

July 29, 2018

TEXT: Exodus 20:4–6

TITLE: No More Idle/Idol Gods

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

A sermon on the Second Commandment usually follows a simple trajectory. The preacher says, “Worshiping an idol is when we prioritize something or someone with a reverence that should only be given to God.” We make idols of cars, homes, wealth, spouses, children, careers—and by doing so we treat relative and contingent things as if they were absolute and eternal. We treat something that’s not God as if it were God. Typical sermons on this subject end by saying something like this: “So stop doing that idolatry and worship God alone,” which is both overly simplistic and not very interesting.

Today’s sermon isn’t going to follow that path. It may wander into the realms of philosophy and grammar, but trust me it gets to an important lesson about Commandment #2. Let’s start with a review of nouns—which, as your junior high English teacher taught you, is a person, place, thing or idea. We tend to think of nouns as static, unchanging things, like rocks, houses, Pittsburgh. But everything changes. The noun “cloud” doesn’t refer to a fixed thing as much as it points to a particular condensation of moisture that changes and moves through the air. A “wave” is not a static noun, but the way we describe how water moves and flows along a shoreline. A “storm” is not a single thing but a collection of meteorological events, just as a “war” is not one thing, but a sequence of historical battles involving national politics and the military. You may say you are part of a “family,” but every family involves varied relationships and emotional ties, all of which change over time.¹

Cloud, wave, war, family—when using these nouns, we have to be quite specific if we want to be understood. I’m not speaking of “clouds” in general but about that cloud over there. The “war” I mean is the Civil War as seen from the perspective of a Union soldier, not the Confederacy—or World War II as experienced by a German citizen and not a British civilian. The problem here is that the more specific you are, the more you leave out of the conversation. We talk about World War II, not the Iraq or Afghanistan wars, or the fighting in the Ukraine. By framing nouns this way, there is always a lot left out of the frame.

Why is this relevant for this sermon? Because when we try to talk about God, especially when we treat God as a noun—as a thing to be described and set in a context—we are never able to put into words all God truly is. So we simplify God—we limit God—and in some way, we misrepresent God. It is that problem that is at the heart of the Second Commandment against worshiping idols.

Let’s set this line of discussion aside for a moment and look more precisely at the language of the Second Commandment. Commandment #2 comes fast on the heels of Commandment #1, which says “You shall have no other gods before me.” First Commandment: Don’t worship any other god.

Second Commandment: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, nor bow down or worship them, for I am a jealous God.” Now, recall what was happening while Moses was up on Mount Sinai receiving these Ten Commandments from God. At that moment, the Israelites grew impatient and decided to melt down their gold rings and jewelry and form it into the image of a golden calf—an idol and false god (Exodus 32). The first two commandments were being broken at the very moment the commandments were spoken by God and given to Moses on stone tablets. So keeping these two commandments involves something quite literal—Do not make idols; do not bow down to other gods.

But, as is always the case, there is more to the commandment than just this literal meaning. Think back to the early chapters in Exodus. When Moses first encountered God, what form did God assume? (Or to build on our earlier topic, what noun captures God’s appearance back then?) Was God seen as a giant person or a winged angel? Was God like a thunderstorm or angry bull? No, Moses didn’t encounter God in any form; Moses only heard God’s voice. That’s important. God doesn’t want us to limit ourselves to what God may look like. God wants us to listen to what God says. That alone gives us the best chance of being true disciples.

Turning God into a statue or an idol made of some precious metal distorts God into a narrow noun, a thing—something to which we pray and manipulate in the hopes of getting something from this idol. In John 4, Jesus reminds us that God is a Spirit and those who worship God must do so in spirit and truth (John 4:24). And in the beginning of that same gospel, when Jesus is described as the incarnation of God, one in whom the fullness of God dwells, the primary noun used to describe what this means is to say that Jesus is God’s Word. In Exodus, the voice of God spoke to Moses from the burning bush and when asked to define Godself simply said “I am who I am.” In John’s gospel, in the fullness of time, God again came near to us as that same voice—the Word made flesh.

It’s also interesting to note that portraits of Jesus were frowned upon for almost the first 300 years of the church, mostly out of fear of breaking the second commandment. When drawings appeared in the ancient Christian catacombs or even in the first Christian sanctuaries, they were almost never representational pictures of Jesus. Mostly they were allegories pointing to Jesus, such as an image of a Good Shepherd carrying a lamb on his shoulders. It wasn’t until Constantine made Christianity an approved religion and cathedrals began to be built to honor Christ that images of Jesus appeared in houses of faith.

So, back to an earlier question: Is God a noun? Not typically. In many ways, God is active, moving, changing, still speaking to us today. Just as a cloud moves and changes—just as families have a structure but the details are daily changing and re-defining as people grow older, marriages and births, divorces and death happen to the family unit—God too is much more fluid and active than we routinely imagine.

And that's part of the problem of our modern idolatry. We compartmentalize faith. Now we're in church, so we're okay with words like scripture and actions like praying and taking time to imagine what it means to be in relationship with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. But in a short while, we'll likely put God back in the noun box—person, place, thing or idea—back on the shelf and go on with the rest of our day focused on lots of other nouns. This type of God is disengaged from us, so it must be okay for us to disengage from God. Sometimes we get mad at God and wonder why God isn't doing more in the world—why God supposedly wasn't near to me when this happened or to prevent that from happening. This noun-God isn't much of a God—it's more of an idle idol. (spell)

That has never been God's intent. God first came to Moses and to us as a voice—as something heard, not seen. God fully came to us in Christ as living Word. If God is a noun at all, it is always a modified noun: God the Speaking Word, Christ the ongoing, persistent love, God the moving, enlivening Spirit. This active understanding of God corrects our modern-day idolatry because it reminds us that no image, no statue, painting, or mosaic, no model, concept or metaphor can fully capture the God who is actively beside us and ever going ahead of us.

God cannot be domesticated in the ways of an idol. Remember: Idols have to be carried around, but the Lord our God is the one who carries us. If you don't believe me, believe Isaiah 46 where it says: *Idols are things you carry around, loaded as burdens on weary animals. [But] listen to me, O Israel, [you] have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb; and even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and I will save.* (Isaiah 46:1–4)

The first two commandments might seem like some of the easiest ones to keep—don't worship other gods and don't make idols for yourself. But the challenge is not to make an idol of the God we do worship—not to reduce God to a thing, an object of our occasional attention, an inanimate, idle noun. God is word speaking—God is spirit felt—God is compassion and love expressed. God is more verb than noun. Try holding on to that definition this day as you seek to follow God's commandments. Carry that good news with you, knowing that God is already carrying you. That's the best news from one of the best commandments.

AMEN.

¹ Cf. Carlo Rovelli, The Order of Time, 2018, pp. 99-101.