

Modern Day Idols: The Idol of Power

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Reverend Peter Jonker

Genesis 16:1-16

As I read this story, one question leaps out at me. Maybe it leaps out at you too. That question is: What in heaven's name was Sarai thinking? Offering your servant girl to your husband as a way to produce offspring?! In what universe did she think this would turn out well? The second question I have when I read this passage is closely related to the first, and that's "Abram, what in heaven's name were you thinking saying yes to this proposal!? In what universe did you think this would work out well?!"

So what were Abram and Sarai thinking?! They were thinking, "I really really really want a baby. We have been waiting so long, and we just want a child and heir."

It has been 11 years since they first left their home in Ur. They left home because Abram had had a message from God, "Sarai, God has promised us two things. He's going to give us land and he's going to give us children. Children like the stars in the sky!" So, on a spiritual high, they'd left their families behind and went searching for the promise. Every night since they'd left home, Abram prayed the same sort of prayer: "O great Lord and God remember your promises to us. Bring us to your land, and give us a child." Every night he prayed this. That was 11 years ago. Do you know how much land they had? None. And do you know how many children they had? Zero. And Sarai's biological clock was ticking. Actually, it's more accurate to say that her biological clock had ticked. She was 86 years old. At this point Sarai literally laughed any time someone talked about her having kids. Truth be told, sometimes she had a hard time not laughing during Abram's prayer. So Abram and Sarai do a desperate thing. God is moving too slowly for them, so they take things into their own hands. They decide to give the promise a push. They don't like how God is driving, so they try to take hold of the wheel. Sarai holds out Hagar to Abram and says, 'try this.' Abram takes a bite, and mayhem ensues.

Did you pick up on the Adam and Eve reference there? That was intentional. Because, when he describes Abram and Sarai's decision here, the author of Genesis wants you to think of Adam and Eve's mistake in the garden. The language of the two passages is deliberately parallel. In verse 2 of our passage, in the original Hebrew, it says that Abram listened to the voice of his wife. That's the same language used in Genesis 3:17 to describe what Adam did when he took the fruit and ate it. In verse three of our passage, it describes how Sarai took Hagar and gave her to him as a wife. That's the same language as Genesis 3:6 where Eve took the fruit and gave it to her husband.

Why the parallels? Because the spiritual dynamic in both passages is the same. In both passages you have two people impatient with God's ways and God's timing, and who respond by taking things into their own hands. In the garden, Adam and Eve were being trained by God and were maturing in knowledge of good and evil. But the serpent offered them a shortcut. "Eat the fruit and, you will have instant knowledge of good and evil." "You don't need God! You can find your own way!" In our passage, Abram and Sarai say to themselves, "Let's not wait on God for a baby. Hagar can get us an instant family." The results of the power grab are also the same. In Genesis 3 Adam and Eve end up sniping at each other blaming each other. "That woman caused me to sin." In our passage you see the same thing: "You are responsible for the wrong I

am suffering.” In both passages, humans try to take the wheel and push on the accelerator. In both passages they crash the car.

Today’s idol is the idol of power. Today we think about the trouble we cause when we take things into our own hands. Power is a special kind of idol. It’s what Tim Keller calls a ‘deep idol.’ That means power can be the true idol underneath a surface idol. People who obsess on money or sex or achievement, can actually be worshipping power. Keller tells a story about a man he’d known back in his college days. In college, this man had been a player. He would aggressively seduce women on campus, but as soon as they fell for him, he would dump them. For him it was about the conquest. It was about demonstrating his power over them. Shortly after college, he became a Christian and entered the world of ministry. He gave up womanizing. Which was great! But he never gave up his need to be in control. In Bible studies, he would always have to be the leader even if he were not designated so. He was argumentative and dominating. He was always trying to show that he was the smartest guy in the room. In giving his life to Christ, he had surrendered his surface idol—sex—but he hadn’t given up his deeper idol, power.

How do we define the idolatry of power? How about this. Power becomes an idol when we reject God’s means and we reject God’s timing, and we replace them with our own means and our own timing. We make an idol of power when we reject God’s means (his methods) and God’s timing (his schedule) and choose our own method and our own schedule. That’s clearly what happens with Abram and Sarai. They don’t like God’s timing. God is going too slow! They’ve waited 11 years for a child and they’re not going to wait any more! And they don’t like God’s means. Sarai thinks she’s way too old to have a child. And so they grab Hagar. They reject God’s timing and his means and take power into their own hands.

This pattern repeats in Scripture. In the story of the golden calf, Moses has been up on the mountain for a long time talking to God, and the rest of the Israelites are sick of waiting, they are tired of all this time in the wilderness, and so they make the golden calf. They look for quicker results. Instant gratification. They reject God’s timing and God’s means and take power into their own hands. Disaster. The prodigal son is sick of his father’s slow old-fashioned ways. All the long hours and chores at the farm. He wants the good life to start now and so he demands his share of the inheritance. He rejects his father’s timing and his means and he takes power into his own hands. Also disaster. It happens again and again.

And if I may be so bold, it’s no surprise that it happens again and again, because God’s means and God’s timing are often hard for us to accept. God’s means is sacrificial love. God’s means is cross-shaped love. Jesus could have called down legions of angels to conquer his foes, but instead he chooses to die for his enemies. He doesn’t clobber them; he offers them grace. And sometimes, when evil seems to be having its way in the world we think, “Jesus maybe you should have tried the legions of angels. I could use a legion of angels right now.” God’s timing seems slow. Sometimes it’s really slow. Frustratingly slow. “How long O Lord!!” cries the psalmist. “How long how long how long! My child is struggling! My husband’s anxiety is crippling him. Lord I pray every night. Lord I’ve given up so much for you! I’ve tried to serve you every day and nothing changes, I’m so tired of waiting.”

You see the idol of power. The idol of power isn’t just something that tempts people in leadership positions, kings, governors and CEOs. It’s something we wrestle with every day in the smaller struggles of life. Every day we find ourselves in pressured situations where we wonder about God’s slow timing, and we wonder whether sacrificial love is really the most excellent way, and we are tempted to take power into our own hands. We’re tempted to change the timing

and the means. A parent is frustrated with his child's boisterous, hyper-active behavior. They're always running around the house and yelling and making a mess. Right after a hard day at work, the kids are chasing each other and they bump into dad and he spills his drink. In a spasm of anger, he grabs the kid by the shoulder and shakes him and says, "What's the matter with you! Why are you always such a clumsy oaf!!" Just for a second, dad rejects God's timing and God's means, and he takes hold of the idol of power. Damage is done.

I remember that years ago, and this is probably 25 years ago now, we were talking with friends of ours from college about their old church far away in another state, and how they liked it there. They said they liked it, but they worried about the minister. He seemed unhappy. In fact, they said there was an incident in a sermon where the pastor wanted to illustrate a point in the sermon, so he said to the congregation, "Everyone, please turn to Luke 10 in your Bibles show I can show you what I mean." Well, people were a little slow, and some people weren't getting their Bibles out at all. So the pastor blurted out, "C'mon people! This isn't television! Don't just sit there!" For just a second, out of frustration, the pastor took hold of the idol of power. He tried to bring change by different means. He 'zinged' his flock. Do you think it worked? Not so much. It made our friends a little uneasy with their minister, made them take a step back from him. Made them question his affection for them.

Do you know what's at the very bottom of the idolatry of power? If we dig down to the very bottom of this idol, do you know what we find? We take hold of the idol of power because we've given up on the power of God. We choose to do things our way, because we don't expect God to do anything at all. That's an honest answer. We've been waiting so long and nothing seems to be happening. We look around in the world that seems to be run by the grabbers and the pushers and the yellers, so we start grabbing and pushing and yelling. We give up on Jesus and we choose Barabbas. Pilate says, 'behold your king' and we say, 'take him away, crucify him! We have no king but Caesar! Caesar's power is the only power we know!' When we grasp at the idol of power we look strong, and we act strong, but right underneath the surface of all that swagger, we are afraid, desperate and alone.

We may give up on God and his power. But God never gives up on us. Abram and Sarai make a mess. They are angry with each other. Hagar is young, pregnant, homeless and wandering in the desert. Who cleans up the mess? Not Abram and Sarai! They're too busy bickering at home. God does the dirty work. He sends his angel into the mess. The angel finds Hagar in the desert. He speaks tenderly to her, makes promises to her, and blesses her. God takes the mess and bends it towards blessing.

It's what God always does. We try to take the wheel, we make a mess, and God cleans it up. It's what he did 2000 years ago. The mess has accumulated. All the wreckage of our attempts to take history in our own hands has built up over the centuries. A burning dump of sin and misery. This time, God didn't send an angel to clean up the mess, this time he sent his son. Jesus goes down into the middle of the mess, and he meets it with the outpouring of his sacrificial love. He lays down his life for us. And now, by the power of his spirit, by the power of his grace, by the power of sacrificial love, by power made perfect in weakness, by power that empties itself taking the form of a servant, he is slowly-in his good time-making all things new.

How do you guard yourself from the idol of power? Historically we practice the practice of what we call the 'passive disciplines.' Some disciplines of faith are active-service, worship, prayer-we *do* those things. God is involved too, but we are active in those disciplines. The passive disciplines are the ones where we deliberately stop acting. The stopping is the discipline. For example, the discipline of Sabbath-where we stop acting and rest. Practicing Sabbath teaches

us many things, but one of the most important is that it physically forces us to acknowledge that we are not in charge. Another passive discipline is silence. We practice silence when we stop talking, go to a quiet place and just listen. We listen to what God is saying, feel the gift of life rising and falling in our breath, where we turn our thoughts away from what we have to do and from all our worries and we hear the voice of Jesus say, “Sit still my child. Stop squirming and worrying. I am here. I love you. I have always loved you. I will always love you. Wherever you go today, and whatever you face. I am there.”

When we try to grab the wheel, when we fall on our knees before the idol of power, we tell ourselves that we are our only hope. That the only thing standing between us and disaster is the strength of our hands. What a terrible, lonely lie that is. The truth is far better. We are children of God. We are frail. We’re dependent. Our power is limited, but we are beloved of God and he will never let us go. To him be the kingdom, the power and the glory forever.

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