

Smashing Idols, Intro

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. I want you to think back if you would to the night of **November 8, 2016**. The date may not ring a bell, but if you think about it, you likely remember it. Many of us probably spent the evening doing something like this: SNL video?
1. However you felt about the outcome, November 8, 2016, was a historic moment. It was a revealing moment. It was a gut-check moment. But **depending on your own perspective, it may not have been a surprising one.**
 2. One of the things that this sketch brilliantly illustrated was the impact of our perspectives on our understanding of what was taking place. The white people in this sketch, likely professionals, well educated, urban liberals who saw themselves probably as post-racial, LGBTQ inclusive, and supporters of women's rights were shocked in a way that the people of color were not. For the people of color here, the fact that we are still living in a country in which racial tension can be easily stoked, and white-supremacy is effective in generating fear and consolidating power, was not a surprise. **Your life experience impacts your perspective and your perspective impacts what you can see.**
 3. When this night happened, our church had been holding public services for about six months. **We were a newborn community, and here we found ourselves wrestling from early in our existence with how our different perspectives impacted what we saw.** A significant portion of our community, probably at least a third at that point, was non-white. Yet as a community formed largely by folks who were emerging from evangelical church backgrounds, we were compelled to wrestle with the way that white evangelicals overwhelmingly supported Trump, leaving many of our evangelical brothers and sisters of color feeling betrayed. **As a community that from the beginning has been fully LGBTQ inclusive and home to a growing number of queer and trans folks, we understood in an even deeper way how that position put us at combative odds with the traditions we emerged from.** As a pastor formed in these traditions, I felt my own need to reckon with the unsavory parts of my upbringing. I needed to examine **how my experience had impacted my perspective and how my perspective impacted what I could see.**
- B. **Today, we're starting a new teaching series here at Haven:** a series which is revisiting a conversation we had as a community a couple of years ago, in the aftermath of that momentous night. It's a conversation about this very dynamic, **about the ways our experiences impact our perspectives and our perspectives impact what we see.** I want to revisit this conversation right now for a couple of reasons.
1. In part, I think it's useful because **the makeup of our community has changed significantly in the last couple of years since we last openly had it.** A lot of you weren't here for this series the first time we went through it. For those who were, this conversation felt so important to informing the character of what we've become and what we're becoming, that it seems worth bringing more folks into it, including some of you who are here for the first time today and wondering what this Haven community is all about. I hope this is a good moment to spend some time with us and discern that.
 2. But this isn't just about getting newer folks up to speed. I also want to revisit this conversation almost two years after we first had it, because **even for those of us who were here for it, I don't think we said all that we need to say.** I think there's more to unpack on this topic. I have more to learn, as I think all of us do, and that will likely be the case for a long time. This may be a conversation over time we come back to as a community again and again.

- II. So let's return to this question of perspectives. Some social scientists suggest that we have **metaphorical glasses** that are made up of "**frames**" and "**lenses**". The "frames" in this illustration are the larger macro parts of our identity: race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc. The "lenses" that fit within them that are more individual. These include our personalities, our birth orders, our individual life experiences, and so on. The frames and lenses work together to shape our perspective on the world.
1. This is essentially the **chief insight of postmodernism**, right? Modernism thought we could have an objective view of the world, but postmodernism reminds us that there's more than one way to see things. True objectivity is really hard if not impossible.
 2. And while I think most of us would acknowledge at this point, that there are various perspectives through which we experience the world, **we may not always be aware of how imbalanced these can be**. The reality is that rarely are these different perspectives held in tension well. Instead, problematic patterns emerge. As many social scientists have discovered, **societies tend to elevate the frames and lenses (or points of view) of certain groups, and diminish the views of others. One group's perspective dominates and is considered "normal", while other perspectives are seen as abnormal, or exotic**. Scholars who study social group dynamics recognize this pattern as being central ultimately to **systems of oppression**.
 3. So that's a big word we hear thrown around a lot. What do I mean when I talk about oppression? Robin DiAngelo, is an author, speaker, and an academic in the field of Race theory, who says that "**Oppression describes a set of policies, practices, traditions, norms, definitions, cultural stories, and explanations that functions to systematically hold down one social group to the benefit of another social group**." Oppression is less of an individual dynamic, it's really a group dynamic - a system-wide social dynamic. It's not about simply our individual lenses, it's also about the frames our lenses are placed in.
 4. Now this happens along a variety of spectrums: there is oppression between men and women, commonly known as sexism. Oppression between whites in the US and people of color, known as racism. Oppression between able-bodied folks and differently-abled folks, that's able-ism. Many of us, wearing our own Bay Area sets of glasses are familiar with these concepts, and can probably list other systems of oppression we have seen at play, or that we've actively been a part of trying to dismantle.
 5. But if you're anything like me, **many of us have been mostly exposed to these conversations** about competing perspectives and systems of oppression **outside of church**; away from the sphere of considering how our lives of faith play a role in these questions. We may have talked openly about these issues in the classroom, or in the workplace. But to talk about oppressive systems in our churches meant "getting political", which at least in the tradition I was formed in, was considered taboo. For this reason, when we at Haven started to ask questions that challenged this taboo, a number of folks couldn't hang with the conversation, and ended up finding spiritual homes elsewhere.
 6. But despite the challenge of talking frankly about these questions here, I feel now, more than ever, that there are compelling reasons why we, as a young church, must honestly and urgently reckon with these issues, and examine the lenses and frames at work in the context of our faith community. I'll give you two.
 - a) **You can't fix what you don't acknowledge**. Systems of oppression replicate until directly confronted. If we try to simply remain "neutral", we'll end up reinforcing an oppressive status quo.

b) **Our faith gives us a unique perspective and an empowering presence in the work of confronting oppression.** As people of faith, I believe we are compelled by a Divine Spirit that is committed to the flourishing of all creation leading us forward, empowering us to be a part of the change we want to see. And we have a rich theological landscape to build upon. To leave this work of dismantling oppressive systems outside of the church means to miss out on the potent tools our faith has given us to tear the systems down.

7. **No, our Bible doesn't use metaphors like "frames" and "lenses" that our social scientists point to.** The texts within our Bible were written long before either of those things had been invented. But our Sacred texts do talk extensively about **the problems that come when we humans take things that we create and become invested in, and we elevate them to the status of Ultimate Truth. Of Ultimate Reality.** Of Divinity, you could say. In the world of the Bible, **this was known as "Idolatry".**

B. Understanding Idolatry.

1. Now most of us have probably heard the word **idolatry**, and likely what comes to mind is **the specific version we saw in the ancient world: the worship or veneration of "idols", generally physical statues or icons that had been crafted for this purpose.** This practice was nearly universal in the ancient world, and we see it archaeologically in the earliest societies from the Egyptians, to the Greeks, to the Romans, to Ancients throughout Asia, Africa and the Americas.
2. Beginning with the stories in the *Torah* of the Hebrew Bible, the **Jewish and Christian view has long been negative.** We see it in the first two of the 10 commandments:
 - a) ***"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. 3 "You shall have no other gods before me. 4 "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God."*** (Exodus 20:1-5)
3. Yet, despite this clear prohibition, the stories make it clear that **idolatry is something the people of God continued to struggle with throughout their history.** While it might seem pretty cut and dry to us: don't make a statue and bow down to it - that was really hard to live by, particularly for people in power, and much of the travails of Israel throughout the Hebrew Bible are connected to their leaders bringing idols in again.
4. **Easy to think about idolatry as something antiquated.** Perhaps even silly. Most of us don't make literal statues and carvings and bow down to them. The whole idea seems ridiculous. But perhaps some of that is because we don't really understand how these idols functioned.
 - a) Now these practices were widespread and perhaps not universal in how different communities understood what they were doing, but anthropologists have made discoveries that tell us a lot about what idolatry seemed to accomplish for many who practiced it. What they've discovered is that often the folks who made these statues understood that the statues themselves were manmade, not divine, (they didn't forget that they made the statue, rather than it drop down from heaven) but they hoped that if they made these idols, whatever deity they were paying homage to, would come and inhabit their idol, bringing it to life in a sense, and becoming, in that way, a god or goddess that they could work for their favor. They could look at this carving on their altar and they could perform a certain prayer or ritual or sacrifice, feed it something

that the god or goddess was known to like, and they have assurance that they would be provided for. Through their own handiwork, **they could induce divine action.**

b) **To make an idol was to try to make divinity work for you.**

5. We may not carve things out of wood or stone and hope they'll come to life and do our bidding, but I think that left to our own devices, we do still want to arrange the world in a way that works for us.

a) **Could the frames and lenses we see reality through, and the systems we establish to support certain sets of metaphorical glasses over others, be a way of us creating our own means of controlling our realities and securing power in the world, similar to what the ancients were doing with the physical tokens they designed and then idolized?**

b) ***Perhaps we haven't gotten over making idols; maybe we've just gotten better at it.***

c) **Patriarchy, White Supremacy, Heteronormativity, Even some of our religious systems and structures...might these all be examples of idols in our age?** And if so, how might we be called, as people of faith, to engage with these contemporary idols?

d) This essentially is the question we're going to be exploring in the weeks to come through **this series called "Smashing Idols"**. Each week for the rest of the series we're gonna take a topic in contemporary life: a place in which we see one point of view elevated in a way that is oppressive to those who may not share it, **and we're gonna ask, how might idolatry be at play, and what might breaking out of that idolatry look like?**

6. Today, with the rest of this introductory talk, **we're gonna spend our time considering briefly the actual practice of idolatry for the ancients, specifically looking at a story from the Hebrew Bible that's one of the most famous accounts of idolatry we see in our Sacred texts.** As we look at it, I hope we'll discover at least a little about why our ancient mothers and fathers struggled with this temptation to worship idols, and what they were trying to accomplish as they did it, which I hope will give us some guideposts on our own journey going forward of discovering and confronting idols in our midst.

III. The Story -We're going to look at **Exodus 32**

A. Here's the setup: **God has delivered God's people from slavery through stunning acts of supernatural power.** 10 plagues. Parting the sea. Now they are camped at Sinai. They have been covenanted to God anew. They've seen God appear on the Mountain and talk to Moses. Moses has been meeting with God for 40 days and 40 nights on the mountain. Thus far, Moses has been the intermediary between God and the people. But God's been a little busy lately and the people are getting antsy.

B. *When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him."*

2 Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." 3 So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. 4 He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are

your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”

5 When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord.” 6 So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.

7 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. 8 They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, ‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’

A few points to notice:

1. Idolatry can come when people lose sight of God at work in their midst.

- a) Hebrew people felt like God was too long in coming. They were anxious. 40 days and night was a long time not to be given a relay of what was up from Moses.
- b) So **they decided to take matters into their own hands**. There’s something really relatable I think to what ancients were doing when they made idols. They didn’t see Yahweh at work, and so they thought it was time to get involved. To make divinity work for them.
- c) This is something I think particularly those of us who come from a White, American, Protestant background can relate to. In my home I grew up hearing the phrase **“God helps him who helps himself.”**
 - (1) **May be connected to truth**. Certainly there is a case to be made that God invites people to play a real role in caring for creation, but our participation with God in this can easily get distorted. Specifically, **our anxiety and need for control can distort our capacity to actually follow God’s leading**.
 - (2) As the story shows us, **even our religious leaders can be complicit**. Aaron, for the Hebrew People, was the forefather of the Priests. He’s a hugely important figure in the history of Jewish worship. But in this story, his complicity in creating idols demonstrates how easily even those who are genuinely called by God to lead can be led astray, and find themselves corruptly practicing idolatry.
 - (3) Much of what we have to untangle as we consider systems of oppression as idols, are the ways that religion has participated in them perhaps **as a means of gaining control where faith leaders and institutions felt a lack of it**.
 - (4) Last week we got the news of yet another act of violence performed to desecrate the sanctuary of people of faith: antisemitic violence at a Chabad in Poway, California. This hits close to home for me. Poway is the town next door to the San Diego county town I grew up in. My hometown, Escondido, is the home to the mosque that the Poway shooter also attacked recently. And what we know now about this young man is that a good chunk of his justification for what he was doing was connected to his understanding of the Christian faith, and his need to defend it. As people of faith, we have to acknowledge and confront our complicity in religious systems that fuel violence. We can’t allow our fear for our own communities, our worry over a loss of control or respect in the public square, our concern about shrinking numbers in the pews or smaller tithing bases to pay our bills, to compel

- us to participate in systems that ultimately wield power by violating the sacredness of others. To do so is not to honor God, but I believe to break the divine heart.
- (5) We have to be aware that idolatry can come when people lose sight of God at work in their midst.
- d) **One Beginning Response: *We choose to accept (even expect) mystery, ambiguity, and uncertainty as natural components of endeavors of faith.***
- e) What if the people at the foot of the mountain hadn't been so impatient and insecure? What if they had stood in the mystery, waiting just a bit longer for revelation to come from the cloud on the mountain? How different would the story have been?
2. The second thing I notice that seems meaningful: **Idolatry can come as those who receive resources become those who grasp and exploit them.**
- a) **The jewelry - where did it come from?**
- (1) Exodus 12: ***"The Israelites did as Moses instructed and asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing. 36 The Lord had made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians."***
- (2) Feels like a real waste! **God secured the Israelites reparations**, but rather than looking to Yahweh for how they should appropriate those, they took matters into their own hands.
- (3) How often this has been the story throughout history, **those who have been released from oppression turn and oppress someone else?** Rather than learning from their oppression and living in a way that furthers justice and equity for all, folks concentrate their resources in ways that seek to build their own power?
- (4) All of us may have circumstances in which our fortunes change. In which we find ourselves with power we didn't have before. But if we're not careful, idolatry can come as we who receive resources become those who grasp and exploit them.
- b) **One Beginning Response: *Reflect on the ways we're received our resources and the ways we can commit to regularly sharing them to directly participate in greater generosity and equity throughout God's creation.***
3. **Idolatry can come as we change the narrative.** Folks changed the story of what they had just been through. They changed their history, from the deliverance of Yahweh, the God in the Pillar of cloud and fire, to the deliverance of this thing they had made. This fed their own ego, but it did not represent truth.
- a) **We live in the era of "Fake News" where the battle over what narrative will be broadly accepted as true is being fought on a moment-to-moment basis in real time.** Fact checkers at all the news sites are working over time these days. In such a setting, particularly, we are at real risk of falling prey to false narratives that then give rise to or uphold systems of oppression.
- b) **One Beginning Response: *We seek truth in our narratives by incorporating diverse perspectives, even when some of those perspectives are unflattering or even painful to us.*** This goes back to what we were talking about at the beginning. *Your life experience impacts your perspective and your perspective impacts what you can see.* If we're having a hard time seeing the truth, then we need more perspectives. We need to recognize that there are prophets in our midst who can see more clearly, who can show us a better way, and who will intercede for us rather than complicity support our idolatry.

- c) These are the ones to follow. At the end of this story, Moses comes down from the mountain, and he has been outside of this encounter, and so he can see as he returns how far his community has fallen, how deeply they've offended the Divine heart. He pleads with God to deal mercifully with them, and he speaks to them and calls them to account; he calls Aaron to wake up and recognize his mistake.
 - d) In the same way, there are brothers and sisters today calling the church to the same work, to divest from the idolatry of our day and turn our focus to the liberating God who is right here in the cloud ready to connect with us and bring us all into freedom and life. This often means listening to those prophets from the margins - those who have been oppressed and can help us see the oppression more clearly for what it is.
- C. **Trying to take control as we lose sight of God in our midst, receiving resources and then grasping them tightly, allowing our stories to shift to serve new agendas: all of these are ways that we, like our forefathers and mothers, can struggle with this sin of idolatry.** And when we do, I believe the effect is worse than that we simply have done something bad that we should feel guilty for. **The tragic effect of idolatry is that it blocks our view of God.** When our eyes are transfixed on an a cheap idol, we miss the beauty, the transcendence, the awe that a God that is beyond our creating or even imagining can reveal. **When we try to make divinity work for us, we can't receive the transforming grace of divinity working on us and in us.**
- D. This is my invitation to all of us this summer. **Let us enter a season together where we examine our own lenses and frames, where we try to see how they're limiting or distorting our view of God.** May we allow this Divine one to call us out of idolatry into a truer kind of worship. A worship that connects us with this God who is committed not to systems that oppress, but to relationships that liberate and heal. **May that be the life experience we are engaging in the weeks to come, and may all of us find that there is more we can see because of it. Amen.**

IV. Questions for Reflection and Conversation

- A. How are you aware that your perspective impacted what you could see in a way that was different from others? How have you been shaped by another's unique perspective?
- B. How have you seen the elevating or suppressing of a person's (or group's) perspective be oppressive?
- C. Do you resonate with any of the factors that helped lead to idolatry in the story? Have you struggled with losing sight of God in your midst, grasping at what you've received, or being led by changed narratives? What effect did that have on you and your journey of faith?

V.