



God Is What Matters
Sermon by Pastor Sarah Rohde
Bethlehem Lutheran Church, St. Charles
August 22, 2021

Well, we're getting closer to the end of this book, and like any good book, the tension is mounting. At this point in Acts, the Apostle Paul has moved on to the city of Ephesus. Ephesus at the time was the second-most important city in the Roman Empire next to Rome, and still today it's known as one of the most spectacular archeological sites in the world. At Bible Study this past week, Anne Lee brought photos of her and Vic's trip to Ephesus several years ago, and through her little square on the zoom screen, she showed pictures of the theater there that could hold 25,000 people. And she shared that the group that she was with sat in all different places in the theater, and no matter how close or far away you were to the stage, you could hear the speaker speaking crystal clear. This temple was dedicated to the goddess Artemis, the goddess of fertility, and people in the ancient world came from all over the place to visit and to worship. They also came to buy silver shrines and statues of the goddess, made by people like Demetrius, who we encounter in our passage from today. Demetrius and his fellow artisans counted on these crowds of people to keep their business alive.

So you can imagine that, when Demetrius hears about this man named Paul who's traveling across the land proclaiming a God of resurrection and, right along with that, denouncing the worship of other gods and goddesses, Demetrius is enraged. He's angry that someone has entered his community and challenged the way of life of his people, he's even angrier that people are following Paul and

finding his message worthy of their attention, and of course he's frightened about the impact this is all going to have on his ability to sustain his income and put dinner on the table for his family.

So Demetrius speaks up, and his anger spreads like wildfire to others in the city, as anger often does. People come from all over Ephesus to pack the theater and make known their outrage. They shout their conviction, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians" and they were so raucous that they easily could have been charged for causing a riot.

So all this is going on, and you can just picture the intensity and the chaos of this event, can't you? But here's what really stuck out to me as I was reading this story more closely. Even though there's an assertiveness to Demetrius and a groundswell of response from the crowd, the teller of this story, Luke, makes sure to mention two different times in this passage how confused everyone was. He says that the city was filled with confusion; and then later he says that they were shouting one thing, and then another because they didn't really know why they had all come together in the first place.

They were all really confused.

I mean, you can't blame them; that's how I often feel when I'm in the midst of a loud crowd, even though that feels like quite a distant memory right now. It's been a really long time since I've been in the heart of a crowd. But I can remember how that feels – there's always a lot to track, there's not really a way out, and when everyone starts shouting and chanting, it can be so exciting and it can also be a little bit overwhelming. Part of what makes being part of a crowd of people so powerful is that you kind of have to lose yourself and go with it, but

that same thing can feel unnerving, precisely because you're losing yourself in it and not able to control at all what happens next.

The city that day was filled with confusion.

Beyond the effects of a large human crowd, there's a deeper confusion going on here, too. It's the confusion that we feel when we try to get at what really matters the most in this life. It may be clear to us what matters most, but living a life that reflects that, if we're honest with ourselves, is not a clear-cut, straightforward endeavor. Along the way, we all encounter times when we feel the pull of a lot of things and pressures on our hearts and on our time, and that can leave us feeling confused about what really warrants our concern, what really warrants our time and investment, our care and our trust.

Paul came into Ephesus and encountered people who were confused, not just because they were swept up in this riotous crowd, but they were confused existentially about who and what to trust, who and what to make most important in this one life we get. Paul named this struggle as one of idolatry, idolatry meaning the human tendency to put our absolute trust in anyone or anything other than God.

Paul looked around the city of Ephesus and could see the practice of idolatry in the people around him, of course in their outright worship of Artemis, but also in their ways of life, and in the values that their lives pointed to. We get to meet a few of them in the story today.

Demetrius raises for us the value that we place on wealth and economic gain. Demetrius wanted to make a living, which is a good and necessary endeavor. But Demetrius also fell to the need for more, and more, and more; he gave his heart and soul to his business and to the pursuit of profit. Money is not, on its

own, a bad thing; not at all. And yet it can become a god of our own making, this thing that dominates our minds and hearts.

The town clerk that eventually comes in and calms down the crowd – this person raises for us the value that we place on order and peace. Political order is a good thing, none of us can live well in chaos; and yet it, too, can become a god of our own making. Peace and order can mask injustice, and sometimes we need protests and shouting to wake society up and to disrupt the world as we know it so that it can become a more just place for all of God's children.

The crowd raises for us the value of conformity – going with the masses even though we're not really sure what is going on. We would be so lost if we weren't constantly interacting with others who can show us the way and offer us advice; and yet the amount of energy and anxiety we put into fitting in, keeping up, going with it because everyone else is going with it – this, too, can become a god of our own making; it can tempt us to abandon ourselves and forget what we know to be true.

And then there's Paul who comes to Ephesus to reveal to all of these confused people the value of life lived in and for God. Paul raises religious questions among them that help to lift them above the constant tug of these other pressures and to see that there is something more than all of these— something more than making a lot of money, something more than peace and order, something more than fitting in that is worthy of human trust. And it's not that Paul says that these things don't matter, it's that he helps the Ephesians long ago, and us, too, to remember that these things are not ultimate. And what keeps them from being ultimate, what keeps them from becoming idols, is that we turn to God, again and again, to help us figure out the place of all of these things in the

whole of life. It's our ultimate faith in God that informs and relativizes the importance of all the other things in our lives.

This is a good and needed word considering all the things our hearts want to chase in this life. Paul brings us back to the God who is at the center, to the God who helps us put everything else in its right place.

And it's also a really good word for what we and the rest of the world are living through right now. As I referenced in my midweek message this past week, I so feel like I'm part of the confused and bewildered crowd right now. On so many levels – trying to track all the things we need to know and learn as our firstborn starts kindergarten, trying to figure out what all parents of unvaccinated children are trying to figure out, what spaces are safe for our kids and what spaces are not, making plans for a congregation in the midst of an ever-changing reality, and then there are the bigger things - grappling with how to do more to mitigate the effects of climate change, weeping over the images coming out of Afghanistan, and then quite frankly nearly losing it over the rising cases of covid across our country and the fact that this surge was largely preventable. It feels like the world is falling apart some days; I know I'm not alone in feeling confused and overwhelmed.

I think it's especially in times like this that we need to hear Paul's message. Times like these make us extra vulnerable to putting our trust in things other than God. And yet Paul speaks right into the confusion, and reminds us that the God who brought life out of death is the only thing worth trusting. God is the power and the hope that will get us through messy seasons like this one; and that doesn't just make everything okay, and it doesn't just make everything clear and easy, but what it does mean is that nothing else gets the final word. The only thing that gets the final word is God and what God does with life that unravels.

The very good news is that God knows about what to do with the fragments of our lives; through the power of love, God makes something new of it and God carries us to the other side. And that, my friends, is why God is more powerful and more trustworthy than anything else we might be tempted to put our faith in.

Thanks be to God. Amen.