

“Read the Riot Act”

Acts 19:23-41

Series: SWORD

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The Woodside Church

February 23, 2020

Have you ever been in the middle of a mob? Suddenly you're surrounded with no way to escape. You and those you love are in danger of being crushed. I had no idea the Fourth of July 1986 would end up that way. Living in Princeton at the time with my wife and two year old son, we originally planned to celebrate Independence Day at home. Yet friends drove all night from Michigan to our house for one purpose: to celebrate the centennial of the Statue of Liberty in New York. It promised to be “The Party of the Century.” To mark the completion of the \$69 million restoration of Lady Liberty, the \$32 million

Independence Day weekend party will find room for twenty-two tall ships, thirty-three warships, drill teams, gymnasts, cheerleaders, movie stars, marching bands, country and western singers, ice skaters, fiddlers, tap dancers, a square-dancing brain surgeon, the Boston Pops, the New York Philharmonic, an intellectual conference, and 200 Elvis Presley imitators.

My friends did not drive 600 miles for that. They wanted to witness the rockets red glare of 40,000 fireworks ringing round Lower Manhattan – the largest fireworks show in history. At the last minute, we decided to join them. All of Lower Manhattan was closed to traffic. Millions poured in to be part of the spectacle. It was truly a grand party for a great monument.

Then it was over. Now we had to get home. You think it's hard to get through New York on a normal day? Imagine every avenue and every street packed from building to building with people. We felt like refugees fleeing barbarians. I literally feared for the life of my son Peter who slept in a flimsy fold up stroller. People pressed in on him from all sides and threatened to crush him. After some very tense moments, we descended a tunnel to the underground train station. Just before reaching the platform, the mob abruptly stopped. More people poured in behind us. The tunnel became tight, the humid July air stifling. There was no room even to stand shoulder to shoulder. You could feel anxiety rising. Then someone shouted, “The trains are broken.” Now panic rippled through the masses. What would the mob do? Which way would it go?

Then as rapidly as it rose, the terror evaporated. It was a rumor. The riot was averted. We boarded a Path train and made our way safely home.

The Statue of Liberty evokes such passion and devotion that when movie makers want to strike at our heart they destroy her. You probably remember the climactic scene of *Planet of the Apes*. You may have watched the more recent Amazon series *The Man in the High Castle*. It's the story of what America would be like if the Nazis won World War II. They dropped the atomic bomb on Washington leaving our government and all its monuments in rubble. Later, to mark the start of their new world order, they explode the Statue of Liberty. It made me sick and disgusted.

Why? That monument holds a special meaning for Americans. The goddess of Liberty lifting her torch to enlighten the world is a powerful symbol of freedom, immigration, hope. Nobody dare defame it, deface it, or destroy it.

The Ephesians feel all this and more about their goddess Artemis. Called Diana by the Romans, Artemis is the goddess of prosperity, fertility, the hunt, childbirth, forests and animals. The city of Ephesus is her fabled birthplace. 550 years before Jesus, the Ephesians build a temple for Artemis. Through several building expansions it eventually boasts 127 gleaming columns, four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens, and makes the short list of the 7 Wonders of the World. Thousands of personnel served in the temple and massive deposits of money were entrusted to Artemis making it a major banking center in Asia. A writer named Pliny from the same century as Jesus and Paul, calls the temple “The most wonderful monument of Grecian magnificence.” Inside is a glorious statue of Artemis and possibly a meteor they believe she dropped from the skies.

Ephesus is the third largest city in the Roman Empire. It’s Wall Street, Vegas and Disney World rolled into one. As the capital of the province of Asia and a port on the Mediterranean, all the world passes through Ephesus. When travelers and traders stop in Ephesus, they always visit the temple of Artemis – a top tourist spot on Trip Advisor. They give an offering and pray to her for prosperity in their family, their fields, their finances. They also buy mini silver replicas of the temple much like a tiny Statue of Liberty. Ephesus is famous for selling magic spells from the great goddess. Buy a spell to bless your crops, give birth or curse your enemies. So Artemis is a powerful force for the religion, government, economy and prosperity of Ephesus and Asia. Nobody dare defame her, deface her, or destroy her.

Then along comes a troublemaker named Paul. He starts out preaching in a synagogue. Well that’s okay since he’s Jewish. But after three months his fellow Jews oppose him.

So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. Acts 19:9-10

He also miraculously heals the sick and casts out demons. Some are so impressed they try to wield the power of Jesus, like Paul, even though they are not followers of Jesus.

They would say, “In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.” Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. One day the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?” Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding. When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Acts 19:13-17

After this, many Ephesians throw away their magic amulets and burn their spell books.

Then something far more disturbing happens. Attendance at the Temple of Artemis drops off. Sales of mini silver temples decline. When Demetrius, a silver smith who makes the mini temples notices a backlog of stock building up he calls a meeting of the Silver Smith Union Local #345, the Ephesian Stock Exchange and the Artemis Presbytery.

You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited; and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty. Acts 19:25-27

The Gospel of Jesus always challenges the idols of a culture, the idols which occupy our hearts, the idols we love. Wherever Paul preaches the Good News about Jesus, it threatens the idols they worship. His message comes through so loud and clear to the Ephesians that Demetrius can quote it: “He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all” (Acts 19:26).

What is an idol? It is any earthly thing to which you are sacrifice your time, energy, money and relationships. It is the person, place or thing you love more than God, yourself and others. It is easy to see the idols of others, the idols over there. Three Sundays from now we will welcome guest preacher Becky Stanley from India Gospel League. Two decades ago I was a guest of her father Samuel Stephens in India. There are statues and temples, images and idols everywhere in India. They pray and offer gifts and sacrifices daily to the gods.

Why sacrifice to idols? To get something from the gods. You pray and offer sacrifices to the gods to make it rain or stop raining, to win a war or to avoid war, to grow your crops and grow your family, to bless your nation and curse your enemies. The forces of this world are beyond our control. Religion is a human invention to get the gods on our side, to ask the gods to help us and save us. This is why the ancient people created gods of war, peace, wisdom, love, fertility, storms. If you can personify them, you can plead with them, please them, receive protection, prosperity and power from them. Artemis is worshiped all over the world because she is the goddess of power, prosperity and pleasure – power, money and sex.

Then Paul comes along and says, “She doesn’t exist. All the gods are nothing.” This obviously threatens everyone who believes in her and makes their living from her temple.

When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul’s traveling companions from Macedonia, and all of them rushed into the theater together. Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater. The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there. Acts 19:28-32

The theater in Ephesus still exists. It holds 25,000 spectators. Can you imagine 25,000 voices shouting, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians” for two hours? If Paul entered that arena it would have been his final appearance.

This is what happens when you challenge someone’s gods. Riots result. Why? The people believe the goddess can save them, give them money, give them hope, give them power. When

Paul says the goddess can't do this, the goddess is nothing, it makes them afraid and angry. The irony is: the people prove Paul is right. How powerful can Artemis be if the words of a mere human can discredit her and rob her of her divine majesty? How almighty can she be if she needs humans to defend her and protect her?

Everyone has idols. You have idols. I have idols. We love them, we serve them, we sacrifice to them. Tim Keller writes,

An idol is anything so central to your life you can't have a meaningful life if you lose it. Idolatry is anything about which you say, *If I have that, then my life has value, then my life has meaning. If I would lose that, I don't know how I would live.* An idol can be family and children. It could be career or making money. It can be achievement or critical acclaim. It can be social standing or a romantic relationship. It can be your competence and skill. It can be physical beauty, either in yourself or your partner. It can be some political or social cause. It could be your moral record. It could be your religious activity and even your ministry success. All of those things can be idols.¹

Now please notice: these are not bad things or evil things. No. The most challenging idols are the good things – like family, children, career – that are turned into ultimate things – things we worship, serve and sacrifice to. Your marriage is a good thing but you're not intended to worship your spouse – despite what he or she may say. Children are a very good thing but if we worship them we will spoil them, control them, or become codependent with them. Career is a good thing but if we throw all our time and energy into it we will sacrifice our marriages, children and health. All these things are good, all given by God, none were intended to be gods.

Here's an example of an idol: your cellphone. While I sat in the Denver airport last week I saw a family of six - two parents and four elementary aged kids – and each was one looking at a phone. Many of us remember when there were no cellphones. Now most of us cannot live without it. Do you feel anxious when you can't find your phone? Do you worry about losing it? Do you obsessively check it? Perhaps you suffer from nomophobia. It's the fear of having *no mobile phone*. Cell phone obsession may be undermining our lives. For instance, studies reveal:

- People check their cellphones an average of 34 times per day.
- 66 percent of people fear losing or being without their cell phones.
- 75 percent of people use their cellphones in the bathroom.
- 30 percent would rather leave the house without a credit card or cash than their phones.
- 11 percent would rather leave home without pants than their smartphones.
- 63 percent said they would climb through trash to find a lost cellphone.
- 25 percent said they would physically fight a thief to get their phone back.
- 30 percent said their mobile device has come between them and their spouse²

No wonder the new prayer posture is over a cellphone.

¹ Timothy Keller, *Gospel Preaching that Radically Changes Lives* preachingtoday.com

² Deborah Netburn, "Nomophobia—fear of being without your phone—is on the rise," Los Angeles Times (2-17-12); Samantha Murphy, "Are You Afraid of Phone Separation?" Mashable (7-13-12)

What else might be your idol besides your cellphone? In the Request and Dedicate parts of SWORD, you may ask God to show you, “What are my idols? What do you want me to let go?” Anything that pulls you away from God or competes with your relationship with God. If the thought of giving it up makes you sad or as angry as an Ephesian riot, it’s probably one of your gods. Last week Scott Burgess pointed out the things we give up for Lent are those which get in the way of our relationship with God. Scott gave up “stupid TV.” Maybe you could consider giving up all TV... nearly all of it fits in that category.

Another possible idol for you may be sports (how dare the pastor bring that up with March Madness around the corner? Maybe madness is a good name for it). Another one may be kid’s sports. I believe sports are good for kids but they were not intended to become the ultimate. I see families wearing themselves out with multiple teams, travel teams, expensive equipment. Talk about sacrifice of time, money and energy. For the sake of competition and the rare chance at a scholarship someday, children are enduring long hours and injuries to their young bodies which may last them their whole lives. I’m not saying give up all kid’s sports but maybe it’s time to have the courage to stand up to peer pressure and draw a line or a limit on how many sports. It’s okay to take a season off, to be on just one team, to give the family some rest. My daughter was very good at gymnastics. But the coach said to be really good she needed to be on the travel team which included matches on Sundays. That’s when we drew the line. They said that’s the end of her gymnastics career. We said Okay. She was not happy with us at the time. But later she got to be a cheerleader. She avoided many of the injuries gymnasts endure and she grew up to be a happy healthy adult. You don’t have to worship the sports gods.

What about church pastor? Church can be an idol. Yes. Nobody knows this better than I do. God does not want us to build another temple of Artemis. That was never Jesus’ plan or Paul’s. Church is not a building – it’s a gathering of disciples in Jesus’ name – wherever two or three gather in His name. Churches come in all sizes. Did you ever wonder how Paul spreads the Word of God so, in just two years, “all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord”? Acts 19:10. He does it through small groups of people, house churches, microgroups – two or three people taking God’s Word into the world to make disciples. Now I love Growth Groups. I started Growth Groups here. I’ve nurtured Growth Groups for the last twenty-six years. I’m pleased that Woodside is known for its 40-50 Growth Groups. Yet here is the honest truth – Growth Groups can become an idol and get in the way of God’s plan to make disciples. Growth Groups can become so warm, close and friendly like a club that they don’t reach out to new disciples or start new groups which make disciples. Do our existing Growth Groups make disciples? Yes. But if you look around the table and see the same faces, week to week, it may have become a club. If you have never birthed or launched a new group from your group it’s looking like a club. If you get upset, irritated, push back or have all these reasons why, with your group, it’s not a good idea to leave it and start a new group, then it sounds a little bit like an idol.

I am not trying to break up or split our Growth Groups. I am looking for some courageous people who are willing to let go of their group for the six weeks of Lent and start a microgroup to reach and make new disciples. If you’ve been with your group for a long time – it’s time. If you’ve had the same people in your group for a long time – it’s time. If you have a heart for reaching and saving the lost, it’s time. It’s simple. It’s easy. We’ll show you how.

When you discover your idols and let them go, you find you were Made for More. Starting next Sunday, we'll begin a study of Paul's letter to the Ephesians called Made for More. We'll find that God made you to BE More, GROW More, GO More and DO More, and WIN More. Now the world and the devil will not like it if you give up the idols, if you discover you were Made for More. Prepare for a riot. But remember – the gods and idols are not real. God is. And He's far more powerful than any empty false idol.

My pastor the Rev. Dr. Thomas Tewell tells a story how his friend Dr. Tat Stewart took a church in Teheran, Iran. He and his family were there during revolution and riot. The government under the ayatollah closed his small, struggling Presbyterian Church. There were very few members, but the government came in and burned all the Bibles and Sunday school curriculum. Then they took a big padlock and locked the door of the church. They wiped their hands and said, "Aha! We have closed Christianity in Iran." Tat Stewart and his wife opened their small home on Sunday mornings for people to come for worship. Nobody dared to say where they were going, and they came early in the morning while it was still dark. But church attendance grew until it doubled, and then tripled. People smuggled in Bibles as if they were pure gold. Tat said that when he opened the Bible and read it, you could have heard a pin drop. Suddenly, electricity and faith broke out in that church, and soon that church made an impact all over the city of Teheran, all over the nation of Iran, and even over that part of the Middle East. He says, despite persecution, there are now millions of disciples of Jesus Christ in Iran.

Don't make gods.

God made you for more.