
Blessed Destruction

Deuteronomy 11:31-12:9 and 12:29-13:5

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, July 1, 2018,
by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

If you've been worshipping with us at the Chapel regularly over this summer, you'll know that we've been engaging a lot of Deuteronomy. We've been reading extended passages in worship in our services each week. Our preaching has focused on Deuteronomy, and the adult Sunday school classes have been about Deuteronomy. We've even invited all of you to read and perhaps study Deuteronomy as a devotional practice each week as we consider how this particular book from the Old Testament continues to speak to us as the word of God. As a church who has for years followed the framework provided by the Revised Common Lectionary, we have sought to sink deep into the waters of a book much of which is by-passed in the lectionary lessons.

Throughout this summer, we've heard about words spoken to, by, and through Moses to the people of Israel, and we've heard about the calling to listen to the words and commands from God. As we were reminded in sermons, the book begins with "these are the words" (Deut. 1:1) and continues with the pivotal call to "hear, O Israel" (Deuteronomy 6:4)—that is to listen, to attend to, to pay attention. This is a book about speaking and listening, which is to say it is a book fundamentally about relationship. The relationship at the center of Deuteronomy is the covenantal relationship between God and God's people. As we were reminded last week, "the whole cosmos belongs to God, yet, inexplicably, bizarrely, God fell in love with Israel, for the sake of the world." Or as Deuteronomy 10:15 says, "the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today." From the beginning, the Lord decided to choose the particular through which to bless the whole world—from Abraham through the people of Israel and finally through Jesus and his church. The laws and guidelines provided throughout Deuteronomy are the working out of God's relationship with this particular people and how the people will live in relationship to God; and, by virtue of their relationship with God, how they will live in relation to others. As we dive deeper into the provisions and expectations of the Deuteronomic law, we move deeper into the everyday relationship realities of God's people as they consider life in the promised land.

The scene Deuteronomy envisions is one where the people are on the precipice of entering into the land that God is giving them. They are between the wilderness and the promised land, and they are preparing to move into the land. As we arrive to chapter 12 in Moses' long sermon to the people, we hear him address the issue of other gods and the concern of idolatry. On this topic, Moses explains the extent to which the people of God must go in the land to fulfill the commands to "have no other gods" before the Lord and not to make for themselves an idol to bow down and worship. Moses says, "You must demolish completely all the places where the nations whom you are about to dispossess served their gods, on the mountain heights, on the hills, and under every leafy tree. Break down their altars, smash their pillars, burn their sacred poles, and hew down the idols of their gods, and thus blot out the names of the gods from those places." God is all in on destroying even the residue related to the gods of Israel's predecessors in the land. Even the spaces that might remind the Israelites of the gods that the Canaanites believed would provide fertility and flourishing and

blessing were to be demolished. Moses proclaimed the Lord's command for the people to break down, smash, burn, hew down the idols themselves thus blotting out the very name of those gods.

The demolition of these places and things was to be a symbolic reminder to the people that no created thing and no other god provided for them hope and a future. Only the Lord their God provided what they needed to flourish and grow. For this reason, the Lord issues serious commands with extreme measures to assure destruction of anything that would guide them away from believing, trusting, and knowing that the Lord was their provider, protector, and deliverer.

Later in chapters 12 and 13, the commands are stronger and more demanding still. The Lord warns about individuals being trapped or ensnared into practicing the ways of worshiping that the other peoples have practiced. And what is more, when any among God's people—be they prophets and dreamers or family members or any others from among the community—propose or suggest or lead God's people toward worshiping anything other than the LORD their God, the penalty for those people is death. This is serious; this is life and death stuff. These commands raise the question: what kind of God would demand such extreme measures as utter destruction of places and putting people to death for leading others away from God? Or to ask a different question, one that is less judgmental of God: what must be at stake for the Lord God to call for such extreme measures when it comes to preventing the worship of other gods?

To answer these questions this morning, we must recall the story of God and God's people even as the book of Deuteronomy reminds us to do the same. We must come to these commands remembering the covenantal relationship that is rooted in God's choosing, delivering, and providing. Earlier in chapter 11, Moses tells the people they must acknowledge God's greatness and all the works of his hands in delivering them from Egypt, in guiding them through the dessert, in judging them and their fellow Israelites when they went astray, and in bringing them to the land that God has promised to give them. The people are to keep God's commandments as a way of acknowledging and remembering God's great acts in relationship to them.

This reminder in Chapter 11 is similar to the instruction Moses proclaimed to the people earlier in Chapter 6 when he said, "When your children ask you in the time to come, 'What is the meaning of the decrees and the statues and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?' then you shall say to your children, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh, and all his household. He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. Then the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case.'" For the people of Israel, faithfulness to God's statutes, ordinances, and commands was always connected to God's history of election and deliverance and provision—that is, to God's love for them. God takes seriously idolatry and the worship of other gods because God loves the people and is in relationship with them.

God's concern about idols and worshiping other gods extends to us as the people who, in and through Jesus, have been grafted into the people of God, adopted as sons and daughters into God's family. Just as with the people of Israel, God calls for allegiance to and worship of God alone. And while the regulations governing our resistance to worshiping other gods are not the same as what Moses shared with the people (we are not called to repeat the crusades), we are called to love the Lord our God with an undivided heart, soul, mind, and strength: that is with all of who we are. And

like the people of God before, this calling to worship God alone comes because God loves us, is in relationship with us, and desires that nothing would disrupt that relationship in any way.

Within the context of God's loving relationship with God's people, we also hear of God's jealousy for those same people. In Deuteronomy 5, when Moses gave the 10 commandments to the people, God declared, "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God." Don't bow down to created things; bow instead to the creator. Why? Because God is a jealous God.

But what does this jealousy mean? It surely does not mean envy, but the difference is subtle. I have a friend and mentor who tells a story that explains this difference so well. He was leading a retreat and began with an exercise where he spread pictures all over the floor and asked the participants to choose one with which they identified. One burly man picked up a picture of a child who was holding a candy bucket with a huge smile on her face. The man explained how he had been married for a couple of years and "felt like he had received the most fabulous gift in the world." Though this man was clearly "not a high achiever or high earner or high anything much, [you] couldn't match his smile... There wasn't a hint of boasting, just effervescent joy." Later a man came up to my friend and was quite distressed. He said, "I hate that man for having what I do not have. It feels so unfair... Why can't I smile with that kind of joy?"

The first man was jealous, and the second man was envious. "Jealousy is [concern] of losing what you rightly have. Envy is the yearning to acquire what you don't have, but somebody else has. The smiling man... loved what he had and was not the least bit embarrassed about it." The other man badly wanted what the smiling man had. The Lord is jealous like the smiling man. As my friend says, "God treasures [God's people] with that unselfconscious smile of effervescent joy and does not mind who sees and who knows. God will hold on to [God's people] with that strong embrace and... God will go to any lengths to [keep them]. A jealous God is part of the wonder of grace."

As with the people of Israel, God is jealous of God's relationship with us. God treasures us. God loves what he has and is not embarrassed by it. And God will go to any length to keep us. This means God will react harshly against anything that tries to take us or distract us or block us from God. And those things we make into idols and worship do exactly this. They distract us, dissuade us, and redirect our attention away from the reality of God and the truth of God's love for us. God's jealousy for us, those who were created for the glory of relationship with God, is so great that in Jesus God took on human flesh and died that, as Paul says in Romans 8, nothing would separate us from God's love.

In addition to God being jealous in God's love of the covenantal people, God despises, we might even say has a holy hatred for, anything that threatens to destroy them. The problem posed by idols and the worship of other gods goes beyond distracting the people from worshiping the LORD, though it does that. The problem of idolatry is not simply that it deprives God of something God is due, though it does that as well. What the Lord knows is that turning to idols, and false gods, and the practices of worship that go with them holds the great and grave potential of causing the people to be trapped and ensnared. At the end of chapter 12, we read, "When the Lord your God has cut off before you the nations whom you are about to enter to dispossess them, when you have dispossessed them and live in their land, take care that you are not ensnared into imitating them, after they have been destroyed before you: do not inquire concerning their gods, saying, 'How did

these nations worship their gods? I also want to do the same.’ You must not do the same for the Lord your God, because every abhorrent thing that the Lord hates they have done for their gods. They would even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods.” In commanding the people to destroy anything that would lead them to idolatry, God guards the people against those very practices that would destroy them, that would keep them from flourishing, and that would deprive them of life. As one author puts it, “the outcome of idol worship is that those who participate in it become, in the same way [as the idols themselves], lifeless and without vitality.” God desires the destruction of anything that would make God’s people lifeless or that would bring about their demise.

God is so intent on our well-being, on our life and flourishing, which comes through Christ, that God would destroy or have us destroy anything that stands in the way. Let me say it another way: it is a blessed destruction that God would destroy anything that threatens to destroy you and me. The blessing of this kind of destruction is true life and freedom. The blessing of this destruction is hope. The blessing of this destruction is connecting to the true source of goodness and life rather than to false sources that ultimately have no power and are no help. You see, no matter what the idol is or what we make into a god to worship, the problem of idolatry is that it destroys us, it disconnects us from our source and life, and it leads to all manner of death. So God’s hatred of idols and idolatry is rooted in God’s desire for our good and God’s absolute love of us.

This is good news for us today, even if it gives us pause as we consider those things that too often become idols for us. It is good news that God would not and will not finally allow us to give ourselves to created things instead of to the creator. It is good news that God will work against our offering ourselves to things that in the end have no power to give life or hope or peace. It is good news, and a sign of God’s abundant and extravagant grace, when those things that stand in the way of our true flourishing—of our participating in the life of God in Christ—are removed and even destroyed.

I trust that even without me naming those things that all too commonly ensnare us, trap us, or grab our focus away from the Lord, the Spirit has stirred in you to reveal what too easily becomes an idol in your life. Maybe in this moment you can readily name those things that distract you from God, that ask for your allegiance and ultimate trust, and that demand something of you that belongs to God alone. Perhaps what easily becomes an idol for you is a commonly held national or American one. Perhaps it is an idol of your local community’s or of your family’s creation. Perhaps it is an idol unique to you. Whatever it is or whatever those things are that might be or become an idol for you, the compelling and good news today is the Lord our God has not and will not stand passively by as those things bring about your harm and destruction.

Through the Spirit, God is at work for your good and invites your response. So I invite you today to three courageous acts, even as the Spirit is working in you. Acknowledge before God the things that have too easily become idols for you. Turn from those idols even if it requires removal of them. And worship the One who created you, redeemed you, and gives you life. By Christ’s Spirit, may we all have the grace to acknowledge, turn, and worship. Amen.