

August 12, 2012
Pentecost 11

"Idols Are Like Scarecrows in a Melon Patch"

JEREMIAH 10:1-15

Hear what the LORD says to you, O house of Israel. ² This is what the LORD says: "Do not learn the ways of the nations or be terrified by signs in the sky, though the nations are terrified by them. ³ For the customs of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. ⁴ They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter. ⁵ Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good." ⁶ No one is like you, O LORD; you are great, and your name is mighty in power. ⁷ Who should not revere you, O King of the nations? This is your due. Among all the wise men of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is no one like you. ⁸ They are all senseless and foolish; they are taught by worthless wooden idols. ⁹ Hammered silver is brought from Tarshish and gold from Uphaz. What the craftsman and goldsmith have made is then dressed in blue and purple-- all made by skilled workers. ¹⁰ But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King. When he is angry, the earth trembles; the nations cannot endure his wrath. ¹¹ "Tell them this: 'These gods, who did not make the heavens and the earth, will perish from the earth and from under the heavens.'" ¹² But God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding. ¹³ When he thunders, the waters in the heavens roar; he makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth. He sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses. ¹⁴ Everyone is senseless and without knowledge; every goldsmith is shamed by his idols. His images are a fraud; they have no breath in them. ¹⁵ They are worthless, the objects of mockery; when their judgment comes, they will perish. ¹⁶ He who is the Portion of Jacob is not like these, for he is the Maker of all things, including Israel, the tribe of his inheritance-- the LORD Almighty is his name.

The Lord tells us that idols cannot harm us and they cannot help us. They are like scarecrows in a melon patch. During our Star Bible Camp in June we showed the older children a picture of an idol. We asked the children if there was anything scary about a picture of an idol. One of the boys raised his hand and said. "It's the eyes. The idol seems to look at you with its eyes and follow you." Idols can look scary but they cannot harm us or help us.

The prophet Jeremiah sure had his fill of idols when he walked through the streets of Jerusalem. He watched the people worship the Lord in his temple in the morning, but in the evening they would sit on the flat roofs of their homes, look up into the stars and burn incense to Baal and other false gods. They lived their lives in fear the storm god Baal would not bring the fall rains and spring rains to provide water for their crops. Some were so afraid that Baal would not bless them that they offered their children in the fire in the horrific human sacrifices that took place in the Valley of Topheth near Jerusalem. This past week archaeologists in Mexico uncovered a huge burial site where human sacrifices were

once offered to heathen gods.

Martin Luther once said that the human heart is an idol factory. Today we don't see idols on our streets or in front of our homes as you might see in places like India. Idols can be found in the corrupted human heart that leads us to fear, love and trust in other things more than God, maybe even our own selves. The words of the Lord that we hear this morning are spot on for the times in which we are living. We need to listen as the Lord tells us that idols are like scarecrows in a melon patch. They cannot speak, they cannot harm us and they cannot help us.

The idols are worthless

The Lord told his people to stay away from the worthless idols of other nations. "Do not learn the ways of the nations or be terrified by signs in the sky, though the nations are terrified by them." The Lord told his people to stay away from the false gods of other nations when they entered the Promised Land, but they did not listen. The people of other nations told them they could worship the Lord their God and add other gods to their worship for added security. When the crops started drying up in the hot sun they began to cry out to the storm god Baal for the much needed rain.

The Lord did not want his people following other nations who looked up into the stars and became terrified by signs they saw in the alignment of the stars. Have you ever met someone who cannot begin their day without consulting a horoscope? I have. Have you ever heard someone say, "I can thank my lucky stars?" I have. And what about the person who expresses her hope of getting to heaven with the words, "I try and do my best and hope in luck for all the rest?"

The Lord tells his beloved people that other nations are foolish in the way they pursue the worship of idols. "For the customs of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with silver it with a hammer and nails so it will not totter." I have brought along this nice little hatchet I picked up recently at a garage sale. See that man go into the woods with his bronze axe carefully sharpened and honed. See him cut it down and shape it into the form of an idol. Now watch as he hammers out silver and gold to cover the idol. He even fastens it down with hammer and nails so it will not fall over.

Psalm 115 says this of the idols: "But their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats. Those who make them will be like them and so will all who trust in them."

The Lord says here in Jeremiah, "Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; for they can do no harm nor can they do any good." I recall helping my dad make a scarecrow to scare away the crows and blackbirds that were eating the succulent sweet corn in our garden in the month of August. Within a day they were sitting on the scarecrow and using it to get a better look at the corn. In the *Wizard of Oz* the poor scarecrow was afraid of his own

shadow and deathly afraid of fire that would ignite his straw stuffing.

All the things that the Lord tells us about idols here in Jeremiah and in other parts of the Old Testament may seem irrelevant to the culture in which we are living. We don't see idols on our street corners or in the homes of people living in our community. We don't see people carry little idols with them to offer them protection. If idolatry were only carving and idol and worshipping all of us could say, "That is not a sin I have to worry about."

There is a reason the Lord has chosen to say so much about idolatry in this book of Jeremiah and other parts of the Old Testament. He wants us to think about other idols that we may construct for ourselves that are not made of wood and stone. If our definition of idolatry is only worshipping something bad with such names as Baal we have missed the point. How easy it is to worship something good such as the blessings God gives us and let that blessing become more important than God.

Here is what Martin Luther says about more subtle forms of idolatry in his *Large Catechism*. "Many a person thinks that he has God and everything in abundance when he has money and possessions. He trusts in them and boasts about them with such firmness and assurance as to care for no one. Such a person has a god by name of Mammon on which he sets his heart. This is the most common idol on earth. He who has money and possessions feels secure and is joyful and undismayed as though he were sitting in the midst of Paradise. On the other hand, he who has no money doubts and is despondent, as though he knew of no god." Then he goes on to say, "So, too, whoever trusts and boasts that he has great skill, prudence, power, favor, friendship and honor also has a god."

When God's people were in captivity in the land of Babylon, they gave up their worship of Baal and other false gods. But then another form of idolatry took over their lives. The prophet Ezekiel warned them of setting up idols in their hearts. For many in Babylon fear had become an idol that replaced trust in the Lord. In times of crisis our fears become so large that they can replace our trust in the Lord. Because the Lord sees this idolatry of fear he speaks to us with these reassuring words, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine."

We used to read books to our children about the Bernstein bears. In one story, the papa bear tries to help his little girl overcome fear of shadows in the room at night. He takes her up into the attic and uses a flashlight to cast shadows on the wall. At first she is afraid, but then her fears go away when she realizes shadows cannot hurt. Our worst fears in life are certainly not greater than our God who says, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine."

In contrast to idols that are like scarecrows in a melon patch, we are privileged to have the Lord remind us of what a great God he is in comparison to all our worthless idols whatever they might be.

There is no one like the Lord

"No one is like you, O Lord; you are great, and your name is mighty in power. Who should not revere you, O King of the nations? This is your due. Among all the wise men of the

nations and in all their kingdoms, there is no one like you." We see the power of God in the vast universe he has made. Verse 12 says, "He made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding." As I speak there is a little vehicle called Curiosity that has landed on Mars and is sending pictures back to the earth. Here is only one planet in a vast universe of planets and stars and galaxies. God's power is seen in the storm clouds that drop their rain on earth. "When he thunders the waters in the heavens roar, he makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth. He sends lightning with the rain." Forget the god Baal, the storm god, to whom the people offered themselves in fertility cult practices and even sacrifice of their children. There is only one God who causes the rain to fall to water the earth as Jesus said, "He sends his rain on the just and the unjust."

This mighty God displays so much wisdom and power in his creation. He is also the King of kings and Lord of lords. Verse 7 says "Who shall revere you O King of the nations?" Verse 10 says, "But the Lord is true God he is the living God, the eternal King. When he is angry the earth trembles; the nations cannot endure his wrath." This King who must punish all sin because of his very nature as God is also a God who sent his Son to this earth to establish a kingdom of love where people can live with him forever. When Jesus began his ministry on this earth he went from village to village talking about the good news of the kingdom of God. As a sinner you bow down to this true God, this King of kings and Lord of lords. You plead for mercy, "Lord, have mercy on me, Christ have mercy on me." And what does this King do for you? He comes to you and kneels before you and says, "Let me take all your sin on me. I am going to the cross and giving my life for you, so you can be forgiven and live in my kingdom forever."

Idols are nothing. Verse 15 says, "They are worthless, the objects of mockery; when their judgment comes, they will perish." They are like scarecrows in a melon patch. As I was writing this conclusion to this sermon I was interrupted by a young man who is going through difficult times. His wife has left him, but then he said with confidence and joy, "Jesus means everything to me." Idols are nothing, but Jesus means everything to us. Idols are nothing, but Jesus means everything to me. Amen.