

Title: The “God” you want: dissecting idolatry
Text: Isaiah 19-23
Theme: God is a jealous God – and that is a good thing.
Series: Isaiah #23
Prop Stmtnt The making and worshiping of false gods is simply mankind’s attempt to worship him self.
Aim: I aim to call my people to worship, trust, and love God alone.

In the movie, Rocky, his girlfriend Adrian asks him why it is so important that he go the distance in the match, especially in view of the obvious physical cost. He says, “*Then I’ll know I’m not a bum.*” What is it, that you think you have to have or you think that you have to do in order to justify your existence? For some, it is just having someone who will love you or having a child who is successful. That person, that relationship, that goal is then infused with all of our desires. We look to that as the divine ideal that is going to make our lives worth living. So, what happens when you see a flaw in them or someone else exposes a flaw in them? What happens when your god, your idol, your divine ideal, your justification for existence is found to be flawed or is threatened? What happens when the child that you have elevated, the partner that you have longed for, the image that you seek to achieve is revealed to be imperfect or is gone from your life? Your sense of nothingness (your fear that you are really nothing) is now at risk of being revealed, and you do not think that you can handle that.

Do you know why I know that about you? I know it because I fear failure, just like you. I am tempted, just like you, to make idols, and create gods, and even give them religious names, in an effort to help me handle life by controlling events in such a way that they make much of me. However, when I finally stand before God, fully humbled, stripped of all of my self-righteousness, stripped of all of my attempts at self-justification, stripped of all of my excuses for my sin, and admit that I really am a failure, that I have no basis for ego, or self-esteem, or pride, then, and only then am I able to see and accept what God has provided for me through Christ. All of the gods and idols of this world are nothing more than attempts to make much of us instead of truly depending on God.

Read Selected Texts: Isaiah 19.1-4; 20.1-6; 21.9; 22.12-13

This week I have been reading through Deuteronomy and I have been impressed with how serious God is about being worshiped in the right way. He has zero tolerance for idols of any kind, even ones that look like him! The Ten Commandments begin with a clear prohibition against making anything to look like God, or worshiping any image, any icon as a symbol of God or as a god. Then God told the children of Israel that when they took possession of the land of Canaan, they were to show no mercy to idols and idolaters. It is a sobering read. God is that serious about how we relate to him. But, by Isaiah’s day, the Jews acted as if God wasn’t serious about that. The book of Isaiah is a long book. It is 66 chapters long and takes a long time to read it through and an even longer time to preach through it. Coupled with the fact that we have allowed ourselves to be conditioned by the media to have the attention span of a gnat, some of you probably feel like the little kid who in the first 10 minutes of the car ride to Florida wants to know if we are there

yet. No, we are not there yet. We aren't even close to being there, but getting through Isaiah is not the goal as much as getting Isaiah through us. So, let's step back this morning so we do not lose sight of the big idea that is being pressed on us. And then I will show you how this big idea is pressed on us over and over in hopes that we really get it.

Book: Isaiah
Theme: Our God Saves

Outline:

1. You have a problem! (1-39) but
2. Our God saves! (40-66)

You have a problem (1-39)

- A. God's people are a mess (1-5)
- B. God is on the throne and must be trusted (6)
- C. Who are you going to trust; God or the idols? (7-39)
 - a. Ahaz trusted in the idols (nations) and made things worse. (7-12)
 - b. Don't trust in the idols (nations) because God is judging them. (13-35)
 - c. Hezekiah trusted God and God delivered him. (36-39)

The past few sermons have been based on these warning messages from God about all of these other nations that surround Judah (13-35). They have been trusting in the wrong God, and as a result they are going to be collapse. God is warning his own people to not trust them and their idols, but to turn back, repent and trust in Him! We are at the point in this book, where these warning messages are all starting to sound alike. Part of that is due to the fact that while these messages were written and preached over a lifetime, I am trying to preach them in less time than that (honestly). The other factor is, that God is saying the same thing over and over and over, because we need to hear it over and over and over. The fact is; God is a jealous God. He is jealous for His glory and He is jealous for you. And that is a very good thing, because if God was not jealous for his glory, then his glory wouldn't be a big deal, and if God was not jealous for your good, then he wouldn't really love you – would he? But this much is clear. God is offended when you put your hope in anything or anyone other than Him. And he should be, because no one loves you as he does, and no one else can save you. But, this morning I want to peel back the skin of idolatry and look a little deeper at it so we can see why this is such a serious issue.

(Numbers 22-24) The children of Israel were finally on the move toward the land of Promise. They made it near the region of Moab and were making the final preparations to cross the Jordan and enter into Canaan. The king of Moab, Balak did not like what he saw. This was a large group of people who constituted a major threat and he wanted to deal with it, but did not know what to do. After all, he had heard the stories like everyone else in that region. These people possessed a power that enabled them to break the back of Egypt, which had arguably been the greatest power in the Ancient NearEast for a

couple of hundred years. What do you do to a people who can make water separate for them to walk through? What do you do to a people who get fed every morning from the heavens?

Balak wasn't sure, but he knew someone with connections. The guy's name was Balaam. Balaam was like a prophet, or a seer. As far as Balak was concerned, Balaam could predict the future, which meant that Balaam had some unusual powers that most others do not have. So, Balak thought that if he could get Balaam to work his magic against the children of Israel, then Balak and Moab would have a chance against them. So, Balak sent for Balaam and offered him a lot of money if Balaam would come and curse the children of Israel. It was no different than a voodoo doll that is used in Jamaica, Haiti and other cultures today. The objective is to manipulate events in order to get the outcome that best suits you.

Now, hit "pause" for a second. A number of years ago, I was at a cemetery for a funeral, when the driver of the hearse came up and muttered, "Well, that was sure different." I've learned that when anyone in the funeral business says something like that you had better listen. He went on to say that a member of the family insisted on riding in the front seat of the hearse for the procession. While he drove she rubbed three stones in her hands and held them out toward the windshield. Naturally the driver asked what she was doing and she explained that there are forces in these stones and by rubbing them together she could control the traffic signals. Now, if you drive like me, you are probably thinking, "if only that were true!" But, what happens when you are working your magic and someone else is approaching the light from your right and they are working their magic – who wins? What was this girl trying to do? She was trying to manipulate the forces for her desires.

Beloved, that is exactly what most religion is: a veiled attempt on the part of man to be his own god. What does Balak want? What is Balak afraid of? What are Balak's desires? Keep that in mind, I will come back to it. Let's look at what Balak did. He realized that he did not possess the power to get the outcome that he desired, so he went to one that he perceived could do it. Notice the assumptions that Balak had. They are the same assumptions that most people have about religion to this day. Most religions emphasize "doing" and not thinking or being, so these assumptions are:

- 1) *Everyone has a price.* Everyone can be manipulated. Everyone has a weakness. All that you have to do is find out what it is and either give it to that person or threaten to take it away. Balak knew that Balaam was influenced by money, so he offered Balaam large sums of money to come and curse the Children of Israel.

Now, when Balaam said that he could only say what God told him, Balak's response was like, "yea whatever, work your little magic, do your little ceremony, do whatever you have to do in order to make this happen." He did not take Balaam serious? Why not?

Assumption #2

- 2) *Even God has a price.* If you give God (the gods) what he wants (needs), or threaten to take it away, then he will give you what you want. You just have to know what the price is.
- 3) *If you do not know what the price is, find "someone who does" and pay their price.* (see rule #1) As far as Balak was concerned, that was Balaam's job. He was the holy man, the medicine man, the sorcerer, and he knew the secrets of getting God to do what Balak wanted.

That is how some people view the clergy. One day my neighbor was having a difficult time getting his mower started. He jokingly asked me if I would come and pray over it. I said sure. His mower was like mine and I knew that he hadn't primed it enough, so as I laid hands on his mower I pretended to pray, and pushed the primer in about eight times and then told him to try to start it. It started right up. He about freaked out, and I just acted like no big deal. I did confess later, but it sure was fun to watch him for a while.

- 4) *The "someone who does" is motivated to hide his "secrets" from you.*

Sometimes, the "secrets" are nothing more than lies and hocus pocus. But sometimes there is demonic activity and the one who is attempting to manipulate the forces, is himself being manipulated. The promise of power is offered by Satan to those who will give over more and more of themselves. That is the heart of voodoo.

But what is it that we really want? What did Balak want? He wanted power over those he perceived as being a threat. When you have power, you are in control. When you have power, you are respected, worshiped and adored. When you have power you are not a failure. Then, you are God, right? Some systems are more elaborate and some more primitive, but most are simply man's attempt to be God.

- 5) *God is like us.* Since we can be bought off and manipulated, we assume that God is vulnerable to that as well.

When Balaam finally meets up with Balak, Balaam is really trapped. Balaam is a reluctant prophet. He knows how God works and he knows that Balak doesn't know it and so Balaam is trying to keep Balak happy, all the while knowing that this is not going to go well with God. He should have just stayed home, but now he is with Balak. Balaam knows that Yahweh is not like the other gods. Yahweh cannot be bribed (Deut. 10.17) and he tries to tell Balak that, but Balak has no category in his mind for such a god. Balak is offering a huge amount of money for Balaam to curse Israel. So Balaam goes before God who tells Balaam what he has to say. So, when Balaam blesses the children of Israel instead of cursing them, Balak goes apoplectic. What are you doing? He says to Balaam. Again Balaam tries to explain, but Balak does not get it. Why not? Balak presumes that God is like us. When your view of God comes from you instead of from God, then you are going to have a man-centered and human-influenced view of God. But, God is not a man. He does not have needs. He does not need anything that you have. He is not vulnerable to manipulation or bribes. You cannot bargain with God, nor hold anything of

his hostage in order to bend his will to yours. You have no ground to bargain or negotiate. It is His way or no way. His way is so good and satisfying, but demands total surrender.

So, the question for you is the same question for these countries, and particularly for Judah. Are you willing to worship God? Are you willing to commit yourself to the glad worship and faith-driven obedience of God as He defines himself, or will you choose to follow a lesser god, a god of your own imagination who will bend his will to yours? Are you willing to surrender yourself to His will? Finding a god you can coerce to bend his will to yours initially seems attractive. It especially seems attractive when God does not cooperate with your dreams and you are really tempted to find another deity who will. But what are your dreams? They usually revolve around making much of you or something other than God & God would be wrong to cooperate with that. Think of the possibilities if you could find a god you can coerce to do your will. That is what makes idolatry so attractive. But, a god that you can make do what you want is no god at all, but simply looks like a god, and is in reality an extension of yourself.

Let me give you an example. In 1972, Ira Levin wrote a book called, *The Stepford Wives*, that became a pop-culture term and was later made into a couple of movies. The story centers upon the town of Stepford, Connecticut that was the home to these fabulously wealthy homes where the husbands had these “perfect wives.” These wives, it turns out, were actually robots, disguised to look like their wives. They never argued with their husbands, and were wonderfully compliant in every way. It was a perfect life for every husband – or was it? It was perfect if you want to be married to a robot. Who really wants to be married to a robot? Who is willing to be de-humanized like that? But if you are more than a robot, if you are human, a robot will not do. You want intimacy. You want true personhood and authentic relationship. Do you see my point? Idolatry is based on a stepford god. We create a god whose will we can bend to our own, who will not cross us, who will comply with our desires. The truth is we do not respect nor love a god like that, really.

Remember Satan’s lure in the Garden of Eden? It wasn’t just the pleasing looking fruit that appealed to Adam and Eve; it was what the fruit promised. They were promised that if they ate the fruit then they would be like God. That is the promise of idolatry. The promise is a lie, but it is a powerful lie. It is a lie that aligns itself with the desires of our hearts and therefore it stirs our imaginations and holds our thoughts captive, because at the very core of idolatry is the promise that “you can be God.” You can get the life that you want. The obvious problem with that is that it simply is not true. It has never worked, but we want it to work so badly, that we will believe the lie in the face of all of the evidence. You see, idolatry is our problem too.

We sit here, having arrived to this site in sophisticated cars that run on fuel that has undergone an elaborate chemical process in an impressive refinery. We have gadgets in our hands which we can call about anywhere in the world, and with which we can see almost everywhere in the world. We look pretty smart, and we are tempted to think that idolaters are uneducated, Neanderthal, knuckle-dragging, club-carrying, illiterate

buffoons who are too vulgar to know better. Hold the phone! Who are the idolaters that Isaiah is warning about? 1) The Egyptians whose mastery of building and math still amazes and baffles the most sophisticated minds today. 2) The Assyrians who had an army that was so efficient and so organized that it set the military standard for the world. 3) The Babylonians whose hanging gardens and architecture were named as one of the 7 Wonders of the Ancient World. These were not backward, buffoonish, thick-headed goons. These countries represented education and sophistication that is still held in esteem. Idolatry is not limited to the poor; it is also the saltwater of the powerful and everyone else who wants to be God. We all are tempted to find a way to get the respect, the influence, the admiration, and the affection that we think will finally make us happy and say to our world that we are not failures. So, we try. We create these gods and look to them, but, in reality, they are imposters. They do not work. As 19.2 says, *“the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.”* All other gods are imposters. When the true God reveals Himself the false gods are revealed to be what they are – frauds! Do not trust in a fraud! Those who trust in them will look like staggering, deluded fools (19.13). Why would you choose that? 21.9, *“Fallen, fallen is Babylon; and all the carved images of her gods he has shattered to the ground.”* There is no hope apart from God. But, when you warn people about these things, many people will simply laugh at you. 22.12-14 *“In that day the Lord God of hosts called for weeping and mourning, for baldness and wearing sackcloth; (but notice how the people responded) and behold, joy and gladness, killing oxen and slaughtering sheep, eating flesh and drinking wine. ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.’ The LORD of hosts has revealed himself in my ears; ‘Surely this iniquity will not be atoned for you until you die,’ says the LORD God of hosts.”* God will not tolerate idolatry. He takes it personal, as He should. He does not bless his competition and will not share his glory with another. There is no other God. There is no other One who is glorious, like God. There is no other God who can save, like our God.

Now, look at what Isaiah is doing here. Philistia cannot save you. She cannot save herself. Moab cannot save you. Moab cannot save herself. Syria cannot save you. Syria cannot save herself. Israel cannot save you. Israel cannot save herself. You though Assyria could save you from Syria and Israel, and look what she has done to you. Now, Egypt and Cush have formed a rebellion against Assyria and it will backfire badly for them. Do not trust them, they cannot save themselves. Tyre and Sidon cannot save you or themselves. In fact, Jerusalem cannot save you. Do not look to these, look to me, turn to me and be saved, God says. God is sovereign over all of these nations because He alone is God. And he alone can save. But he will only save you, on his terms.

Many of you read Nathaniel Hawthorne’s book, *The Scarlett Letter*, when you were in high school literature class. It is the fictional account of a minister, set in Puritan Boston, who has an illicit relationship with an unmarried girl. The girl becomes pregnant and has a child and the city responds by making her wear a scarlet “A” on her clothing so that her shame is known to all. The girl never says who the father of her child is, but the minister knows and for seven years he is tormented by his private shame. Hawthorne is an effective writer and his painting of the church is devastating. I hope that, if you are in high school and you read this account that you will realize that it does not have to be this

way. But Hawthorne got this much right, and that is; shame is powerful. Whether it is known to all, or known to your self and finally revealed, it is powerful. And that is what these chapters in Isaiah are dealing with. All of these nations have one thing in common, shame. They are trying to mask their failure. The very thing you try to avoid is the very thing idols bring with a vengeance. But that is not all that Isaiah writes about. In fact, it does not have to be this way. Over and over God appeals to Judah and to the nations, “turn to me and be saved.” Only God can save you, because only Christ can rescue you from your sins and shame. Only Christ can rescue you from that because Christ took the sin and the shame upon himself of every person who would ever trust him when he died on the cross in your place. There is no shame left for you to bear, no guilt left for you to be condemned with, if you will repent of your sin and trust in Him.