

“Icons and Idols”

Do you know the difference between an icon and an idol? An icon such as a cross, rosary, prayer chain, Bible, prayer book, chant, a song, belief, doctrine, formula, phrase, mantra, etc., is an aid to communicating with God. It is not the divine but “an outward and visible sign to an inward and spiritual grace” received through and providing for communication and a relationship with God. An icon is translucent (clear) so that one can look through or beyond it to see and relate to God.

An idol, however, is an object, idea or practice that gets in the way between humans and God, obstructs the view or the relationship with God and becomes the thing that is idolized or worshiped itself. An idol is opaque (unclear, fuzzy), one can not see through or beyond it. So, for that reason, I do not like the phrase, “American Idol.” A sport’s star, a Hollywood actor/actress or any hero should never be our idol. They are flesh and blood, flawed, clay feet people like you and me. They can be our heroes, our icons or guides to emulate, but never our idols. Any icon can unwittingly become an idol. The challenge is to always watch our icons and never let them become idols because God said, “*You shall not make for yourselves a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them.*” Exodus 20:4-5a. Therein lies my whole message for this morning. You may turn off your hearing aids for the rest of my sermon.

“From Icon to Idol”

I. The Bronze Serpent Icon-Numbers 21:4-9

During the Exodus, the people of Israel had a myopic vision of their destination and an impatient attitude about their progress. They had been delivered from slavery in Egyptian and were being guided by Yahweh, but they had not developed a close relationship with God. They had witnessed many miracles wrought by God through Moses but had not developed the spiritual and mental toughness to sustain their faith. They questioned the leadership of Moses and they had little or no faith in the God of Moses.

They were not satisfied with their lot. They had complained that they had no food at the Wilderness of Sin, then God provided sustenance for them-quail that evening and manna for the next forty years (Exodus 16:1-30). They complained of having no water at Meribah and God gave them water from a rock (Numbers 20:4-9). Then at Hor in today’s lesson, they were dissatisfied with the manna that God had provided (Numbers 21:4-9). They called it “miserable food.” Despite All that God and Moses had done for them, they were unhappy and the chronicler said that many of them were bitten by serpents and died there in the wilderness.

Now you, like me, may have some difficulty with an image of God as being vengeful and overly judgmental, but the story’s central focus is of a call to faith in the providence and guidance of a loving God. Each of us, no doubt, has been in a similar place. You may even be there this morning during this time of economic crisis or within some crisis in your personal or family’s life. Regardless to what is happening to you, God is with you all the

time, God wants the best for you and God loves you!

The saving grace of the story, however, is that when the people repented of their murmuring (in other words, responded in faith), the Grace of God became accessible to them. The insight here is that the instrument of their salvation was a bronze image (icon) of the very thing that was causing their death—a serpent. Those bitten by the serpents were healed of the snake bites by gazing upon the lifted up image of a iconic serpent. Isn't it interesting that the medical symbol is the staff of Asclepius—a coiled snake around a rod.

Later, however, Hezekiah will have to destroy the bronze serpent because it became an idol rather than a symbol of God's deliverance. The chronicler again writes, "*Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz...did what was right in the eyes of the Lord... He removed the high places, broke the pillars, and cut down the Asherah. And he broke the bronze serpent that Moses made, for until those days the people of Israel had burned incense to it...*" II Kings 18:4. An icon had become an idol.

II. The Cross of Christ, An Icon—John 3:14-21

Most Christians know about John 3:16 where Jesus summarized God's purpose and motive for creation, redemption and salvation. "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*" John 3:16. It is written upon billboards. It is flashed on placard at sporting events. It is shouted out by street evangelists and mouthed by believers and non-believers alike. Today, we find it within the context of John's story about Nicodemus, an inquiring leader of the Sanhedrin who came to Jesus by night. But did you know that it was preceded by a reference to Moses and the fiery serpent in verse 14? "*Jesus said to Nicodemus, 'Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whosoever believes in him may have eternal life.'*" John 3:14. Here, Jesus referred to it as an iconic precursor to his sacrifice on the cross at Calvary.

Nicodemus wanted to know about the signs of the kingdom that he saw exhibited by Jesus Christ. He posited that he thought that they were from God. In response to Nicodemus' question, Jesus told him that one must be born again. Nicodemus was puzzled and asked if one could re-enter the physical birthing process. On the contrary, Jesus informed him of the spiritual birth necessary for entrance into the kingdom of God. He told him that it was a matter of understanding heavenly things as opposed to earthly things. Would that Herod and Pilate understood that at the trial of Jesus! Just as many were saved during the time of Moses by gazing upon the image of a bronze serpent (icon), so too everyone who looks upon the lifted up Cross of crucifixion and believes in Christ (the ultimate icon of God) will have everlasting life.

It is within this context that Jesus told of the great love of God from the foundation of the world. "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*" John 3:16. The love of God, manifested through the Son of Man brings salvation to all who believes in Him. The Incarnate One was sent into the world not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him.

Now, the latter part of the Gospel also provided an image of salvation that has divided Christians for the past two thousand years because a belief also can become idolatrous. The

passage stated, *“Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”* Many so called “Christians” have presumed to know, identify and designate those who are saved from those who are not saved. Whereas, it is true that we condemn or often isolate ourselves from the grace of God by our unbelief, it is not up to you or me to decide who is within God’s grace and who stands outside. The important message is that the motive of God toward his creation and creatures is love and his intention is to redeem, save and sanctify human kind. The negative cross of crucifixion was subsequently turned into a positive symbol of salvation and eternal life through Jesus Christ. So, on Good Friday, it is appropriate to celebrate an adoration of the Cross of Christ and sing Hymn 473, “Lift High the Cross” by George William Kitchen and Sydney Hugo Nicholson.

III. The Doctrine of Faith, An Icon-Ephesians 2:1-10

Another key passage of our faith and iconic belief is found in Paul’s summary of the process of salvation and a formula of faith. *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your doing, it is the gift of God-not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”* Ephesians 2: 8-10.

This passage compares the difference between the powers of evil which distort the image of God in humans and the God given re-created image which gives rebirth and new life to those who believe in the Christ. It was out of God’s rich mercy and his undying love that God by grace sent Jesus to save us. He has now raised Jesus and seated him in the heavenly places so that in the Age to Come, God might show the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness toward the human.

It also clearly explains that the distorted image in the human is created by trespasses and sin, by following the evil spirits and by being influenced by a spirit of disobedience to the will and intention of God; in other words by idolatry. Such are those who live by the passions of their flesh, who follow the desires of their lower nature and who become by their distorted nature, “the children of wrath.” For me, this partially explains how things happen in the world and causes all kind of bad things to happen to good people. It does not explain why or what we should do about it. We must come to that realization by spiritual maturity.

We live in a world where good and evil seek to influence us-a world of icons and idols. We often make bad choices that lead to spiritual destruction and death, but other bad things happen for which we have no known causal reason. Bad thing, horrific and terrible things just happen in our world. Rabbi Harold Kushner in his “When Bad Things Happen To Good People” advises us to not ask the “why question,” but rather to respond as individuals, a community or a family of faith to help make the critical difference in the lives of those who are assaulted by bad circumstances and idols.

IV. Epilogue

In conclusion, The Israelites who complained about the God-given manna, were bitten by serpents, yet were saved when they looked upon the lifted up bronze serpent-image created by God and held up by Moses. Nicodemus was told by Jesus that Christ on the lifted-up cross was to be a symbol of human salvation. Paul explained to the Ephesians that spiritually dead men and women could by the grace of God and their response of faith in Christ Jesus take hold of eternal life.

God provides and has always provided a means of salvation-a lifted up image of a bronze serpent, the lifted up Cross of resurrection and doctrines of faith. The important message is that the motive of God toward his creatures and creation is love and his intention is to redeem, save and sanctify. *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”* John 3:16.

Let us pray. Dear God, teach us to always respond to your will with faith, confidence and obedience. Help us to know the difference between an idol and an icon as we seek to worship you in spirit and in truth. Keep us ever mindful that there are many paths to your presence and that ours is only one way; lest we be judgmental toward other. Then hasten the day when all men and women will with one voice give you the praise and glory. We ask this in your Divine and Precious Name. Amen.