

God's names reveal God's greatness.

- ⁶ “This is what the LORD says—
Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty:
I am the first and I am the last;
apart from me there is no God.
- ⁷ Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it.
Let him declare and lay out before me
what has happened since I established my ancient people,
and what is yet to come—
yes, let them foretell what will come.
- ⁸ Do not tremble, do not be afraid.
Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago?
You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me?
No, there is no other Rock; I know not one.”
- ⁹ All who make idols are nothing,
and the things they treasure are worthless.
Those who would speak up for them are blind;
they are ignorant, to their own shame.
- ¹⁰ Who shapes a god and casts an idol,
which can profit nothing?
- ¹¹ People who do that will be put to shame;
such craftsmen are only human beings.
Let them all come together and take their stand;
they will be brought down to terror and shame.

This past week I was doing a little work planning for this coming school year's catechism classes. I know it's still summer, but school is not that far away! For many of you though catechism class probably is pretty far away... far away in the past. But I wonder if I started you out this morning on a bit of memory work from Luther's Small Catechism if you could finish it for me... should we try it?

The 1st Commandment is, “**You shall have no other gods.**” And when Luther asks in the catechism, “*What does this mean?*” the answer he gives is simple and straightforward... do you remember? *We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.* This is a good thing to remember... and not just because your pastor says so, or because Luther wrote it... but because that simple explanation of the 1st Commandment is a great summary of what the Bible teaches about God and why we worship and serve him alone.

Jesus was once asked what the greatest commandment was and he quoted another Bible verse that picks up on these very thoughts when he said, “**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.**” **Matthew 22:37** Luther was simply restating what Jesus taught, and what is taught all over the pages of Scripture about how we rightly view our amazing God. And if you want more proof of this I would strongly encourage you to read through not just that short sentence in Luther's Small Catechism, but the section on the 1st Commandment from Luther's Large Catechism. Luther spends a lot of time on this commandment because he was convinced that where this commandment was being kept, all the other commandments would follow. And where this commandment was broken... well... it wouldn't be long before we were breaking the rest.

In fact, just listen to a short portion of his opening comments in the Large Catechism on this commandment: “**What does it mean to have a god? Or, what is God? Answer: A god means that from which we are to expect all good and in which we are to take refuge in all distress... I say that whatever you set your heart on and put your trust in is truly your god.**” *Luther's Large Catechism*

We heard St. Paul warn against such idolatry in our reading from Romans today when he spoke of the foolishness of those who **“exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator.” Romans 1:25** And we heard Matthew record the fate of all those who grow as weeds in this world, following after the devil’s lies and abandoning the one true God... Jesus said of them: **“The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil.” Matthew 13:41**

Our sermon text for today from Isaiah chapter 44 also speaks against the foolishness of idolatry and the disaster that awaits those who would not only break the 1st Commandment, but live in such idolatry to the end of their days. And yet in the midst of such a warning God also gives hope to us his people and to those we witness to still today. We’ll see that especially in the first half of our text as we consider how *God’s names reveal God’s greatness.*

But before such a reminder of everything we get with the true God – let’s consider the nothing that is promised to those who look elsewhere for a god in their life.

Isaiah 44 is full of imagery of the folly of idol worship. The final three verse of our text just scratch the surface, but they provide a good summary of the emptiness that is idolatry. Listen again to what God says through his prophet here:

**⁹ All who make idols are nothing,
and the things they treasure are worthless.
Those who would speak up for them are blind;
they are ignorant, to their own shame.
¹⁰ Who shapes a god and casts an idol,
which can profit nothing?
¹¹ People who do that will be put to shame;
such craftsmen are only human beings.
Let them all come together and take their stand;
they will be brought down to terror and shame.**

Imagine the picture that this painted for the Old Testament believers who lived in a world where idol worship was so much more common than it is in our world today. It was normal to see people carving idols and then worshipping the thing they had just made as if it were a god that could help them. Or casting it out of metal and fashioning it with a tool... only to worship it as if that idol could help fashion a life worth living for them! It’s no wonder God used the words he did to describe this kind of idol worship – calling those who make idols **nothing, blind, ignorant... people who... will be brought down to terror and shame.** And as for the idols themselves... God says they are **worthless... and can profit nothing...**

Maybe for us today we would nod our heads in disgust and derision at those who would bow down or pray to an idol of wood or metal or stone... we see the folly in it... the futility of such worship... we can recognize there is nothing there and nothing good will come of such idolatry.

And yet before we get too proud of ourselves, we would do well to read again brother Luther’s comments that I read earlier... they reflect the Scriptures and sadly reflect the idolatry in our hearts too as we read them: ***A god means that from which we are to expect all good an in which we are to take refuge in all distress... I say that whatever you set your heart on and put your trust in is truly your god.***

Do you look forward to going on vacation more than you look forward to time spent in God’s Word at home each day?

Do you look at money and possessions as things which God has promised to provide for your needs, or do you see them as the things that give you true security and comfort once you have them... and that bring misery and fear when you don’t?

Do you see time spent on sports and leisure activities as priorities and time spent in worship or Bible class as optional?

Do you run to friends and family in times of trouble and use prayer as a last resort?

Idolatry takes *good* things, such as vocation, money, love, intimacy, ministry, family, or health, and turns them into *ultimate* things. It is easy to deify people or things to such an extent that they become the center of our existence. And once they occupy the center of our heart, we tell ourselves that we can't live without them... and think that such gods can free us from what troubles us in this life. But counterfeit gods will never free us... just the opposite... they will enslave us, they will always torment us, and unless we repent of them, they will most certainly destroy us.

Idolatry expects from the finite creation the gifts it can never give. The only solution to entanglement with false gods is to turn to the true God, the one revealed yes at Mt. Sinai when the Commandments were given... but also the one revealed at the cross and the empty tomb where God came bringing redemption for such broken lawbreakers as us. This is the only God who, when he is in our lives, will fulfill us. And this is the only God who, though we fail him, will completely forgive us.

And we can remember that truth about our God when we meditate on his names. He gives us a number of names to consider in our sermon text today and I want to close our sermon by considering how these names reveal God's greatness... and how, when we remember these names, we can remember what God has done and what he is capable of in our lives still today. This is how God will daily turn us away from our idolatry and towards a faith-filled life living as fruitful witnesses in his field of wheat.

Isaiah writes:

⁶ **"This is what the LORD says—**

Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty:

I am the first and I am the last;

apart from me there is no God.

⁷ **Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it.**

Let him declare and lay out before me

what has happened since I established my ancient people,

and what is yet to come—

yes, let them foretell what will come.

⁸ **Do not tremble, do not be afraid.**

Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago?

You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me?

No, there is no other Rock; I know not one."

This is what the LORD says... In all capital letters, the Old Testament name "**LORD**" was a special name God used to remind his people of his faithfulness and grace. He explained this name to Moses in Exodus when he said: "**The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷ maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.**" Exodus 34:6-7 The name of the **LORD** meant God was serious about his Word and would be true to his promises of mercy and grace while also upholding justice and punishing unbelief.

God then gives three more names in quick succession in Isaiah's prophecy: **Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty**. Israel had had many kings at this point in history and would soon be without a king when they went into captivity. But God alone was and would always be their one true King. The one who protects his people and rules over them for their good. Something he does still today for us as his people!

He also uses the familiar title **Redeemer** – this was an Old Testament title for someone in your family who could buy back your land or your life if they were sold away because of debts you owed. Jesus our Redeemer paid the price to buy back our lives forever. How? St. Peter tells us in the New Testament: **you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the**

empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. 1 Peter 1:18-19

Yes, God is **LORD, King, and Redeemer**. He also is called the **LORD Almighty** – or literally in the Hebrew, the **LORD of Hosts**. He is the God who controls all the hosts of heaven and the armies of earth. He is all powerful. His hand guides the pages of history. He turns evil intentions and human ambition and violent oppression into blessing as he uses all things to spread his gospel, strengthen the faith of his people, bring judgment on the unbelieving.

And to back up his claims God tells us: **I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God**. He then goes on to remind us that no false god can do what he has done in making predictions of the future that all come true. Because he is a God who is eternal and knows both the past and the future, he is able to tell us truly what will happen! And in him alone then we find safety and refuge. He closes with that thought saying: **You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other Rock; I know not one.**

There are many in this world who claim that all religions lead to the same place, that “all paths lead to God” – and that it doesn’t matter if you are Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Christian or any other religion... as long as you do your best by your religion you’ll get to the same place.

This is a lie. There is only one God. Only one way to God. And only one destiny for those who reject this. Do you remember what Jesus said? In John 14 he said: **“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” John 14:6**

In John 3 he made this exclusive claim even clearer when he said: **“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” John 3:16-18**

Yes, God’s names reveal God’s greatness. I pray that as you live as wheat among the weeds you would be a witness to God’s saving name so that the seeds of the kingdom continue to be sown! I pray that as you remember the greatness of God, shown to us so perfectly in the merits and mercies of his Son Jesus – you would find forgiveness for your failures with idols in the past... and power to cast down those idols in the present that would seek to take your fear, love, and trust away from God and throw them after nothing. God grant all this, dear brothers and sisters for the sake of his great name. Amen.

There is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all. Amen. 1 Timothy 2:5-6