never made images of God or of the saints. Such things were universally rejected in the church as pagan until around the 4th and 5th centuries. During that time the churches began to change.

They began fill with pagans who were used to localizing, containing, and constraining their gods through the use of images.

[By the way, the narrative I am telling you here is one you find even in sources that endorse and love icons and images. I'll give you my sources if you ask me. This is just history that I'm giving you here. I don't think I am spinning it. I am confident that if you research this on your own, you will also find this same information.]

But the pagans come into the church as Christianity becomes legalized and then the religion of the empire because of the Emperors Constantine and Theodosius.

And here's what happens in the worship life of the church at this time: much like the Egyptian culture taught Israelites the wrong lessons about worship, so too the Roman culture taught the church in the early middle ages the wrong lessons about worship. And the church adopts some of those pagan lessons – especially around images.

The place you start to see things really begin to turn is with Gregory the Great, the bishop of Rome in the 600s. And Gregory starts to say that perhaps images of God *can* be used after all, but only for instructing those who don't know anything about God. At first, the images are just to help people learn. They are tolerated as having a teaching purpose.

But eventually what was used initially “teach” people became objects of adoration and veneration; the people began to rely on those images that were only ever supposed to teach them. They started to use those images for prayer and to show their devotion to God. They were usually careful to say, “we venerate the images, but we don't worship them; we worship God through the images, but we don't worship the image itself.”

And that was supposed to be the guardrail. Venerate but don't worship. That's the red line. We use the image, we venerate the image, but heaven forbid that we should worship the image. Assuming that distinction is biblical (something I would not grant), part of the problem is still that the distinction between veneration and worship was very very difficult for your average person to understand or maintain.

They would see an image of Jesus and treat it as though Christ himself were in their presence.

And I would argue that in practice, the distinction between veneration and worship is a little bit like the distinction between a potato and a potahtoh. Worship – venerate. Tomato – tomahtoe.

But here is how the turn happened: at *first* they argued that images are permitted for some who needed them. And they considered that to be those who were new to the faith, and for some reason they thought they needed a picture of a bearded man and they would point at it and say, “Jesus.”

So in the 6th century, that’s the argument: we need this in order to show Jesus to people. And we can’t do this without statues or images. There is something about the preaching of the word that is not enough on its own. These people will never learn. We need something more.

But things evolve from this argument. Eventually by the 8th century, at the second Nicene council, the church did a heel turn and condemned anyone in the church who would *not* use images to venerate Christ and the saints. In fact, they condemned and pronounced a curse on anyone who was *friends* with someone who had a problem with images. In reality they were condemning the very church fathers that they claimed to be following, and were drifting further away from the teachings of the apostles and those who knew them.

So over the course of about 500 years, many in the church – and certainly those at the second Nicene Council, turned their back on the views of the church fathers, and they moved to being a people who *filled* their buildings with images that did not and do not reflect the expressed wishes of the living God, who cannot be constrained, contained or comprehended.

You can find where things stand even today. Enter any Roman Catholic church or Greek Orthodox church, and you will see images covering nearly every surface. The images did certainly triumph in these places.

Those churches even today would have you believe that their worship is the most ancient that can be found anywhere in the world. In fact, many unwitting

protestant Christians have been lured away to Rome and Eastern Orthodoxy with promises that theirs is the more ancient worship.

But in fact, after reading the early church fathers, I am convinced that if those fathers entered one of their buildings, they would consider the things they see there to be horrifying and blasphemous, and would be far more at home in a simple space with a table and some bread and wine.

The testimony we have from church history is universal in the first 400 years of the church that one of the defining characteristics of Christian worship is that the God we worship is invisible and unmade, and because of this, our worship is not localized or focused on any physical objects – either crosses or statues or pictures or books or relics or anything else.

This is not because God is teaching us that the physical world is bad, but because our God who made all things was himself not made, has no body, and is too glorious to be localized, contained, constrained, or comprehended. He is not like us, and is not a creature.

Even the glory of the Son of God, who *does* have a body at the right hand of the father even now, is too great to be portrayed, depicted, or compressed down into some human-invented picture.

Instead, the Bible reveals to us what Christ is like today in his glorified state, and you could not bear it if you tried. You would fall down dead. You can read the Scripture and don't need a statue or picture to see what God wants you to see. In fact, I'll help you out right now:

“The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.” John says, “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.” (Revelation 1:14-18 ESV)

This picture of the Lord Jesus, drawn from Scripture is perfectly accurate, holy, fearsome, and far more glorifying to Jesus than if I tried to sketch it. In fact, it's

better than anything the most skilled artist could produce. These words are sufficient and far greater than any picture that any human being could make of him, or that any actor could ever portray of him.

The only reason you've never fallen down dead when you see an image of Jesus is that every image you have seen is incredibly inaccurate and so lacking in the true glory of Jesus Christ. John falls down as though dead when he sees Jesus. Pray that you never see an accurate image of Jesus before you have been transformed and sanctified.

None of us know what he looked like. And yet ever since the seventh century people have prolifically imagined what Jesus could look like.

My question is this: **is Jesus honored by these images that are drawn exclusively from human imagination?** Well, let's try a thought experiment:

Imagine if I had a picture of a woman on the desk in my study over here. And let's say you saw it and you said, "who is that woman?" and I responded, "That's my wife." And you'd say, "Well I've met Arryn Parker. That's not Arryn Parker. That doesn't look anything like her." Imagine if I said, "Well look... it's a lady. My wife is also a lady. She has hair. My wife also has hair. What's the big problem? This is pretty close." You'd think I was crazy. And my wife would be very very insulted. She would not be honored, she would probably be jealous.

Jesus, also, is jealous for his glory. He is jealous to be known as he is. And he is offended, as well, when we invent things about him or misrepresent him, no matter how noble our intentions. He has not shown himself to us visibly, but only in his word, and in the sacraments. More on that later.

We need to recapture an appreciation of God as he has intentionally revealed himself in his word rather than God filtered through human imagination. And that's hard. We live in a very visual society that is increasingly less interested in reading. This makes us as Christians sound incredibly old fashioned to point people to a book rather than a picture or a movie.

Now, looking at the image here (like Paul did with the Athenians) we do learn something about Nebuchadnezzar at least. We learn that he is very religious. We

learn that he has an inner impulse to give and receive worship. This idol is a glimpse into his own heart, but not into the heart of God.

This is how we are in general, really: we create those things that we most desire. This image is an expression of its human maker, not of the Creator.

You can learn more by meditating on a passage in God's word than you can by drawing a picture of what it describes. We learn more about the artist from a picture that they make than we actually do about our Lord. And that's because Idols are not God-made, they are man-made. They aren't inspired, they aren't God-breathed as the Scriptures are. We make them, we prop them up, and they are a reflection of ourselves.

Idols are purely man-made.

2. Idols are Man-Centered (3:5)

Second today, I want us to see that Idols are Man-Centered.

In other words, they don't just come *from* us, but they are focused *on* us.

In verse 5, the direct demand is made for the people to "fall down and worship." But understand: the problem here is not that the *idol* will be offended if they don't worship. Who is going to be offended? It's Nebuchadnezzar. The idol is a dumb thing. It can't see, it can't speak, it can't do anything.

When people won't bow down to this idol, it's really about Nebuchadnezzar, not about whatever god this statue is supposed to represent. It seems implied that it's actually meant to be an image of Nebuchadnezzar himself. If so, then that makes this point really plain, doesn't it?

There is a penalty attached to this if someone fails to join in the worship. Whoever doesn't worship is supposed to be burned alive in a furnace. They will be thrown, likely into the same furnace which produced the idol to begin with.

Of course the penalty is imposed by people, not by God. I want you to note this difference: idols cannot defend themselves. They need a defender – a champion – a human agent who will take up the idol's cause.

But in Scripture, God is his own defender. When people fall into idolatry, it is God who imposes the punishment. Here, on the other hand, it's all human-imposed punishment from top to bottom.

The Babylonians worship in their own way, but we've seen already that they are not the only ones who make up their own means of worshipping.

But even if we don't make images of God, we still need to be aware of our tendency to contain, constrain, and comprehend God by reducing him to something more domesticated and controllable to us.

This means that any time we aren't faithful with God's word... any time we say something about God that he has not himself told us... either from his word or that can be deduced by good and necessary consequence from his word, we fall into idolatry. When we place our hope in worldly things, that's idolatry.

Idols are everywhere. Anything that we fixate onto and hope in and find life in can become an idol. Video games can be idols. Movies can be idols. Devices can be idols. Our favorite apps or habits can be idols. Our family. Our job. Our preferences. Anything in our life that if we lost it and we would be undone... that is probably a good indication that it is an idol for us.

I do not say these things to heap guilt upon any of us, but for two main reasons:

One, to humble us, especially if you heard the first half of this message and were like, "Yeah! Go get 'em pastor! We're not *like* that church up the road with their image veneration." Well, are you sure about that? I want you to see that none of us gets a pass, even if we avoid one type of idolatry, we're still beset by others.

The second reason is that, if no one shows us our idols, how can we ever repent of them? How can we reject something that we haven't been shown?

There is a confrontational aspect to what happens between Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel and his friends. But understand, God means to confront us, too. If you see your idols, you can identify them and repent. I'm hopeful that the Lord will confront all of us on this, wherever we are.

We will see next week the way that God provides out for Daniel and his friends, but let me just touch on God's own answer to idolatry.

Here's the first thing I want to say: the answer to idolatry is not for us to worship less. What I mean by that is, we have this inborn absolute desire and need to find something else, to lift it up and praise it and make our life about it. The reason we have this inborn desire for that is, we have been imprinted from birth with the image of our creator.

Every human being has been embossed with the image of their maker. And all of us instinctively know that we need to get home... that we are lost and wandering until we find our way back to him.

This is why Augustine says in his *Confessions* that God made us for himself and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in him. It's the God-shaped hole that all people know about, and it's very real. God is our home. And everything else plays a poor substitute.

We are all worshipers, and we were all made to *be* worshipers.

So that's the first thing I want to say as we conclude: the answer to idolatry is not to worship less. Do not lose the worship impulse. It is right. It's natural. God has baked it into us. We were made to worship. Hold on to that.

But second, I want to say that if the answer to idolatry is not less worship, then the true answer to idolatry is to find the one who has imprinted us with his mark – the one we truly belong to, and to worship him and him alone. In other words, it's not about whether we worship or not, but it's about who will be the object of our worship, and will we listen to him when he tells us how?

Until you make God the object of your worship, here's what will happen. Everything you do will be haunted by this sense that there's got to be more, there's got to be more... what is it? And we'll be tempted to double down, or just keep looking and searching; or perhaps settling. And that's what the rest of our lives look like.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Jesus, speaking to the Samaritan woman said, "The Father is seeking people to worship him." He's seeking. He's active. He's proactive. His gospel goes forth, and he changes hearts and lives. We aren't grasping our way through the dark. We aren't wandering far from home never to return again.

Instead, the Lord says, "You can always come home. Come home to me. Because my son laid his life down for sinners, you can come back, and all of your wandering ways and your strange worship and idolatry from your past can be forgiven. Simply come to me, rest in my Son, and I will give you rest."

Let's heed that message. Let's come to him today.

Let's pray.