

Scarecrows

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October 22, 2018

Jer 10:5

(BHS)

כְּתֹמֵר מִקִּשְׁשֵׁי הַמָּה
וְלֹא יִדְבְּרוּ
נִשְׂוֵא יִנְשָׂא כִּי לֹא יִצְעָדוּ
אֶל־תִּירָאוּ מֵהֶם
כִּי־לֹא יַרְעוּ וְגַם־הֵיטִיב אֵין אוֹתָם:

(NRSV)

Their idols are like **scarecrows** in a cucumber field,
and they cannot speak;
they have to be carried, for they cannot **walk**.
Do not be afraid of them,
for they cannot do evil, nor is it in them to do good.

The first line reads, “like-scarecrow cucumber-field they.” The context supplies “idols.” Note the intensifying infinitive in line 3 followed by the passive Nifal stem, “lifting up they are lifted up” = “they must be lifted up.” For they cannot “**walk**.” The word for walk is better glossed “march” (Judg 5:4; Hab 3:12). Think of idols being carried around the city in a procession. They must be carried like that, for they cannot parade themselves. The last line ends with the negation and pronoun.

Idols in the Old Testament were graven images representing deities. The testimony of Scripture is that these deities do not really exist. Thus, the only elements of pagan religion that are actually real are physical images and cultic objects. The absurdity of bowing down to wood and stone is then a valid critique of idolatry.

In Paul’s words (taking his cue from Jer 2:11 in fact), pagans have “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (Rom 1:23). Idolatry is imagining something true of the real God to reside in some aspect of creation—and then trusting in it for help; “Save me, for you are my god!” (Isa 44:17).

Today we are just as prone to this as the ancients were, but our idolatries are more secular. Covetousness is idolatry (Col 3:5). We can live for the praise of man rather than the praise of God (John 5:44). Our god can be physical pleasure (Phil 3:19). We can treat the tools of our trade as if they constitute a religion (Hab 1:16). Pride, other people, luxuries, money—all can be conceptualized as false gods, no better than old-fashioned graven images. We foolishly endow them with some attribute of God: the ability to bless us in some way.

Which brings us back to our verse. What good is a scarecrow? It can't move around. It can do nothing good or evil. But it is not worthless! It does serve a purpose. It scares the crows away. Birds are too stupid to realize that it is only a mannequin, and so they nervously keep their distance. (Actually scarecrows aren't even very good at that. I bought a motorized owl statue to frighten off a sparrow that was damaging my house. Two of those and rubber snakes did not dissuade him for more than a day.)

In the valuable melon patch of your life, destructive forces threaten to ruin or deplete the precious fruit that you cultivate and protect. You are afraid of what might happen. Your garden is subject to harm. So you install scarecrows. They can't do anything. You need to service them. You position them. At best they might scare off some pests for a time.

That is about how good an idol is. You trust in the praise of man to avoid the specter of abandonment or loneliness. But people can't fill you up with love and peace like the living God can.

You trust in Social Security to keep from being anxious about the future. But you are in the hands of God all along—and you need not worry that your Father will ever go bankrupt. You trust in your own competency to stave off poverty. But even that won't last forever.

When we trust in this or that aspect of creation to quiet our anxieties, we turn them into idols that replace the true God in our hearts. Often, we are not even aware of our idolatries until God takes something away from us, like our health or our job. Then we must learn anew that only Jesus is reliable.

As Christians, we don't need scarecrows. In the words of Jesus, "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt 6:33). "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).

What have you set up in your metaphorical cucumber garden? What do you need for a sense of security or normalcy in addition to Jesus? What besides him makes you feel acceptable? Where do you turn for peace of mind? To what do you flee for refuge?

Scarecrows, all.