

In the name of the + one, holy, and undivided Trinity. *Amen*

Idolatry is a big deal in our Biblical texts. In the 10 Commandments, the very first is “I am God, you shall have no other God than me”<sup>1</sup> and the next is something of an extension to that, “you shall not make for yourself an idol ... you shall not bow down to them or serve them.”<sup>2</sup>

With the Commandments given in this way and in this order, it’s clear that for God to be understood/recognized as God, we must also be keenly aware of anything that might take the place of God: false Gods.

God’s delivery of the second Commandment is actually quite ironic, because while the ancient Israelites were waiting for Moses to come down the mountain *with* the 10 Commandments, they’d started to get a bit agitated because he was taking a lot longer than they’d expected, and they needed something, anything to focus on, while he was gone. So they persuaded Aaron to make them a golden calf, something tangible, visible, and so really real, something they could worship as God. Because it’s really hard to keep waiting, keep waiting and not really know what’s happening with God, it’s hard to trust something that’s not actually right in front of your nose. These are the same folks who were set free from their long enslavement in Egypt by God’s actions, who walked on dry land through the parted waters of the red sea, who were fed manna from heaven. These people had said they were ready to do right by God, and keep God’s covenant, and so come back into full, life-giving relationship with God.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 20:2-3

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 20:4-5

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 19:8

... but then things went quiet, the miracles fizzled out. The drama died down, the extraordinary experiences were now things of the past.

Their time in the wilderness was losing meaning and direction. Folks likely started to doubt the truth of the presence of God, perhaps even doubt their own experiences of God, with nothing going on they were likely getting nervous about what the future held, nervous about not knowing for sure what was going to happen next, about not being in control. Without Moses around to keep them connected to God, it was harder to really believe that God was with them, that God was really real; they hadn't seen or felt any actual evidence of God's presence for a while, so they fell back on what they really trusted, what they'd always trusted, *things*, something they could see and touch, something really real, a solid and real part of this world. Of course they needed a Golden Calf, an idol, to make the mystery of God seem real, feel real, it was something tangible they could engage with their senses, they could see it, they could be certain it was really there.

The prophet Isaiah takes a humorous swipe at this seemingly human need to turn something very ordinary into God ... he talks about a carpenter who cuts down a tree, using part of it as fuel for his fire, a fire that keeps him warm and lets him bake his bread and cook his meat, and from the very same stuff he creates a God which he worships. Isaiah brilliantly points out the ridiculousness of confusing something that's useful, something that gives us material comfort with something we should worship, something we expect will save us.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> see Isaiah 44:13-17

Perhaps the human struggle with idolatry reaches right back to one of our oldest stories, the story of those first two humans, in the book of Genesis. Those first two humans, who decided to ignore God's one rule: they were given all the fruit of the garden to eat, all of it, except the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil. Which of course they ate. When they chose to eat that forbidden fruit, those first two humans traded whole and complete fullness of life in union, communion with God and all Creation, they traded that for a mind full of knowledge, knowledge that would have them feel and act like Gods. *And* they traded the experience of union/communion with God and all Creation for an abiding sense of separation. And that sense of separation, of distance from God, that feeling, is perhaps what's tempered, still, by substituting something, anything, for that which is truly longed for: the completeness that's known only from within our life in God.

Arguably the most enduring idol, through history and in our society today, is Mammon, wealth, it surely is the supreme deity in the pantheon of false-gods. As part of this idol's "catechesis," we're taught to have absolute faith in its omnipotent power, trust it entirely for our safety, and security, we're taught to prioritize it, organize our lives around it, and through it find our fulfillment, our purpose. Jesus explicitly warns us about this one.<sup>5</sup>

And Mammon has many companions, including Nationalism, where the leader is exalted as "savior"; and the idol Status, with its massive system of 'worship' that's propped up by our various institutions,

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<sup>5</sup> see Matthew 6:24

which have us strive to earn our personal value or worth as we progress up through the ranks.

We're capable of making an idol out of anything, anything we trust, devote our time to, and serve with all our mind, and with all our effort.

And so it's really important for us to think deeply about God. Creator God, God as revealed to us in Scripture, God as revealed to us in the person of Jesus the Christ, the one who draws us, by love, through healing, back into relationship with God and one another, and God the Holy Spirit, abiding, present, discernable (albeit barely, sometimes), our guide. It's really important for us to think deeply about God so we might get a sense of how we actually order our lives: is it the impenetrable mystery of the Holy Trinity that sits at the very center? If not, what *have* we come to trust and to love with all our mind, heart, and soul, and with all our effort in God's place, what have we come to *really* trust will provide for us, will offer us freedom and fullness of life.

The many Idols we come to worship are concrete, definable, they are the stuff of everyday life and so will keep us satisfied, in a way, but also trapped, limited, as we conform our lives to the service of a false God. Idols have us close down our expansive vision, shrink our consciousness, our own spiritual vastness, our belief in what's truly possible; because none of that's necessary to be in their service.

In sharp contrast, the Triune God, as it's understood (or not really understood) of the Christian tradition is very different. It's obscure at best, beyond the reach of reason, not seemingly very practical, hard if not impossible to sufficiently 'capture' with language and so hold easily in the mind.

And yet, the Holy Trinity is more than an idea of God, a definition of God, it's also an experience of God, a way of being *with* God.

The ungraspable mystery of the three in one has the power to right size the human intellect, forcing us to trust our sense, our instinct for God, just as much as we trust our sentence-making mind. And the relational, mutual, dynamic and life-giving balance of the Holy Trinity that we're invited to share in, can expose the death-bringing, extractive demands of the idols in our lives, idols which will always take way more than they'll give, idols that need us to even exist.

Like those ancient Israelites waiting in the wilderness, when it's not obvious or clear it can be really hard to trust in a God we can't see, or describe, or control. So we gather as church, to practice and develop our sense, our instinct for God. Through the mystery of the sacraments, in the depth of our shared silences, through our commitment to times of daily prayer we can get free of the idols that have a tight grip on our lives and imaginations, and learn to trust in the liberating mystery of the Trinity. Amen.