

Modern Day Idols: Nationalism

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Daniel 6:1-14, Philippians 3:15-21

All along in this series we've been saying that idols originate in something good. Idols are good things, God-created things, that end up being lifted up too high or twisted by human sin and put in the place of God. So, for example, last week's idol-power-is a good thing. God gave human beings power at creation and intended us to use it in service to him. Power becomes an idol when we take it into our own hands. Today's idol is nationalism. What good thing does nationalism twist to make into an idol? Well I think that good thing is patriotism. Patriotism-affection for your country and its culture and its people-that is a good thing.

Read the Bible, and it seems God intends for human beings to be gathered into communities of nations. He did not intend for humanity to be one homogenous group, an undifferentiated, amorphous blob. At the start of this sermon series, I preached on Paul's trip to Athens and all the idols he encountered there. In his speech to the Areopagus, Paul said this, "From one man [God] made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed time in history and the boundaries of their lands." So God established nations. Not only that, he seems to take pleasure and joy in the distinctiveness of each nation, in the creative variety of their cultures. So much so, that when Revelation 7 pictures all the faithful gathered around the throne of the Lamb, the cultural distinctions are not completely erased. John sees people from every nation, tribe and language. He is still able to see their differences, their uniqueness. They're not completely erased. And furthermore, when Revelation 21 pictures the kings of the earth entering the New Jerusalem, we see each of these kings bringing their splendor into the city. Neal Plantinga and Rich Mouw and others have seen this as each king of the earth bringing the best of the culture into the city. So, the French carry in their food and the Scots carry in their kilts and their golf clubs and the Canadians carry in their hockey sticks. The cultural splendor of every nation is laid at the feet of the king! All this suggests that God planned to make different nations and rejoice in their diverse splendor.

The Bible tells us that Jesus is King of kings and Lord of the nations. That's clear. But he uses nations and cultures as a way to work his purposes out. So it is appropriate and good to love your country. This week I read an article by John Piper about this. It was titled *Should Christians be Patriotic?* His answer was, yes they should, and he referred to C.S. Lewis' work. Lewis talks about patriotism in his book *The Four Loves* and he places it under the 4th of the loves, which is 'storge', or affection. Here's a quote: "As the family offers us the first step beyond self-love, so [love of country] offers us the first step beyond family selfishness...of course patriotism of this kind is not in the least aggressive. It asks only to be left alone. It becomes militant only to protect what it loves." Lewis argues that such patriotism does not come at the expense of other nations or peoples. Just as healthy self-love makes you better able to love other people in a strong healthy way, Lewis says that healthy love of country gives "a good attitude towards foreigners." So patriotism is good. Not just okay for Christians, but good. Fly the flag. Sing the anthem. Chant 'USA! USA!' at the Olympics. Celebrate your culture. Have a party on July 4. Serve your nation and honor those who served before you.

So if that's the good, what happens when that good gets twisted into an idol? Patriotism becomes nationalism when instead of love country, we have worship of country. Patriotism becomes nationalism when our national story is given an exaggerated sense of transcendence or superiority, that when the things that happen in our politics and with the work of our leaders becomes our great hope in this life. Patriotism becomes the idol of nationalism when you place your hopes for peace and happiness in your country and its leaders. Patriotism becomes nationalism when national politics get sacralized-that is, people start talking about politics as if it's sacred; like it's a holy war. Angels of light vs. angels of darkness. As if the cosmic battle for good and evil depends on what's happening in your country's capitol. Patriotism becomes nationalism when the powers and purpose of religion merge with the power

and purpose of the state. These are meant to be two separate realms-remember Jesus said render unto Caesar what is Caesar and render unto God what is God's. Nationalism fuses them together.

We see a Biblical example of nationalism in the story I read from the book of Daniel. Darius is King of the Medes and the Persians. He just conquered the Babylonian empire. He is the most powerful man on earth. His advisors play to his pride and power. They flatter him into becoming more than a regular ruler, they flatter him into setting himself up as a god. He erects this huge golden statue and issues an edict that they should pray to no one but him. Think about what that means. Darius wants them to center themselves body and soul to the state. When their hearts ache, when their souls feel empty, when they need comfort and direction, they should open their hearts to the power of the king. Persian power is their only hope. Persian power is their only comfort in life and in death. The power of state has been made sacred. That's nationalism. Daniel is no rebel. He doesn't hate the king. He's one of the three administrators of the kingdom. He works hard for the king every day. But he knows the limits of patriotism and state power. He knows where his hope lies. So he prays every day to his true Lord.

Nationalism is a big theme in the book of Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar had the same issue. Remember the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego? Nebuchadnezzar erected a statue to Babylonian power, and every time the national anthem played, everyone had to bow down to the statue. Again the confusion of divine power and state power. Later God sends Nebuchadnezzar an episode of madness to keep him from thinking he has divine powers. When he's restored to sanity he acknowledges that God's kingdom is supreme and all the nations of the earth, including his, are nothing before him. You can make an argument that all the stories of the first six chapters of Daniel are stories where God challenges Babylonian and Persian nationalism. Chapters 2-6 all end with the powers of Babylon acknowledging that their power is under the power of the living God.

The New Testament also warns about the dangers of nationalism. Most of you probably know that the Roman Emperors eventually started to be worshipped as gods. Citizens of the empire were required to make token offerings to the emperor to acknowledge his 'lordship'. In 40 AD, just a few years after Jesus ascended into heaven, the Roman Emperor Caligula declared himself a god, and demanded that his image be placed in every house of worship across the empire so that his lordship could be acknowledged. Revelation 13 is a direct challenge to that nationalistic worship of the empire. It compares the empire to a beast. The beast conquers the nations and demands worship. The people bow down to the beast and say 'who is like the beast?' Like Daniel, Revelation 13 tells the people not to bow down to the beast because the Lamb is the one on the throne and will destroy the beast. You know the number of the beast, it is 666. What does John say about that number? It is a human number. It's a word against nationalism.

Nationalism has persisted in Christian circles in various forms. I wonder if you know the story of the Baptism of Clovis, the first king of the Franks, the first in the long line of French kings. I heard about it first this summer when I read Timothy Egan's book *Pilgrimage to Eternity*. Clovis had been a pagan king, but he was converted and baptized. There is a legend surrounding his baptism. The year is 496 AD. Bishop Remi baptizes Clovis by immersion. After the baptism, Clovis was supposed to be anointed with oil as part of his confirmation as king. But alas, when the bishop looked for anointing oil, the oil was gone. At that moment, in front of the crowd, descending from heaven, came a dove as white as snow. In its beak was a golden jar. Inside the jar was heaven-sent oil. So Clovis was anointed with the oil of heaven. For the next 1300 years, as part of their coronation ceremony, every king of France was anointed with oil from the phial of Clovis. Can you see how this legend was nationalistic? It gives the kings of France special divine blessing. The king of France was God's man and the French were God's special people. You can see how French kings would like the legend of Clovis because it made their power seem God-sanctioned. It can be said that in some ways it parallels the story of Jesus' baptism and it mixes the realms of sacred and of secular politics together. They were the Lord's anointed and you are not to touch the Lord's anointed.

Nazi Germany had one of the worst examples of Christian Nationalism. The German church was taken over by Nazi sympathizers who shaped the theology of the church to fit the ideology of the state. Jewish references were taken out of the Bible. The flag of the church was a cross with a Swastika in the

middle. Theologians insisted that Jesus wasn't a Jew, he was actually a blue-eyed Aryan. Christian faith became a servant of Nazi political ends. Nationalism.

Lately there has been lots of talk about Christian nationalism in our country and in our times. What do we say about that? How should we understand what we are seeing and reading? How do we discern the presence of this idol in our own times? Well let me try to do that, but first, in an effort to be fair and clear, let me say five things that nationalism is not. 1. Believing that your country is unique and special is not nationalism. As I tried to say in the beginning of this sermon, all countries are unique and special and have a unique glory to offer God. 2. Believing that Christian faith played a strong and important role in the founding of your country, and that Judeo Christian values have been central to your nation's history does not make you a nationalist. 3. Nationalism is not just a right wing thing. In our current climate, charges of nationalism are directed to people on the right, but both the political left and the political right are capable of nationalism. In Nazi Germany, we have an example right wing nationalism. On the left, you have the secular nationalism of the Soviet Union and North Korea. The communist leader is venerated, his images are everywhere, and the people are told that state is your only comfort in life and in death. 4. Simply voting for Donald Trump does not make you a nationalist. Sometimes that seems to be the accusation. It's not fair. 5. Speaking out for Biblical morality in the public square, and being public about your faith is not Christian nationalism.

Real Nationalism is when you start to make your nation central to the world purposes of God, when you give an exaggerated, transcendent meaning to your country's history. Specifically, you tell stories that make your nation's history into a sacred story. You give it a sacred past, a sacred present and a sacred future.

You make your nation's past sacred when you have a founding myth that implies God's special blessing. So that's like the Clovis story. Our nation began with the dove bringing the holy oil! We are a chosen people! In our country we stray into that territory when we talk about our founding documents as though they were divinely inspired. Like they are holy Scriptures given by God. If you think I'm exaggerating that is a claim put out there and widely believed. The constitution is a wonderful document but it is not inspired like Scripture. It is a human document.

We make your nation's present sacred when we use language of anointing to describe your leaders. When you say God has anointed them for his purposes. Of course God's providence is involved with any leader who comes to power. We are Calvinists, after all. We have a strong view of God's sovereignty. Romans and 1 Peter both acknowledge the general way in which God puts authorities over us. But when we talk as though one leader is an agent of evil, and the next leader is God's anointed, we are making your national politics into sacred story.

We make your nation's future sacred when you talk as though your nation is the means for God to work his purposes out in the world. You see this most when people read Revelation to apply to specific modern national events and then want their government to do things that will help trigger Christ's return. But it shows up other places too. The other day on TV there was someone who was strongly advocating a that fellow Christians get involved in a certain political cause. "God wants you to act," he said. He also said, "If you don't do anything what will you say to George Washington when you die and meet him in heaven?" When you combine all three-a divine founding myth, anointed present and end-time promises tied up in your country's politics-you have nationalism.

Can I be honest with you? I found writing this sermon exhausting. It's no fun to go through this long list of ways in which we humans mess things up. I would much rather point you where Paul points us in Philippians 3-to the true King and his Kingdom. I would much rather talk about the better country where our ultimate citizenship lies. I would rather point you to the better country where our Savior reigns. The Savior whom we eagerly-eagerly eagerly eagerly-await. The Savior whose power will bring everything under his control and who will make all things new. I would rather point to the King whose throne was a cross and whose crown was made of thorns and whose blood gives us eternal hope. Thinking about things like nationalism is so stressful. Add to it the challenges of sickness, the pain of death, the conflicts that surround running a church in a pandemic, I just want to fall on my knees at the cross and receive the grace that I need, but don't deserve. I don't want to try to figure things out anymore, I just

want to rest in the cradle of his grace. But God has called me and you have called me to speak the truth so here I am.

I guess that brings us back to Daniel, up in his room, looking out his window, praying towards Jerusalem. Three times a day he stepped away from the politics of Darius' court with its scheming and its plots and its threats and its lies and its pride-and he fixed his eyes and his heart on his true Lord, his true king. After a week like this one, I know exactly why he did that. As I thought about Daniel looking toward Jerusalem, I found myself led toward a question, a question which is for me and for you. What window are you looking through? I think for many of us, myself included, I might be spending too much time with this little window (phone), and the window of my TV screen. And through those windows I might be spending too much time meditating on crises and worries and problems. I want to spend more time at Daniel's window. I *need* to spend more time at Daniel's window. I want to sit with Daniel with my face turned toward my king. I'll bet you want that too.

We're doing it now, here in this place. Our faces are turned to him. In our prayers and our songs, we're shaking off the fear and reminding ourselves who's in charge. I pray that as the week goes you will find your way back to the window many more times to find your center, to see your Lord, to survey his cross and to find your rest in him.

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