***The House of Listening, Part 1: Are Idols Still a Thing?***

This morning we begin a four-week series in our lead up to Holy Week.

The *House of Listening* is a four-part series preparing us for Easter. The title “House of Listening” refers to the clearing of the Temple of sellers and moneychangers. Quoting Isaiah 56, Jesus declared that his Father’s house would be a “house of prayer,” or *listening*, for all the nations.

* *Are Idols Still a Thing?* March 7 - This message begins the series by looking at the first and second commandment in our lectionary readings for the week (Exodus 20). Although culturally obsolete, the heart of the long-ago problem of idolatry and is still a danger to us in our materialistic times. We will see that God’s self-disclosure has always been through words, not objects. Thus, those who wish to know God must be good at *listening* to those words. We are to become *The House of Listening*, an apt metaphor for our church in these days of growth and planning.
* March 14 it is *Occupy the Temple*, Jesus takes on corporate Judaism by cleansing the Temple. (John 2:13-33//Mk 11:15)
* March 21 it is *A High Priest Forever,* a look at Hebrews 5.
* March 28, we celebrate Palm Sunday with the traditional text (Mk 11), and then on to Holy week and Easter with Jimmy preaching.
* In Eastertide we pick up the story with the traditional emphasis on Acts and explore how the gospel, in fact, expands to all the nations as predicted by Jesus in the statement, ‘this Temple shall be a house of prayer for all the nations.’

**The Text**

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Ex 20:1-6)

Idols are “dumb and worthless” (Lev 21:1; Hab 2:18-20; Isa 44:19). The are *tôēbah,* an “abomination,” something that violates the moral and ritual standards of God’s covenant. Not good. The absurdity of idols is wonderfully mocked in Isaiah 44.[[1]](#endnote-1)

And when Moses came down from the mountain to find a golden calf, as absurd as it sounds to the modern ear, what he found was a people who had almost immediately succumbed to the patterns of their old life.[[2]](#endnote-2)

They were all still polytheists, probably Moses too (you shall have no other gods before me).

The Word of God had come down from Sinai, but they had not yet learned to *listen* to God’s words, they hadn’t received those words yet. They were not a *House of Listening* and they lost their way at once!

They just wanted something they could grasp, something they could see.

Moses says to Aaron, ‘What were you thinking?!’ and Aaron said, ‘It just popped out of the pot when we put the gold in!’

We’ve always thought how ridiculous that golden calf was. But…! What is it about these “idols” that was so dangerous to the faith of Yahweh? For one thing it was a barrier to syncretism. By prohibiting idols Yahweh prohibited the mixing of other religious ideas with his own.

In ANE cultures the deity was not the wood, stone and overlay, but it indwelt the physical image of animal or human. It had to be fed, cared for, its mouth washed in dedication ceremony.[[3]](#endnote-3)

But it was different with Yahweh, who prohibited the production of any likeness of Him. Even when Moses and the elders “see” God in Exodus 24:10-11, there is no description of God, only what he was standing on. And they made no image of Yahweh – ever.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The people of Israel were just grasping at something they could see! And they rose up to revel when they had it! It is hard to follow a God who forbids an image of himself.

Are idols still a thing really?

Eventually, Judaism had largely purged itself of the evil and shame of idol worship by the time of the classical prophets, let’s say by 600-500 BCE. By this point classical monotheism had consolidated at the centre of the faith.

**From the Text**

Isn’t there something here to note? It is that we are constantly in the process of being assimilated to our cultural environment. There is good there of course. As society progresses we address racism, become more aware of income inequality and what might be done about it, the damage to our climate is top of mind. I’m not talking about that.

Aren’t we as consumed by our fascination, even worship, of the material as we ever were? If this idolatry issue was so important as to be the first two commandments, then what do they mean for modern society?

… you shall have no other gods before me

Maybe each of us has our own idols in a way. Maybe each of us has attachments to materialism that prevent us from hearing God, that supplant our loyalty to God alone.

The question is: What we are listening to? Has our attention become so co-opted by the quest for material security, for the attainment of ever higher levels of income, by the bright and shiny objects around us? Has our ability to listen to the deep ideas and voice of God been dulled by misplaced loyalties?[[5]](#endnote-5)

As we will see next week as we look at Jesus’ conduct when he entered the Temple and cleared out the merchants, when you turn the temple into a marketplace sin follows fast and hard. You can’t mix making money and politics with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We are political creatures, money earning creatures, but these things have the potential for becoming *tôēbah,* an “abomination,”

I see two things by way of application in this first commandment.

First, it is the tendency to build the meaning of our lives around things, stuff.

* We don’t think that shiny thing is a “god” but we spend our time inside it and focused on it, we love it. We grow anxious when we are parted from the object!
* I love my “things” as much as anyone. I’m not throwing shade. We all have relationships with things actually. I am deeply attached to my classic car because I’ve spent 14 years restoring her, spent an amount of money that I’m embarrassed to admit on her, and when *she* isn’t running well *I’m* not doing well. I am troubled in my soul!! I love my guitars; I love my material life. I do.

So recognizing this basic human propensity is the first step toward living life on a deeper level.

And second, ours is a religion of ideas and words. When Moses brought the law down from the mountain Exodus says, The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets. (Ex 32:16) All this is abstract.

This is the lens through which we view preaching. It’s not a TED talk. Preachers aren’t motivational speakers. We preach because the Word is God’s chosen method of self-disclosure. What happens when we proclaim that Word is ineffable, “inexpressible, incapable of being described in words.” We gather, two or more together, and there is always another in the room with us, the Lord.

We aren’t a Bible thumping church. We don’t do that. We are thinking Christians on both a spiritual journey and in intellectual journey together.

The reason we have Scripture at the centre of our community of faith is because this is God’s method of self-disclosure.[[6]](#endnote-6)– God speaks.

Our life together in the Scriptures is our way of aligning our loyalty with the God who has spoken, and a way to keep our loyalty focused on the one and only God, rather than the innumerable bright and shiny things that clamor for our attention.

From the very first command of creation in Genesis, to the first commandments to Moses, to the monologue of God in Job, to the Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ our Lord. God Speaks.

If He speaks then we must become those who listen; we must become the House of Listening.

If we keep that voice first in our affections, in our community worship, in our mission, we can become a House of Listening. We must become great listeners to the Word of God.

Because:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:1-5)

1. 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. Half 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!” The 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!” (Isaiah 44:15-17) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I don’t think Moses and his people were monotheists yet. After all, the first commandment says you shall have no other gods before me… which is hardly a statement of monotheism. It took a while for God to clarify his nature to his new people. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. It could be moved about. And thus, if you took someone’s household ‘gods,’ as Rachel did with her father Laban’s deities when Jacob fled with his wife (she hid them in her camel saddle, Gen 31:33ff) you decimate the household. You remove their gods. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Perhaps most importantly, the prohibition of acquiring foreign idols “minimized the danger of assimilating foreign religious values” and the resulting syncretism that accompanies such compromises (*ABD*, vol III, 379). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. An example from today is the way political values of white evangelicals in the US have become entwined with their religious values, and the latter being co-opted by the former, transforming evangelical religion into a political movement, a very tragic state of affairs for evangelical Christianity in North America. It is a form of syncretism, the prohibition of which lies at the foundation of Mosaic law. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This was a god who spoke and wrote. “Yahweh, unlike the gods of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Canaan, did not manifest himself through images. His self-disclosure came through a revelation in words, and the Sinai experience constituted a paradigm of God’s self-disclosure to Israel; thus images were prohibited” (ABD, vol III, 379). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)