

Sermon for Morning Prayer
The Fourth Sunday After Trinity

Lessons: ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-second Chapter of the Fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy. ⁱⁱ

“Give ear, O ye heavens, and I will speak; and hear, O earth, the words of my mouth. My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew, as the small rain upon the tender herb, and as the showers upon the grass: Because I will publish the name of the LORD: ascribe ye greatness unto our God. He is the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he. ...

“ ...

“Is not this laid up in store with me, and sealed up among my treasures? To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence; their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste. For the LORD shall judge his people, and repent himself for his servants, when he seeth that their power is gone, and there is none shut up, or left. And he shall say, Where are their gods, their rock in whom they trusted, Which did eat the fat of their sacrifices, and drank the wine of their drink offerings? let them rise up and help you, and be your protection. See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god with me: I kill, and I make alive; I wound, and I heal: neither is there any that can deliver out of my hand.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Romans. ⁱⁱⁱ

“Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things. But we are sure that the judgment of God is according to truth against them which commit such things. And thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God? Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance? But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God; Who will render

to every man according to his deeds: To them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life: But unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath, Tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile; But glory, honour, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile: For there is no respect of persons with God. For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law; (For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another;) In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: ““Where are their gods, the rock in which they took refuge, who ate the fat of their sacrifices, and drank the wine of their drink offerings? Let them rise up and help you, let them be your protection!”^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

To us, who are sitting comfortably in the Twenty-first Century, cushioned all around by unmistakable evidence of our technological superiority over past ages of mankind, some of the Old Testament’s cultural references are very difficult to access. In fact, many of them, such as Deuteronomy’s warning about the uselessness of material gods, seem irrelevant and not a few of them come across as just downright weird.

Prominent among these weirdnesses are the ancient prophets’ repeated reminders that the Israelites were living surrounded by pagans and were constantly being tempted to exchange the God of the Covenant for the many, helpful and easily understood gods of their neighbors or, at least, to affirm their neighbors’

religious lifestyle choices by simply adding those other gods to their One God and so to acknowledge diversity in worship.

For us, however, paganism is something from the distant past, or at least from the farthest and least-developed portions of our modern world. Thus all these ancient warnings seem to us to be just so much “white noise”, cluttering up the background.

Theme, and Development:

I suggest to you that the self-satisfied view I have just outlined, while a true reflection of what all too many 21st-Century Westerners actually think, is wholly incorrect. Paganism is not just a problem of ignorant ancient peoples; its underlying principles are not only alive and well among us but are flourishing in our up-to-date technological society.

And for us, as for the ancient Israelites, being immersed in a sea of pagans means that we are constantly being tempted, urged, and persuaded to adopt pagan beliefs and practices or, at the very least, to add them to our traditional monotheistic Judeo-Christian ones. The only problem with that is that, once one *adds* any other deity to the One God of the Jews and the Christians, one is no longer a Jew or a Christian, one is simply another pagan.

Still, this sounds to you like something that is completely irrelevant to your personal situation, doesn't it? After all, no one on your block is applying for a zoning variance to build a temple to Baal [**Buh-AWL**] and it's been quite some time since your college alumni association kicked off its annual get-together with a sacrifice to Ishtar [**ISH-tarr**], hasn't it?

So all this is just another boring fifteen minutes you are trying to endure politely by gritting your teeth and prying your eyelids open.

Unfortunately, it isn't quite that simple. Paganism is all around us and it is trying to creep into your personal life. So all this I am saying really does have something to do with you. To understand why this is so, though, we need to stop for a moment and examine just what paganism is. And it's not all about big stone or metal idols that sit in large, easily-identified marble temples.

Merriam-Webster's online dictionary gives, as its first definition of "pagan": "a follower of a polytheistic religion (as in ancient Rome)". So, paganism involves many gods as opposed to just the One, true God of the Jews and Christians. Yet many ancient pagans made individual choices to devote all of their personal worship to just one member of their culture's pantheon, yet in doing so, they assuredly remained pagans. So actually worshipping many gods is not the essential mark of the pagan although having many gods available to worship is.

True paganism is the conversion of natural forces or human aspirations into objects of worship. Thus every ancient pantheon had gods of the air, the sea, the sun, and so on, but also gods of love, sex, fertility, harvests, wine, and food. They also had the great public gods, who were the ones with the elaborate temples in the centers of the cities, but also the smaller, more intimate, household and family gods which were often the ones most assiduously worshipped and propitiated.

In our own time, the true pagan gods are like those ancient *lares et penates* [LARR-ays-ett-penn-AH-tays] or gods of the hearth and home. They are to be sought for in much more inconspicuous places than in the great old temples and fanes. The 19th-Century Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle wrote, "Show me the man you honor, and I will know what kind of man you are." The same principle applies to religion: show me what a man or woman truly honors, and I will know who his or her gods are.

We are all familiar with examples of this. All over our community, on this Sunday morning, there are those who have arisen early, prepared themselves to leave their homes, and traveled to places that are specially set aside, there to join together with other like-minded persons in formal, structured exercises that require specially-designed venues and for which their devotees wear special clothing and follow strict inherited rules.

Some of these groups, like ours, are meeting in buildings of various sizes, often but not always with steeples on their roofs, and usually marked by prominent crosses. Everyone passing by these meetings knows what is important this morning to those groups and, therefore, Who is their God.

Others of these groups are meeting on long, carefully-shaved lawns dotted with patches of sand and small flags; others on smaller paved rectangles marked with white borders and divisions and bisected by hanging nets. A moment's

thought will equally well distinguish what is important to these groups and, therefore, who or what their gods really are.

A hint: it is not a small hard white ball or even a slightly larger, fuzzy one; those are merely the instruments of their worship, somewhat like our chalices and patens. Rather, if you would find their gods, look at the ones who are being served by these various rituals. Where you find the ones being served and honored by what is going on, there you have found the gods being worshipped.

And, yes, you are correct: the gods being worshiped in the rituals I just described sometimes masquerade under names such as “health” and “fitness” but those are just disguises; the gods that are truly being worshipped at those times are the worshippers themselves.

What we have been trained to see as “sport” doesn’t seem, at first blush, to be a religion, does it? That is normal: the paganism of the modern world customarily camouflages itself as something other than formal religion. The key, again, is to look for natural forces or human qualities in which the worshipper puts all of his or her faith and to which the worshipper ascribes responsibility for the course of at least human events.

Stop a moment and remember what the world was like in 1988. Then, a considerable portion of the globe was under the domination of one particular religion that deified its conception of “history” as an impersonal force, in much the way that the Greeks and the Romans deified the wind or the sea. This divine “history” was pictured as the inexorable interplay of the competing interests of social classes and the religion that worshipped this competition, which it called “dialectic”, called itself “Marxist-Leninist Scientific Socialism”.

The political dominance of this religion lasted seventy-one years in Europe and Asia but, between 1988 and 1989, even its most ardent devotees had to recognize its catastrophic inability to explain or control the very events on which it was allegedly founded. As a result, it has virtually disappeared from our world and survives in any form in only in a very few places. It is still given lip-service, but no real credence, in Communist China and in North Korea but the only place it is still worshipped is in Western academia.

To replace this exploded system, new religions are rapidly growing up. For the more individually-minded, there is the “sport” to which we alluded earlier,

along with “fitness”, “leisure”, “entertainment”, and the ever-popular “keeping up with the Joneses”. For the more collectively-minded, there is “diversity”, “relevance”, “social progress”, “environmentalism”, and the latter’s very successful step-child, “global warming”.

This is not to say that the God of the Jews and Christians does not wish His worshippers to be healthy and fit, and therefore does not wish them to be careful in their diets or to use suitable leisure time for exercise. Still less is this to say that our God is not concerned that we care for our less-fortunate brothers and sisters or even for the environment. Rather, the distinction is one of motivation.

Conclusion:

The Jewish God, and to an even greater degree the Christian God, commands us to care for ourselves and for our world not because we worship those things but rather out of an obligation of *stewardship*, that is, the wise and respectful use of what He has given us. Thus those activities, pursued out of Christian motives and undertaken from a Christian perspective, are all part of our overall worship of that One Father and Creator.

Similarly, our God commands us to care for our fellow men and women not because we worship the ideal of social progress but rather out of an obligation of *love* for Him Who created us and loves us, an obligation that can only be fulfilled by demonstrating our love for His other people.

So in the end, the analysis of how far the modern form of stealth paganism has penetrated into one’s life depends not exclusively on an examination of *what* it is to which one devotes one’s time, treasure, and talents but equally on an appreciation of *why* one is a devotee of those things.

And remember, “devotee” means “worshipper”.

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ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxviii (PECUSA 1928).*

ⁱⁱ *Deuteronomy 32: 1-4, 34-39 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Romans 2: 1-16 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Deuteronomy 32: 37-38 (RSV).*

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