

The Courage to Expose Idols and False-gods—Seventh Sunday of Easter

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[Acts 16:16-34](#)

[Psalm 97](#)

[Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21](#)

[John 17:20-26](#)

Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT

I *did* have some plans about what to preach on this week. But they, obviously, have had to change. They had to change after hearing about the deaths of 19 innocent children and 2 adults in Uvalde, Texas—after mourning about it with my wife all week, and after hearing from you too about your heart-ache, and knowing how all this dredges up the horror and confusion from 10 years ago at Sandy Hook Elementary.

What do we do or say in the wake of such meaningless suffering? What we can do, I suppose, today, at the close of the Easter season, is look to God's Word for meaning and guidance.

We've been hearing from the book of Revelation these past several weeks. And the author of Revelation is addressing several churches—small, new communities that are enduring violence and persecution. And the author has had a vision. He's had an *apocalypse*—which is a Greek word for “unveiling.” The Holy Spirit has peeled back the corner of the world and let him see inside.

And the author of Revelation sees great suffering at first. He sees the powers of the world getting the upper hand. He sees death—violence, plagues, and natural disasters. But the author of Revelation also sees—and describes in vivid detail, using the images and calendars and festivals of the Old Testament—the author sees that at the bottom of all things is God.

The experience of feeling powerless, the age where violence reigns, Revelation says, will not last forever. The new age is being brought about day by day. And, here today, we've heard the close of the vision, of the apocalypse, the unveiling, John sees and hears Christ.

This is not Jesus of Nazareth, but this is The Christ—God's eternal Son—and here Christ says something very important, very comforting and true. Christ says: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” Through Christ all things were made—the first. And in Christ all things will find their completion—the last. Which means:

there's nothing outside of Christ, outside of God. Violence, murder, hopelessness, sin—all these *cannot* remain forever. They will wear out. But God endures.

But, I know, it doesn't always feel like this, not by a long shot. Tragedy comes. 18-year-old shooters with AR-15's seem to come now as often as hurricanes and tornadoes. And all these inspire in us the same kind fear—fear of all the things that don't seem to be under God's control. It's a fear you can find abundantly in the people of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. Fear of demons, fear of storms, fear of Leviathan, fear of death.

And gripped by fear human beings have a tendency to make idols for themselves. Our Psalmist this morning speaks of this tendency. And our Psalm makes the same claim the author of Revelation does:

“The Lord reigns; let the earth rejoice...”

But, the Psalmist goes on:

“Confounded be all who worship carved images and delight in false gods!
Bow down before the Lord, all you gods.

“For you are the Lord, most high over all the earth;
you are exalted far above all gods”

When we hear this in the Bible, at first, we are thinking of actual statues maybe. Idols like the Golden Calf from Exodus. But what really is meant here: is the things that human beings cling to when they are scared and want to be in control. Even the Golden Calf in Exodus wasn't about worshiping a calf-god. It was about Aaron, Moses' priestly friend, trying to avoid a riot because the people were frightened and hopeless.

So what are the idols, the false gods, we turn to? Well, no matter which way you slice it in America, guns are an idol. I don't care very much one way or the other about firearms, personally. But the furor and resistance about how to regulate guns just shows—guns are one of the ways that frightened people gain control. Guns are a symbol of protection and power, and, in America, they are a false symbol of freedom.

There are lots of other idols though, here. To pick on liberal folks for a second—social justice is an idol. Justice, like freedom, obviously is a good thing. But when people feel frightened and they are losing control and they clamp down on an issue, often blindly to the humanity of their opponents, when they do everything in their power to appear as though they are in the right, above reproach and they alone will save the world... then this pursuit, however noble, becomes an idol.

Buying things is an idol. Wealth and prestige to feel powerful and in control is false god. Astrology, personality tests and maps of all sorts, though fun, are the same... Science, athletics, busy-ness, productivity, alcohol, sex, politics, TV News. All these things, to a people who are frightened and losing hope—they present simple, dependable answers. But they don't last.

Guns rust. No one takes their wealth beyond the grave. Social justice warriors alienate the very people they seek to save. And partisan politics grinds our culture to halt, making a mockery of the freedom and justice that the folks we will remember this weekend perished trying to preserve.

The only thing scarier than the human tendency to set up idols and false-gods, is those same human beings when you take the idols away! The story from the Book of Acts today tells that tale. We hear that a family with a slave girl used her to tell fortunes and make a fortune. And as is usually the case, people possessed by spirits, whether evil or good, always recognize Christ and Christ-like people. Paul, annoyed at this girl's attention, banishes her spirit and kills her gift.

Now, bereft of their knowledge of the future, and their extra income, her owners get Paul and his companions into a lot of trouble. They are brought before the authorities, beaten and imprisoned. Deep in the center of this prison, their feet in stocks, is where breaking down idols has taken Paul and Silas.

Whether this dark prison, or that dark tomb that Jesus of Nazareth was laid in—often the world will try to destroy and silence the people and prophets who shine a light on their idols and false gods. But God makes Paul and Silas and Jesus steadfast. Paul and Silas were praising and praying into the night, just as Jesus walked faithfully to the cross and to death.

In these stories we find our faith. In these stories of death, imprisonment, of hopelessness and fear—we see the same as is written in Revelation today. The foundations of the prison that held Paul are shaken... The stone is rolled away and the foundations of death itself are broken. Because before the foundation of the world was God and God's love for the Son, as John's Gospel writes it. Christ is the beginning and the end. There's nothing else to cling to.

So, what does that mean for us, now, awash in grief, and fear, and losing hope in 2022? I believe that this means we must take heart and be brave. To be steadfast. God gives us the courage to do as Paul and Jesus did, as the prophets did of old, and as all the saints after them have done too—**the courage to expose idols**. Idols like guns, political parties, wealth, self-made righteousness, cable news, and all the rest—they cannot save us. They will pass away.

But God's Holy Spirit this morning, in the Book of Acts, in Psalm 97, in Revelation and in John's Gospel reminds: our life in Christ, the love of God, **will never fail**.

Amen.