

Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church
Brillion, WI

First Sunday after Christmas
January 1st, 2012

Isaiah 45:20-25

“Gather together and come; assemble, you fugitives from the nations. Ignorant are those who carry about idols of wood, who pray to gods that cannot save. Declare what is to be, present it— let them take counsel together. Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me. “Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear. They will say of me, ‘In the LORD alone are righteousness and strength.’ ” All who have raged against him will come to him and be put to shame. But in the LORD all the descendants of Israel will be found righteous and will exult.

I know I might take a lot of flak for this – especially from the guys here – but I watched a season finale of the Bachelorette once. It’s hard for me to admit that publicly, but I did. Now please don’t take this admission as an endorsement of the show. I tell you I watched because I want you to know how badly I felt for the poor guy whose name was Ben. He got down on his knee to propose to Ashley and said, “Will you marry me?” And instead of saying, “yes,” Ashley said, “Please stand up.” That’s all she needed to say. Ben and everybody else knew she was rejecting him. We all felt awful for Ben. I’m pretty sure that’s why they made him the new Bachelor. Poor Ben. There are not a lot worse things that can happen to a guy than having your marriage proposal shoved back in your face. I’ll bet if you asked Ben to reflect on that experience he’d tell us, “I picked the wrong girl. Hopefully, there’s someone else for me.” And I’d agree with him. He picked the wrong girl.

The only thing worse than picking the wrong girl is picking the wrong god. As rough as it is to have to put a diamond ring back in your pocket, I’m sure we’d all agree that picking the wrong god is going to have much worse consequences. Isaiah isn’t going to let that happen on his watch. He’s got a hard hitting, and, then, super comforting message to make sure we pick the Lord as our God for our eternal good.

First, we have to take a look at the hard-hitting part. As I read this section, try to notice how adversarial God sounds. **“Gather together and come; assemble, you fugitives from the nations. Ignorant are those who carry about idols of wood, who pray to gods that cannot save. Declare what is to be, present it— let them take counsel together. Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me.”** The Lord challenges his listeners to a debate. He says, “Take counsel together.” He means to say, “Put your heads together. Gang up on me in brainpower. See if you can come up with a god who did what I did. I predict the future. Does anyone else do that? I’m it. I’m the

only one. Can anyone one of your ignorant gods of wood do that? Nope. I'm the only one." So the Lord is imagining a debate where everyone puts their heads together to try to prove the authenticity of another god – any god really. It's interesting to me that the debate really is a mute point. It's the process that matters for these people. They need to go through the process through of thinking through this god issue to realize that there is only one God and his name is the Lord. It'd be like a top scientist saying people, "Put your heads together. Prove there is no gravity on earth. I dare you." The top scientist knows that everyone is going to come back with the same conclusion. The point is that these people go through the process of gathering information and seeing for themselves that gravity actually exists.

Not only does God challenge them with his words, he also challenges them with his tone. The Lord is adamant. You might even say that he is being adversarial. He says things like this, "Declare it. Try to find a god who can forecast like me. I dare you. Come to the conclusion that I'm the only Lord." It's like one big dare to prove the Lord wrong. That's God putting practical psychology into action. There's nothing like a dare to get people's brains humming. They would be forced to come to grips with their weak, dead idols.

Now, of course, we're far too modern to have spent time carving up some wood, wrapping it in gold leaf, and praying to it. We're far too smart to think that dead wood can hear, think, or be a guiding force in our futures. Maybe you sense my sarcasm. Let me ask you a key question. Who do you think Isaiah is preaching to? The guy sitting next you, right? This message was tailor made for me. And it's coming straight at you.

I'm the idolater. I'm the reason God is being adamant. I'm the one who has to go through the process of dumping my dead and dumb idols. I'm the one who values money too much. I'm the one who needs to come to terms with how deaf and dumb money is. Money does not care about me. Money cannot hear me. Money cannot control my future – let alone predict it. Money will desert me at all the times when I most need it – and at the most inopportune time, the last judgment. In fact, my loving relationship with money will leave me eternally broke, and worse, eternally pained.

Now, you may be saying to yourself, "But money's not one of my idols right now." Granted. My observation is that my idols are like Culvers. There's always a new flavor of the day. Yesterday my family was my greatest joy. Today basketball is what drives me. Tomorrow the Packers are my one and only focus. It's time to quit our Culver's like approach to God.

Idol dumping is a two-step process. First, recognize them. That was the hard-hitting part that we just went through. Second, well... I'll let Isaiah tell you. **"Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other." (v. 22)** Dump the idols. Replace them with God. That's Isaiah's two-step process. Dump the idols. Replace them with God. We're in the replacement phase. Look at

the back half of the verse. It says, "For I am God, and there is no other." The word, "for," looks at the first half of the verse and says, "This is why you need to complete the replacement phase. You do it because there is no other God." Here's another way to put it: the basis for replacing the idols is the Lord's divine exclusivity. There are no other options. The Lord is it.

And we are to embrace him in that role. "**Turn to me, (v. 22)**" Isaiah says. You could also translate those words, "Look to me." Either way, Isaiah is using a figure of speech. You can't turn and face an invisible, non-material being. How would you do that? Which direction would you face? It's a figure of speech for what's happening inside. It's a figure of speech for faith. You'd be saying the same thing as, "Look to me," if you said, "Believe in me." God says, "Look to me," because looking is a powerful way to illustrate faith.

In the book of Numbers, Moses shows us the power in the look of faith. Maybe you remember how the Israelites were saying, "We're sick of this miserable food and these awful conditions. God, you stink at taking care of us." So God sent venomous snakes among them, and many Israelites ended up dying from them. When Moses prayed for the Israelites God told him, "Set up a bronze snake on a pole. If anyone is bit, then they can look at it and they will live." And that's exactly what happened. They looked at the bronze snake and they lived. All they did is look. That's the power in a look.

I wonder if that story flashed through Isaiah's mind when he wrote, "**Look to me and be saved.**" (v. 22) Look to the Lord and live. The look of faith is that powerful. It saves. Saving is what it's all about. The Lord wants us to be saved. God spent time helping us ditch our idols *so that* he would be our exclusive God *so that* we would be saved. You being saved is the goal. Now you know how he pulls it off. Look to the Lord and live. It's just that simple. Look to the Lord and live. It's just that wonderful. Look to the Lord and live. I've heard people ask the question before, "What's in a look?" Maybe you have to. When it's you looking and when you're looking at the Lord, you know the answer. You're saved. That's what's in that look.

There was a man on death row. He was thinking about death and thinking about his eternal destiny. It wasn't death that scared him. What scared him was what came after death. It wasn't that he was uncertain about what would happen to him after his death – no, that definitely wasn't it. He was fairly certain of what would happen. That's what scared him. He knew he was not going to get favorable treatment from God. That is, until, the thief on the cross looked. Do you know what he saw? He saw a man who had once been cradled by Mary. He saw a sign over that man's head: Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. He looked and he believed. He believed that this Jesus heard him. He believed that Jesus cared about him. He believed that Jesus would control his future by giving him full forgiveness for his idol-a-day habit. He believed that Jesus would not desert him when he most needed it – at the last

judgment. He believed that a loving relationship with Jesus would leave him eternally blessed. All of that was in his look.

Now it's your turn to give Jesus the same look and receive the same results. Look to the Lord and be saved. That's what the Sunday after Christmas is for. Now that the presents are opened and the family visits are all over, God has given you this moment, by the power of his life-changing message, to make Jesus your exclusive God. On that basis, then, look to Jesus for forgiveness, and God guarantees, you will be saved. Amen.