

## Psalm 97:7-8

Advent Midweek 2 • December 13, 2006  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church • Boise, Idaho  
Pastor Tim Pauls  
“Gods and Daughters”

The Word of the Lord from Psalm 97:

<sup>7</sup>Let all be put to shame who serve carved images, Who boast of idols.  
Worship Him, all you gods.

<sup>8</sup>Zion hears and is glad, And the daughters of Judah rejoice  
Because of Your judgments, O LORD.

This is the Word of the Lord.

### I. Idol Worship

On the surface of it, idolatry or idol-worship simply doesn't make sense. At its most simple, a man takes a block of stone and carves a face into it. He gives it a name and declares it to be a god. From then on, he lives his life in service to a hunk of rock with a name and a face carved into it—he and whatever other people start to worship the rock with him.

If such a man were to write a *Magnificat* to his god, it would have to sound something like this:

My soul magnifies and rejoices in this god.  
It stares at me stone-faced and silent,  
and I have no idea how it regards me.  
It is mighty, because I say so,  
and has done great things—because I say so.  
It rewards the strong and the rich, while it cares little for the weak and the poor,  
because that's how the world works;  
and since my hunk of rock is a god, it must be making it work that way.  
It fills us with good things,  
except for the times when it doesn't, at which point we'd better work harder at  
serving it because it's obviously upset.

That's not much of a deliverer. An atheist would see life in this world much the same way, just without giving a rock the credit. It's just plain silly to worship an idol, no matter the name and no matter the face. A rock is a rock is a rock, and it can't raise you from the dead. The same goes for carved wood, golden calves and whatever other idols you find scattered throughout the Old Testament.

So why would anyone ever voluntarily follow an idol? What does a false god have going for it? The answer is simple: idols say what people want to hear. They don't speak, of course. Their followers speak for them, and so their followers decide what an idol

commands and permits; and, lo and behold, their followers decide that the idol commands and permits what they want. So if the followers want promiscuity, they create a god that approves of immorality. Or if they desire a god to keep order and enforce morality, they'll create a god with strict rules and permission to punish the disobedient. If they desire wealth, their idol will extol greed and materialism. If they want power, they will create a god that authorizes force; and then they are justified in forcing other people to serve them and their god, too.

An idol only teaches what its followers want to hear: that is its power. But idols have a huge limitation: they are only as big as the mind of their human creators, if that. They only reflect what man wants to hear, to give him an excuse to follow his sinful heart. It's a tragic chicken/egg set-up: man creates an idol to be greater than he, but then decides what his greater false god will teach. Which is more powerful: the god or the man who determines its teachings? Despite titles, the man has more power than a rock with a face: he's the driving force. But man is a terrible false god, because he fails the important test: he can't raise himself from the dead.

All that said, this is where we apply some law tonight, lest we smugly believe that we are idol-free if we lack a stone statue in our living room. If an idol is only a reflection of your own desires, then you don't really need the idol; you can skip right past that and simply worship your own desires. This saves you the need to use a hammer and chisel, and skip right to making yourself a god.

So if you're attracted to immorality or see it as a necessity, you're going to create an idol of your mind that approves of lust, promiscuity or adultery. If greed is your weakness, you're going to create an idol that permits you to ignore family and other commitments in order to pursue more wealth. If you're more prone to gossip, you're going to craft an idol that permits you to spread rumors and expose peoples' secrets when you decide it's right. Remember, too, that the devil doesn't play fair: when you're terribly troubled, afflicted or depressed, he'll tempt you to make a god out of self-pity, an idol that says you can indulge in whatever sin comforts you because you've had a rough enough time already.

Now, here's the really scary part: it's very easy to call this idol "Jesus." In other words, if you are tempted by lust or greed or gossip or self-pity, as a Christian you're not likely to say, "I'm going to do this, even though it earns me hell." Rather, you're going to say, "In my case, I think Jesus would permit this sin because of the circumstances." In that case, you've created a Jesus who permits lust or greed or gossip or some other sin. But that's not the Jesus of the Bible. It's a false Jesus of your own mind, to say what you want to hear rather than the truth.

That's what idols do: they tell you what you want to hear, not the truth. So mark this, and mark it well: idols will always tempt you, but they cannot save. They'll always be tempting because they're what your sinful mind wants God to be. But they shun truth for lies to seduce you. Worse, they can't save: they cannot remove your sin and guilt, and they certainly can't raise you from the dead.

That is why, on the Last Day, all who worship idols will be put to shame, for their false gods will only deliver them to hell.

So flee those idols that bring eternal shame. Flee them, and instead rejoice with the daughters of Judah.

## **II. The Daughters of Judah**

<sup>8</sup>Zion hears and is glad, And the daughters of Judah rejoice  
Because of Your judgments, O LORD.

So declares the next verse of our psalm, and you see two daughters of Judah rejoicing in our Gospel lection for this night (Luke 1:39-56). Mary arrives at Elizabeth's house with the unbelievable news that she carries the Christ in her womb. As Elizabeth hears her greeting, the unborn John the Baptist leaps within her, and she says back to Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord" (Luke 1:43-45).

So two daughters of Judah rejoice, and why? Because the Virgin has conceived by the Holy Ghost, and she will give birth to the Savior. This is unbelievable news, and I mean that quite literally: the Word of the Lord that Mary is the Mother of God cannot be believed, except by God-given faith. Every false idol will war against it. If Mary is tempted to place personal security above God's plan, then the hazards of being an unwed mother in an intolerant society will lead her astray. If she places logic above God's Word, then common sense will be an idol that says, "This just can't be happening!" That is why it seems so absurd—because false gods clamor to tell you what your Old Adam wants to hear, rather than the Lord's own truth.

But this is the truth in which Mary and Elizabeth rejoice: God is not a chiseled rock or a hunk of carved wood. He is not smaller than the mind of a man who invented Him; rather, He is the Creator of all things, and His paths are beyond our understanding. However, that all-powerful God has promised His faithfulness to His people, and so He is revealing Himself—not as a statue or rock or golden calf, but in human flesh. He has a face, too—not of unblinking stone, but of human flesh with eyes the see and ears that hear, knitting together in Mary's womb. He is not conceived and born of Mary to demand service, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. He has not come to speak to you what your sinful flesh wants to hear. He has come to speak His truth, what your faith delights to hear.

This is the truth that He proclaims: idols cannot save you. No matter how much they say what you desire to hear, and no matter how they woo you with approval of your sin, they will lead you to eternal death in the end. You know this: that biting shame of your conscience is God's gift to tell you that, as long as you trust in idols, you will be eternally

ashamed. This truth may slap you as unwelcome news, but the Lord only speaks it to lead you away from harm. He only speaks it to bring you His Son made flesh, to lead you to repentance and to save your life.

Because He goes on to declare this: the one true God has a face, but not of rock or wood. It is a face of flesh and blood, one whose eyes first opened in Bethlehem, one that was stricken and spat upon as He suffered in your place. Because He became flesh, suffered your punishment and died your death on the cross, you have the certain hope of eternal life. Idols of pleasure and logic and pride will all war against this, but this is the Word of the Lord. That Baby is miraculously conceived in Mary to be the Savior who dies in your stead. He is born to be judged by God and found guilty for your offenses, so that God's judgment of you might be forgiven.

That is why the daughters of Judah rejoice. The Lord is faithful, and has faithfully become flesh to save them from their sin. That is why you rejoice with them, because that Child in Mary's womb is there to save you from your sin. For His sake, God's judgment of you is one of forgiveness and life.

Rejoice in the judgments of the Lord: for He declares that for the sake of the Son of Mary, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

Amen