

BEING LIFTED UP BY BEING BROUGHT DOWN

“The arrogance of man will be brought low and the pride of men humbled; the Lord alone will be exalted in that day....” (Isaiah 2:17)

“Your god is whoever or whatever you trust the most to keep you safe and make you happy. And that will either be God Himself or it will be an idol.” These words of Martin Luther pretty much say it all: You can trust God to take care of you or you can trust something other than God to take care of you but anything other than God that you trust to take care of you will be an idol. What Luther didn't add—but what the Bible makes clear—is that idols not only don't take care of us—quite the opposite, they turn on us and devour us. Unfortunately, people have always tended to trust idols more than they trust God. And what exactly is an idol? The image that typically comes to mind is something like a wooden figure or totem pole. But idols come in many different forms—most of them not physical forms. Well, if an idol is anything we trust other than God to keep us safe and make us happy, then what are some of the idols we worship nowadays? Oh, what about things like physical beauty, fame, money, power, intelligence, winning, success? These are the things that make people happy and give them security, aren't they? But they're not God, and that means that they're idols. And that means that they can neither keep people safe nor make them happy, because only a relationship with the Living God can do that.

How about beauty, for example? I once saw an interview with Marlene Dietrich, the beautiful German femme fatale of the 1930's and 40's. The interview took place toward the end of her life. She was so ashamed of what age had done to her looks that she refused to let her face appear on camera; she sat behind a screen for the entire interview. The source of her pride had become the source of her shame. Thus does God deal with the idol of physical beauty.

How about fame? I think of Judy Garland, who Fred Astaire called the greatest entertainer he had ever seen. Adored by millions of fans you would think she lived a charmed life. Instead, she lived a life which by her own account was miserable and lonely. After years of depression and numerous attempts to kill herself, she finally succeeded. And how many other celebrities have followed in her footsteps? William Holden—the “golden boy” of Hollywood--died alone in a motel room with a half empty bottle of whiskey as his only companion. Ernest Hemingway—Nobel Prize winning author and possibly the most famous writer of the 20th Century—blew his head off with a shotgun. Fame is no guarantor of happiness, just another idol that God casts down.

Money? Ask Bernie Madoff. Power? I think of the Caesars of ancient Rome—men who literally ruled the world. Julius Caesar? Stabbed to death by political opponents. (They did it more openly then!) Tiberius Caesar? Strangled by an assassin who had been hired by his nephew Caligula. Caligula? Murdered by his own palace guard. Claudius?

Poisoned. Nero? Committed suicide to avoid being lynched by a mob. Thus does God turn power against those who worship it.

Intelligence? Consider King Solomon. As a child he acceded to the throne of Israel and when God asked him what he wanted he asked for wisdom to govern. God was so pleased with his request that he gave him not only wisdom, but wealth as well. But when later in his reign Solomon turned away from God and began to encourage his people to worship foreign gods, God withdrew his blessings and this man who had once been able to explain the meaning of everything ended up in despair, saying: ***“Meaningless! Meaningless! Everything is meaningless!”*** Solomon was living proof of what God said: ***“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; I will frustrate the intelligence of the intelligent.”*** To which the Son of God replied, ***“I praise you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children.”***

And winning? Consider Nadia Comaneci—the gymnastics champion who only five years after winning the Olympic Gold Medal tried to commit suicide. And how about success—the secular sacrament of America? I think of Denny McClain, one of the most talented pitchers in the history of baseball, who won 31 games for the Detroit Tigers in 1968 and only five years later ended up in a federal penitentiary for drug trafficking and illegal gambling. Interviewed just before he went into prison, he said: *“How anybody can go from where I was to where I am is beyond me.”*

Thus does God bring down the arrogance of man and humble their pride. But He doesn't do it out of spite; he does it out of love. *He tears down our idols so that we will turn to Him Who alone can lift us up.* And when we abandon our idols and turn to Him, he enlightens us with lasting gifts: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness gentleness and self-control. These are the flowers that can blossom when we stop worshipping beauty, fame, money, power, intelligence, winning and success.

When Isaiah says that all that man has lifted up must be brought down so that man himself may be lifted up, he is saying that all of our idols, our little personal towers of Babel, have to be torn down so that we will no longer place our hopes in imaginary gods. Our fancies, our daydreams, can't save us. Quite the opposite—they can lull us into a terminal coma. We have to be awakened to the reality that we who are burdened with sin and the prospect of death need God to take away our burdens if we want to be lifted up to the heavenly realms. God does this by taking away our false gods one by one until we are left with only Him to trust. In other words, he reduces us to faith and then, through the eyes of faith, he shows us heaven.

So where do you find yourself on this Fifth Sunday of Easter? Do you trust Jesus or do you trust someone or something else? Are you basing your hopes for happiness and security on beauty or fame or power or money or intelligence or success? If so, know that these are idols and that one day they will betray you. What gives you passing joy today will become a source of sorrow tomorrow.

Or are you a lukewarm believer who is going through the motions of worship, perhaps for the sake of your family, perhaps just out of habit. If so, know that worship without faith and hope and love is an empty shell. Being in this physical church will not lift you

one millimeter toward heaven. Only God can do that through gifts he is eager to bestow upon you: a humble heart, a forbearing spirit, a love of charity, a sense of hope, and a living faith. These are the only things that make us light enough to soar to heaven.

Or are you like the people of Israel during Isaiah's time to whom God said, "*The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.*" (Isaiah 1:3) The Israelites didn't understand that their sins were piling up on them like a mountain of lead, weighing them down and pressing them into the clay from which they were made. Having become indifferent to their sins they felt no need to repent. If you fall into this category then know that indifference to sin is not absence of sin: we will be called to account for our sins, even to, "**...every careless word [that we have] spoken.**" And know as well that this accounting provides for a death beyond physical death, a death that consists of eternal suffering and separation from God.

Or maybe you're someone who feels unworthy of God because you've become enslaved to some sin that rules over you. You desperately want to be disburdened of the guilt that you bear but don't know how. To you God says: "*Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked man forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord and he will have mercy on him, and to our God for he will freely pardon him.*" (Isaiah 55:7)

If you are any of these people, know that Jesus came to **lift up** sinners who are enslaved by their idols and weighed down by their sins. People like you and me. Throughout his life Jesus made common cause with people like us—people who are stuck in the muck and the mire of worldly disappointments and sorrows. From his lowly birth with the animals to his crucifixion between two thieves, Jesus threw in his lot with those the world despises. That's why the world treated Jesus the way it did. Mark Twain once remarked that, "**Human nature is the same everywhere; it defies success and has nothing but scorn for defeat.**" No wonder the world mocks and scorns the Christ; He is not the god it seeks. The world seeks the gods of beauty and fame and power and money and intelligence and victory and success, not the God of the cross.

But the God of the cross is the only God that can save you and me. Enthroned on the cross, Jesus granted the gift of paradise to a lowly thief who was about to die with him. And you and I are exactly like that thief because no matter what our circumstances are right now, we are all walking down the road to death. And there is no better companion on that road than Jesus, because when we travel with Him, we know that along with that thief, our destination is paradise..

God tears down our idols because He loves us that much. And having saved us from our idols, he offers us His Son Who can lift us up to heaven, because he loves us that much.

Amen.

Isaiah 1:2-3; 2:12-18

Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth! For the LORD has spoken: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." ... The LORD Almighty has a day in store for all the proud and lofty, for all that is exalted (and they will be humbled), for all the cedars of Lebanon, tall and lofty, and all the oaks of Bashan, for all the towering mountains and all the high hills, for every lofty tower and every fortified wall, for every trading ship and every stately vessel. The arrogance of man will be brought low and human pride humbled; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day, and the idols will totally disappear.

Philippians 2:5-11

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Matthew 20:20-28

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. "What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom." "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father." When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."