

SERMON TITLE: "Lord of Heaven and Earth" (Series: "50 Days for the Earth")
SERMON TEXT: Acts 17:16-34
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: May 17, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

This past week, a number of our church members were here at the church property doing volunteer ministries. Some did inside projects. A few were doing maintenance on the church building itself. Others were in the church yard—mowing the lawn, running the tractor and weed whacker in the outer areas, pulling weeds from flower beds, and continuing the sprinkler system repairs.

Kristen and Steve Bell put a lot of time in the church garden. You may recall that the Bells received a \$15,000 Earthkeepers grant from the United Methodist Committee on Relief for their SWIFTS Project. "SWIFTS" stands for "Sustainable Water Initiative—Food To Share." The Marriott-Slaterville City part of the pressurized secondary water isn't ready yet, but our own church watering lines are now up and running with an electrical system to time the watering. So, we won't have to open canal gates and flood irrigate at weird hours of the day and night anymore, and the water will be available when needed and in just the right places without waste. With all that in order, Steve and Kristen began planting peas, beans, onions, and more.

We also had a couple guys here from *The Deseret News* this week. The photographer and writer are preparing a story about our First UMC ministries with the bees and the community garden, and our Christian commitment to caring for the environment. Whenever that news story appears, I'll send out the link so you all can read it. We can be proud that our congregation has this positive relationship with God's creation.

Throughout these 50 days between Easter and Pentecost, we've been celebrating the 50th anniversary of Earth Day by focusing our worship themes on both resurrection and the care of the earth.

We continue that today. So let's dig into this story in Acts 17 about the Apostle Paul and see what it means to worship the Lord of heaven and earth.

1--DON'T WORSHIP IDOLS; WORSHIP THE LORD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

As this scripture begins, the traveling missionary Paul had just arrived in Athens. While he was there waiting for Silas and Timothy to arrive, Paul immediately noticed that the city was full of idols. So his conversation and preaching to the Athenians naturally addressed his concern, as he called them to repent and turn away from their idols.

Having been raised as a "Hebrew of Hebrews," Paul's Jewish faith clearly taught him that idols were wrong. From at least the time of Moses and the Ten Commandments, the Jews were taught not to think of God as a piece of stone, wood, or metal that could be shaped and limited by human hands. The Lord of heaven and earth is the one who created all those natural resources, and certainly is not created from them or by them. The Lord of heaven and earth is far greater than any temple, shrine, or statue.

Most of us today would scoff at the idea of worshiping an idol. But we need to realize that these statues weren't really intended to be deities themselves. Maybe some unsophisticated people thought so, but most folks would have understood them to be symbols of power. In the most positive sense, the idols were images of virtues and strengths. Inasmuch as those virtues and strengths were helpful and hopeful, their symbolism could possibly serve some purpose. But—if those objects of devotion were symbolic of narrow-minded prejudices, evil purposes, and oppressive power—then, certainly, those idols would mislead and cause harm to their worshipers.

2—DON'T WORSHIP THE IDOL OF RACISM

This past week, I read an interesting article in the Christian *Sojourners* magazine. The Mennonite pastor who wrote the article told of the Bible studies she and another pastor held in Raleigh, North Carolina. For each of six weeks, they traveled around the city of Raleigh and held a Bible study at

the base of a different Confederate statue. Each week's study covered a different Old Testament scripture that told about the errors of idol worship. Each study also told the history of that particular Confederate statue and the evils of white supremacy that had caused that statue to be erected and honored.

Out here in Utah, we don't have Confederate statues on our city corners or in our parks. But the article did make me wonder: In what ways might we still be erecting monuments to racism? In what ways might we be worshipping a god of bigotry and oppression? In what ways might we be limiting God to our type of folks, instead of worshipping the great and expansive Lord who made and loves *all* the creatures of heaven and earth?

3—DON'T WORSHIP THE IDOL OF SACRED COWS

Of course, idolatry isn't just about racial issues. Do you remember the Old Testament story of when Moses went up on the mountain, so God could give him the Ten Commandments? While Moses was up there discerning God's will, his Hebrew people down at the base of the mountain got impatient and nervous. Moses' brother Aaron was in charge, but the people were putting a lot of pressure on him. Finally, the urgency to "do something, even if it's wrong" won the day. And Aaron led the way for the people to create and worship a golden calf.

As if the idea of worshipping an object weren't bad enough, what made it even worse was that the calf was a symbol of worship in Egypt. So, essentially, Aaron and the Hebrews were falling back to the beliefs and values of their oppressors. Instead of calmly waiting for Moses to return, instead of patiently awaiting God's instructions that would lead them forward into their new life of liberty, instead of putting their hope in God, who had promised them a new home in a new land—in their great anxiety, they clung instead to those backward-looking notions that had enslaved and oppressed them.

Wow! That gives us some pause, doesn't it? In our frustrations and stress, in our impatience and anxiety, what do we do? Do we also create idols to worship? Do we allow ourselves to value and

deify the very principles and powers that would hold us back and hold us down? In our discomfort with uncertain waiting, would we rather “do something, even if it’s wrong”? In our fear of the unknown future, do we retreat into old ways of bondage? Do we allow sacred cows of the past to oppress us still?

I think we especially need to be aware of this problem in our current time of coronavirus, when we’re all so impatient for things to return to normal, to get back to the way they used to be. For sure, when the future is so uncertain, there’s some comfort in the past, even in “the devil we know.” But, as Paul preached to the Athenians, our life can’t be focused on those set-in-stone certainties from prior times. The resurrection of Jesus calls us to be forward-looking people who are willing to trust God to do some new things. The resurrection of Jesus calls us to repent and let go of our sacred cows and embrace the hope-filled life that leads to a positive future with the Lord of heaven and earth.

4—DON’T WORSHIP THE IDOL OF PLASTIC

Today, because of the radical changes that are happening on earth and in our earth’s atmosphere, we people of God are being called to recognize that the Lord of heaven and earth needs to smash a few more idols and free us to worship and live in even newer ways. Our habits of energy usage are causing the oppression and death of many species of plant and animal life. This two-month coronavirus shutdown has given the earth a little reprieve from air pollution caused by factories and traffic, but as we open businesses back up and return to burning fossil fuels, our air will become dirtier again. The atmospheric blanket of carbon dioxide will get thicker, and our earth will become warmer and warmer. As the heat increases, water will evaporate faster from the oceans—causing more intense storms, rainfall, and flooding near the coasts; and drying out the land in other places. Deserts will increase in size, and droughts and wildfires will become worse. Around the world, food insecurity will increase. Just like the coronavirus snuck up on us while we weren’t looking, so is this climate crisis coming.

I'm not telling you this because I want to stress you out beyond what you can bear. I'm telling you because the Lord of heaven and earth is trying to get our attention and help us think about the future. God raised Jesus from the dead to live a new life and to lead us into that newer, better way that provides hope for ourselves and our grandchildren. Resurrection faith isn't just for some other-worldly heaven after we die. Resurrection faith is also the hope and belief that God cares about abundant life on this earth right now and in the decades and centuries to come.

And just like the Lord of heaven and earth isn't manufactured out of gold, silver, or stone, our future can't be created out of material goods like plastic. I'm sure you've heard of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, where the currents have pushed plastic pieces into a concentrated area. It's big. Some say it's the size of France; others say it's the size of Texas or twice the size of Texas. It's not an island of floating debris that's easily measured; it's more like a sea of plastic soup that the fish are eating. So when we eat the fish, guess what we're eating?

I know right now it's hard to reduce our plastic usage. A few weeks ago I took my cloth bags to the grocery store and the checker and bagger weren't allowed to touch them. Because of the coronavirus, everything seems more sanitary if it is wrapped in a one-use plastic or styrofoam container. But whenever we can, we're going to have to focus our attention on reduction of waste. The other day, I found a website where you can track your personal use of plastic, and make goals for cutting back. We need to do this, so someday someone doesn't come to our city, our county, our lake, or our ocean and say that it was full of plastic idols.

CONCLUSION

We can't allow ourselves to worship and value symbolic and material things as if they were God. They aren't. God is the creator who made us and everything else. God raised Jesus from the dead to show us that there can be a renewed and better future ahead for us. So, let's put away our idols and worship the Lord of heaven and earth.