

Idols & Christmas

Psalm 115, John 1:1-9

Pastor Tom
November 25, 2016

The Christmas season brings out lights. Christmas trees have lights on them. You may decorate the outside of your home with lights. The city puts up special lights. This weekend, downtown St. Albert was lit up for Christmas at the Snowflake festival. The government puts lights on buildings and landmarks. People visit Candy Cane lane in Edmonton because of all the lights. Christmas lights are part of this season. But why?

Maybe it's partly due to the darkness that accompanies the Christmas season in the northern hemisphere. The shortest days of our year come right around Christmas. So lights break into the darkness with some color and creativity. It's almost like Christmas lights say "darkness, we're going to shine bright and colorfully in spite of you."

When you think about it, there's a fair amount of light and darkness in the Christmas story. Baby Jesus may have been born in the evening or at night. But the shepherds were keeping watch over their flock by night. The angels appear and the glory of the Lord shone. Inspired by the angels, the shepherds leave their flocks and go at night to see this baby. The wise men found Jesus because of a light; a star which rose and guided them to the place where he lay. So light shining in the darkness is a major part of the Christmas story. Light shining in darkness not only happened physically but spiritually. Jesus came into a world that was spiritually dark to be its light.

Many of us know this Christmas story. We've trusted Christ. We have received Jesus, the light of the world into our lives. Yet we might still walk in darkness. There's a very subtle way this can happen without us even being aware of it. You might be going into this Christmas season walking in some sort of darkness. I don't want you to stay there if that's where you are.

So today, we are going to explore this subtle cause of darkness that can shadow every one of us. We are first going to discover its cause and how it can take hold in our lives. But then we will discover God's provision for us to escape this darkness. We are going to look at two Bible passages today, Psalm 115 & John 1. The first is Psalm 115:1-8 – page 444 in the Bibles in front of you. Here we discover the source of darkness that may shadow our hearts as we go into Christmas.

Psalm 115:1-8 (ESV)

115 Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,
for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!

²Why should the nations say,
"Where is their God?"

- ³Our God is in the heavens;
he does all that he pleases.
- ⁴Their idols are silver and gold,
the work of human hands.
- ⁵They have mouths, but do not speak;
eyes, but do not see.
- ⁶They have ears, but do not hear;
noses, but do not smell.
- ⁷They have hands, but do not feel;
feet, but do not walk;
and they do not make a sound in their throat.
- ⁸Those who make them become like them;
so do all who trust in them.

This Psalm invites a people to sing who have been taunted for their worship of God. It begins by calling on the Lord to glorify His name. The people declare this praise because of the Lord's steadfast love and faithfulness. They celebrate that despite the persecution and suffering, the Lord has proved Himself faithful and steadfast.

Then in verse 2, the people refer to the taunts received. "Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?" This song may have been composed when Israel suffered some sort of defeat. When your nation lost a battle in the ancient world, the victors concluded their gods were greater than yours. So they taunted by questioning the presence of Israel's God. "Where was Israel's God if she had been defeated? What kind of God would allow His people to suffer some loss?" We might have such thoughts about God when things go wrong in our lives. How could God allow this to happen? Where was God? Is there a God."

But the people in this Psalm had been brought through that season of defeat or disappointment. They triumphantly answer the taunt in verse 3. "Our God is in heaven. He does all that he pleases." How can the Israelites have such confidence? They observe the gods of other nations.

Verses 4-8 contain a comprehensive critique of the idols worshipped by the others. Now when we think of idol worship, we immediately think of primitive people bowing down to images carved into wood or cut into stone. We know that worshipping such an object is foolishness. An image carved into a piece of wood doesn't magically become a god with any power. So we can quickly dismiss any consideration of idol worship in our lives.

But though we don't engage in worship of physical idols that doesn't mean we're free of idol worship in our hearts. This is **the subtle cause of darkness in our lives. Idol worship in our hearts.** To understand this more deeply, we need to

think about idols differently. Consider this definition, Tim Keller gives one in his book “Counterfeit Gods. **“An idol is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you only what God can give.”**”

Keller talks about many different categories of idols. Some people have theological idols caused by doctrinal errors that produce such distorted views of God that they end up worshipping a false god. Think of the millions of people involved in the Mormon church or the Jehovah Witnesses. Each has followed doctrinal errors that have led to the worship of God fundamentally different than the God of the Scriptures.

There are sexual idols. Addictions such as pornography promise but don't deliver a sense of intimacy and acceptance. Or people have made an idol out of physical beauty for themselves or their partner or anyone they might consider dating. Or we think we have to obtain some level of beauty or physicality to have worth and acceptance. Or we believe in romantic idealism where every moment of a relationship must be filled with warm romantic feelings. And if it's not we conclude there's no love when love includes feelings but must much more include decisions and will to love.

Some worship magic or ritual idols. They dabble in witchcraft or the occult. Or their fascinated by stories of those who do. Keller argues that in some ways, all idolatry is a form of magic that seeks to rebel against God's order and instead tries to alter it for one's own advantage.

Some worship political or economic idols. Ideologies of the left, right and libertarian absolutize some aspect of the political order and make it THE solution. You see this when people deify or demonize free market economies.

There are racial or national idols. These show up in racism, militarism, nationalism or ethnic pride that turns bitter or oppressive.

Some worship relational idols like a dysfunctional family system of codependency or fatal attractions or living your dreams through your children.

We can bow down to religious idols like moralism, legalism or prosperity. We can worship worship. We can worship the Bible or worship missions or worship social justice or worship some celebrity preacher.

There are philosophical idols - systems of thought that make some created thing the problem (instead of sin) and some human product or enterprise the solution (instead of God's grace). There are also cultural idols like the radical individualism in our culture that idolizes individual happiness at the expense of the community. This feeds anyone who has placed themselves as the idol of their lives. Our culture encourages and caters to self-worship and putting self above

everything else. Some of you come from shame cultures that make an idol out of family or clan at the expense of individual rights.

There's education idolatry where the most important motivation is to get an education. There's work idolatry where your identity is completely wrapped up in what you do. There's money idolatry with the belief that the more you have, the more secure you are.

But perhaps most prominent in our lives today are what Tim Keller calls Deep Idols. These are motivations or temperaments made into absolutes.

- **Power idolatry** – “Life only has meaning/I only have worth if – I have power and influence over others.” Or we love to be around people of power and influence. We like to drop names of somewhat famous people we're connected to.
- **Approval idolatry** – “Life only has meaning/I only have worth if – I am loved and respected by _____.” My peer group; the cool group; the popular crowd; social media affirmation; my boss; my colleagues; my parents.
- **Comfort Idolatry** – “Life only has meaning/I only have worth if – I have this kind of pleasure experience, or a particular quality of life. This can show up with people constantly going on some vacation or trying to find the greatest pleasure in escaping in some form of entertainment or drug or drink.
- **Control idolatry** – Life only has meaning/I only have worth if – I am able to get mastery over my life in the area of _____. Like my children; or my work; or my body; or my finances.

The hard part of idolatry is many of the things we idolize started out as something good. It's not a sin to have influence or be entrusted with power. It is important to act and live in a way that respects others and shows them God's love. It's not wrong to spend time in recreation or physical fitness. It's a valid concern to care for our children or look after our finances. But when these become our number one focus in life displacing God - we've made them into an idol.

Might any of these idols have gained some subtle hold over your life? If so, might it be possible that you're about to go into the Christmas season worshipping and feeding these idols without even knowing it?

With these modern idols in mind, consider again the devastating critique of idolatry found in verses 4-8 of Psalm 115. The Psalmist points out 7 body parts of idols that don't work – mouths that don't speak; eyes that don't see; ears that don't hear; noses that don't smell; hands that don't feel; feet that don't walk and throats that don't make sounds. Why would anyone worship and give their first love to someone that doesn't speak, see, hear, smell, feel, walk or make throat

noises (which I will explain further in a moment)? You would make only one conclusion of such a god or person. They're dead or at the very least powerless.

Yet this section does more than expose the lifelessness of carved wood idols. A commentator named Alec Motyer notes this. Behind the scenes of these observations lie serious theological accusations. A mouth that doesn't speak means no voice and no revelation. Eyes that don't see means no moral observation of right and wrong. Ears that don't hear means no hearing of prayer or response to it.

Noses that don't smell goes back to the image of a god who smells a sacrifice and responds with an atoning or forgiving work. Our God is pictured this way back in Genesis 8. After the ark settled on the mountain, Noah prepared a sacrifice to the Lord. We read in Genesis 8:21 "And when the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma, the Lord said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done)." But noses that don't smell on a god means no provision of forgiveness & mercy.

Hands that don't feel can mean no sensing or understanding of the frailty of our human condition. How unlike Jesus who is described in Hebrews 4:15 like this; "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."

Feet that don't walk means this god has no movement or activity. Sounds in the throat can mean "musings in the throat" or the sound a person makes in their throat when they are thinking hard about something. Mmmmmmm. But idols don't think hard about anything. They don't think at all.

Idols do not have the power to give us the love, forgiveness and guidance we need. Yet sadly, they do have power in one area described in Psalm 115, verse 8. "Those who make them become like them, so do all trust in them." Idols look dead. That's what happens to their worshippers. We experience a type of spiritual death or darkness when some idol holds the central place of our hearts. We become spiritually blind, unable to see and spiritually lame – unable to change. Such is the darkness that comes with placing anyone or anything higher than God in our heart.

That's the darkness that could be shadowing your heart today. So what has God provided to enable us to break free from this darkness?

That's where our second text of the day comes in. John 1:1-18. Page 749 in the Bibles in front of you. This is the Apostle John's introduction to his gospel or good news announcing Jesus as the Son of God. This is John's take on

Christmas. But it's a totally different perspective than the one we find in Matthew and Luke. John was one of Jesus' 12 disciples and close friend. We think he wrote this gospel later in his life after much reflection. So what does he say about Christmas?

John 1:1-18 (ESV)

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. ⁴In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

⁹The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹²But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵(John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") ¹⁶For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God; the only God,¹ who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

"In the beginning" brings us back to the first words of the Bible – "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." But here, "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." So before God created the heavens the earth, Jesus was with God and was God. He is God, the Son, part of the Triune God.

"All things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made." So Jesus is not a lifeless God who doesn't do anything. Jesus participated in creation. Nothing was made apart from Him.

"In Him was life and that life was the light of men". So Jesus is not dead like an idol. He is life and the source of life. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it." This reminds us of the second verse of the Bible – Genesis 1:2 – "The earth was without form and void and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters". So what does God do first in creation? Genesis 1:3 – And God said, "let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light and the darkness." Here in John "the light – Jesus – shines in the darkness – the world opposed to god; the devil; his forces; the idols that arise in our heart – and the darkness has not overcome Him.

John the apostle then mentions John the Baptist, who came as a witness to the light, Jesus – that all might believe through him and unlike an idol that ultimately directs a person to worship something false, Jesus is “the true light, which gives light to everyone.” Yet remember the experience of the worshippers in Psalm 115? They were mocked and rejected because of the apparent absence of God. Jesus also experienced taunts and mocking and rejection. “He was in the world and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own and his own people did not receive him.”

Yet some believed. Verse 12 – “But to all who did receive him, to those who believed on his name, he gave the right to become children of God who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” If God has revealed some idol in your heart today you need to put Jesus back at the center. If you have never done this, verse 12 lays out his name that He is trustworthy – that you can trust him for forgiveness of your sin, guidance for your life, hope for the future. You will be adopted into God’s family as one of His children.

But not only was this Jesus with God in the beginning before creation,; not only was He God, creator, life, light of men, shining in the darkness, the true light that gives light to everyone, rejected, yet savior, he does something no other so called god ever did. Verse 14 – “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us”. This Jesus literally became flesh. The people who lived during his lifetime saw God with a mouth that spoke revelation; eyes that saw right and wrong; ears that listened to the cries and pleas of the people; a nose that smelt honest worship; hands that healed, touched and helped; feet that walked hundreds of kilometers all over Israel and a throat that made sounds as he thought or responded to that which was before Him. Yet John not only saw Jesus minister in the flesh and blood. The second half of verse 14 - we have seen his glory, the glory as the only Son from the Father. John saw Jesus in all His glory during the transfiguration when Jesus’ face shone like the Sun.

Through Jesus we receive grace upon grace. Grace and truth came through Him. No one could have seen God had he not revealed Himself. Yet He gave us much more than some image etched in stone. He gave us the living Son of God, Jesus Christ whose coming we remember this Christmas season. But we don’t just want to remember. We want to relate to and experience the living and risen Lord Jesus Christ who reigns the universe from the right hand of God – yet bears the scars of the cross where he paid for your and my sin.

So I invite you today to prepare for this Christmas season by centering your life again, on Christ. Ask Christ for His strength and spirit to help you displace any idol that you have placed above Him in your life. This won’t be easy. If we have

constructed our lives in a way that our first love is directed towards something or someone other than God, we will need to change. Some people might not like that change. We might not even like that change if our idol is comfort. But when we get up off the couch and start following what Christ calls from us, we experience walking with Him. We discover that this is real life. This is what we were created for. This is the life that God meant for us to live.

Then we can join with the worshippers back in Psalm 115 who, after the worship leader offered his devastating critique of idols, joined together in praise of the one true God. We will close with this praise from the second half of Psalm 115. I want you to join in on this praise when it says people.

(Leader) ⁹O Israel, trust in the LORD!

(People) He is our help and our shield.

(Leader) ¹⁰O house of Aaron, trust in the LORD!

(People) He is our help and our shield.

(Leader) ¹¹You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD!

(People) He is their help and their shield.

(Leader) ¹²The LORD has remembered us; he will bless us;

he will bless the house of Israel;

he will bless the house of Aaron;

(People) ¹³he will bless those who fear the LORD,

both the small and the great.

(Together – Speak this to one another)

¹⁴May the LORD give you increase,
you and your children!

¹⁵May you be blessed by the LORD,
who made heaven and earth!

¹⁶The heavens are the LORD's heavens,
but the earth he has given to the children of man.

¹⁷The dead do not praise the LORD,
nor do any who go down into silence.

¹⁸But we will bless the LORD
from this time forth and forevermore.

Praise the LORD!