

Glad to be back with you today, after Robby's fever last weekend. I am pleased to report he's now had his nose tickled twice and we are in the clear. Today, we continue our summer series following the early church in Acts. Prior to our text today, Acts narrates the wild success of Paul's mission in Ephesus, a coastal city in modern day Turkey. Paul spent three months preaching about the kingdom of God in the synagogue, and after parting ways, Paul gathered disciples of the Way for two years in the academic lecture hall of Tyrannus. There, it is said that all the residents of Asia, Jews and Greeks, heard the gospel. God did such extraordinary miracles through Paul that many pagans relinquished their idols and the word of God grew. Previously, in Ephesus, worship centered around the Greek goddess Artemis, Apollo's sister, defender of chastity and champion of fertility. The temple of Artemis in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and a financial hub for Roman Asia. Her Temple provided relief to the poor and shelter for refugees. In Ephesus, Artemis worship was the civil religion, with the city's routines, calendars, and commerce orbiting around her temple and festivals. Pilgrims flocked from the breadth of the Roman empire to purchase silver shrines from local craftsmen and to worship in her grand Ephesian temple. But in the years since Paul's arrival, something had changed. Locals were flocking to Tyrannus Hall instead of Artemis' Temple. They were ditching their idols and pooling their money to share with the Way, rather

than buying Artemis shrines from craftsmen or making offerings in the Temple. It was all very concerning, especially to the craftsmen whose livelihoods depended on the continued worship of Artemis. Our text today follows these events. It's a long, but very interesting narrative, so settle in to hear the word of God.

Now after these things had been accomplished, Paul resolved in the Spirit to go through Macedonia and Achaia and then to go on to Jerusalem. He said, "After I have gone there, I must also see Rome." So he sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he himself stayed for some time longer in Asia.

About that time no little disturbance broke out concerning the Way. A man named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the artisans. These he gathered together, with the workers of the same trade, and said, "Men, you know that we get our wealth from this business. You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess of Artemis will be scorned, and she

will be deprived of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship here.

When they heard this they were enraged and shouted, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” the city was filled with the confusion; and people rushed together to the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul’s travel companions. Paul wished to go into the crowd, but the disciples would not let him; even some officials of the province of Asia, who were friendly to him, sent him a message urging him not to venture into the theater.

Meanwhile, some were shouting one thing, some another; for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. Some of the crowd gave instructions to Alexander, whom the Jews had pushed forward. And Alexander motioned for silence and tried to make a defense before the people. But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours all of them shouted in unison, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” But when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, “Citizens of Ephesus, who is there that does not know that the city of the Ephesians is the temple keeper of the great Artemis and of the statue that fell from heaven. Since these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. You have brought these men here who are neither temple robbers nor

blasphemers of our goddess. If therefore Demetrius and the artisans with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls; let them bring charges there against one another. If there is anything further you want to know, it must be settled in the regular assembly. For we are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion. When he had said this, he dismissed the assembly. *This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. (prayer)*

Our text today isn’t featured in any preaching commentaries, because it’s long and has a context foreign to us. As I dove into the cult of Artemis, as a pastor, I couldn’t help but think of our churches, in a post-Christendom world, when the world doesn’t quite revolve around the institutional church as before. When you heard it, what did you think of as our Artemis, the overarching idol in our world, our country, in Athens, in our homes and hearts? Where have we most vested our interests? What overrules pretty much everything else? Is it the Georgia Bulldawgs? Your political party? Is it your gym? Or your Instagram? Or your business? The bottom line - your bank account or 401K? Is it our denomination or particular way of being church? I wondered who would be cast as Demetrius, the riot’s ring-leader, and who would play the town clerk, brokering peace?

I can tell you what my toddler's Artemis is: - Play-mobil, plastic figurines that come with a million little pieces that combine in endless ways. I confess that we are parents who often bribe our son, especially in times of masks and tickly COVID tests and endless changes in routine. Robby's currency is 100% Play-mobil toys. It's a great carrot, but his collection long ago overtook our living room floor. So recently, we took the day to organize all his toys into bins. When Robby got home from school, he saw all the changes and panicked. I showed him where his toys were stored in all the bins. He said, "I like it all...except the Play-mobil part." We had moved his cheese, and he wasn't having it. But, as I showed him bins sorted into heads and hair, legs and arms and torsos, I saw his eyes warm with understanding for how much easier the new system would make building new characters.

We who are living through the second year of a global pandemic know a bit about adapting to having our cheese moved, don't we?! Last year, everything was canceled or moved online, but this year, was supposed to be it! Thanks be to God, vaccines are available and most all of the adults in our church have gotten them! We were all ready to move on, making plans and scheduling programming to head into a normal-ish Fall after a very abnormal year. But things aren't trending well, are they? I am so grateful that our city and correspondingly, our congregation have revived a prudent mask policy, but it seems like many institutions around us are trucking forward like it was Fall of 2019, even while all the warning signs

are flashing red. I really don't get it. And the only thing I can figure is that while we might be reluctant to admit it, the Artemis cult in our town is our beloved Red & Black. And we worry for good reason that even previously do-able and proven measures, like mask mandates, will ripple across the entire system, discouraging in-person events and costing our town dearly needed revenue after a year of austerity, when everything feels like it is already on the brink. There are inextricably linked lives on the line - businesses, craftspeople, families, churches, the poor amongst us. We all depend on things getting back to normal between the hedges. It's enough to enrage you, to make you want to take to the street, on one side or the other and maybe drag some people there with you and hold them accountable for what's happening.

Wasn't that sort of what happened with the Riot in Ephesus? From the Greek perspective, for two years, the miraculous and persuasive Paul and the disciples of the Way had been seducing people into believing that gods could not be made with human hands. It had reached a tipping point, and the craftsmen saw a decline in revenues. Their leader Demetrius issued the clarion call that their wealth was at risk. But the Greek word he used is more expansive; their holistic well-being was at stake. And it didn't just impact these craftsmen of silver shrines to Artemis and their families. No, in a town where religious and economic interests were so intertwined, the temple, the world-wide Artemis cult itself was in jeopardy. Hearing this, a mob got fired up. They

dragged Paul's companions to the amphitheater. Folks picked up along the way barely knew what was happening, swept up in the emotion of the movement. There was so much confusion the crowd was shouting divergent complaints. But the one thing they could agree on was a chant to praise Artemis, at one point, cheering for more than two hours straight. That is some serious fervor. Pass the Ricola!

Who would save the day? Paul was chomping at the bit to get to the theater, with his disciples barring the way after receiving warnings from *Asiarchs*. They were prominent, wealthy, aristocratic men who were the highest-ranking priests of the powerful Roman imperial cult in Asia, men whose friendship with Paul clearly overruled their religious differences. But they weren't the only ones to help put out the fire. Even Jewish leaders, from whose synagogue Paul had preached schismatically, very graciously pushed forward their representative Alexander to try to pacify the crowds with a reminder that Judaism, from which the Way derived, was an officially recognized religion in the empire. But Alexander was dismissed as a Jew, of similar monotheistic beliefs and practices as Paul. The mob's fervor was at its crest when the chief city official, a bureaucratic scribe or town clerk that acted as a liaison with Rome, successfully intervened in Paul's defense using the rule of law. He began with an appeal to the sovereignty of the gods. After all, Artemis' shrine fell from heaven with Ephesus as its keeper. How could lil' ol' Paul thwart the will of the

gods? It's not like Paul was a temple robber or had blasphemed Artemis in any way that would stand up in court. The mob, on the other hand, was out of order, illegally rioting, rather than formally taking their complaints to the judges. Rome ensured peace in its cities, and the riotous conduct of an unlawful assembly could cause Rome to revoke Ephesus' privileges of self-governance. Well, that entreaty was enough to disperse the crowd.

This narrative turns me on my head. The villains are just trying to feed their families and keep businesses and benevolent faith centers open. Though pagans, I sympathize with them. And the heroes aren't the ones we expect. Paul is locked away, wildly successful mission on hold, companions held hostage by a crazed mob. The ones God sends to the rescue are first, Jews long dismissed by Paul, then, aloof aristocrats sending secret messages, and finally, a pagan bureaucrat with the law on his side. He quiets the mob to defend the very person whose faith practice had undermined and destabilized the religious and economic bedrock of Ephesus. Maybe he was acting out of self-interest like everyone else, afraid of Ephesus losing autonomy, but it seems to me that pagan bureaucrat put the safety of people, specifically outside agitators, before profits or popularity. He laid it all out and talked some sense into a mob, who to their credit, listened. It's a wild text and as we try to figure out what lessons to draw from it, how to apply it to our own lives, there is much to consider. First, God is always doing something new, often outside of the

religious establishment. Second, when things get shaken up, we can use what influence we have to take the path of Demetrius, working against the Spirit to incite others to protect our interests. Or we can choose to be inspired by the city clerk, who adapted in times of transition, who found a third way to broker peace, a way that preserved life and protected Ephesus' autonomy, even if it gave a free pass to those undermining the cult of Artemis and those who depended upon it.

This summer, we drove to Maine to see sights from Ben's childhood. Every time we passed a cute church, I wondered if it was one of ours, but it never was. It was almost always a Congregational church. I was jealous. I kept looking for Presbyterian Churches to no avail. Finally, I looked it up on our denomination's website. It turns out there aren't many PC-USA churches left in Maine. Most of them left the denomination nearly a hundred years ago, around the time of the Scopes trial and the Fundamentalist-Modernist schism over Evolution. It seems ridiculous today. They felt embracing that new-fangled science had moved the church away from scripture and Christ, which is untrue and basically the mantra of every Christian schism ever. It made me super sad. How could I fantasize about summers in Maine if there were so few PC-USA churches to attend? What if that was a window into the future of Presbyterianism down in the Bible belt? So much of my identity is wrapped up in being Presbyterian. Our way of reading the Bible, our way of thinking about God and humanity, our structure for sharing

power, our understanding of salvation and call are, for me, the best way. I have tied my life to it, not just the sticker on my car and the pendant around my neck and the way I spend my workdays and weekends, but even my pension plan, my future. It's the tradition I am passing on to my child, with great hopes for his future. I have given my one precious life to the Presbyterian church and God's mission through her. And that is good and right for me. But I have to remind myself not to turn into Demetrius, not to let my self-interest, my love for this particular manifestation of Christ's church become my Artemis. I have to keep watch, lest in clinging to the old ways of practicing faith and being church, I become jealous, bitter, or even hostile to those who seem to threaten my denominational idol, that I love and depend upon. Like Demetrius, I might miss the new thing that God is doing amongst us. After all, as we see in Ephesus, the Church is in Christ's hands, no one can thwart God's plan, and the Spirit blows where it will.

So what about for you? What is your cult of Artemis? When God is doing something new, when things are changing, when the old way of doing things is threatened, financially or spiritually or otherwise, how are you responding? Will you react like Demetrius and go on the offensive, whipping up others to join you? Or can you find a third way, like the town clerk? Can you find a way that isn't your ideal scenario, but that looks out for others, even those who might seem to be working against your self-interest? Or maybe God is using someone very

unexpected to play the hero for you, perhaps to rescue you from a Demetrius-sized hole?

Recently, I had the privilege of visiting some church members for the first time. During the visit, as I got to know their joys and concerns, I learned they owned a good amount of commercial property in town, which immediately concerned me. I wondered how they had fared after a year in which commerce in our college town has been so restricted, with no football games or conventions or tourists to fill up hotels and trickle into restaurants and shops. The member explained to me that thankfully, they didn't carry any debt, so they were able to work with each tenant to see how their income had been impacted by the pandemic and adjust their rents accordingly, reducing some rents, deferring some payments, and giving amnesty to others when warranted. All their tenants who had healthy businesses before the pandemic, still have healthy ones now. I was so moved at the grace this member extended to their tenants. Like the town clerk, they had found a third way. Yes, they had no debt, which allowed them the freedom to be generous, and yes, holding onto tenants is often cheaper than replacing them. But I am sure our member had plans for that income that went up in smoke, and choosing to adapt in this transitional moment, to follow the Spirit's lead and manage the tenants in this way was a sacrifice against their immediate financial self-interest. But gracious God moving amongst us, wasn't it the holy way?! Landlords don't often enjoy a great reputation amongst us

Townies, but here is one of our own who used their power, influence, and resources to creatively and responsively broker peace. Think of all the ways their rescue rippled out into our community. It saved many businesses, many jobs, the livelihoods of many families. It was such a blessing to hear this story of corporate generosity overriding our primary self-interest. I trust that in your own way, many of you have quietly offered similar acts of generosity, benevolence, care, as instruments of peace in bitter times. Surely, the Holy Spirit inspired our faithful landlord, just as it has inspired our session to act beyond our own self-interest, in spite of the financial burdens our congregation carries, and dedicate a chunk of our budget toward helping our neighbor and advancing our goals with the Matthew 25 initiative. We look forward to hearing more about what God will do through that generous outreach, made possible by your continued faithfulness to the ministries of the church.

I pray that in times of transition, we might be more like the town clerk than Demetrius, that like my new favorite landlord and our church session, we might be similarly inspired to see and accept the new thing God is doing, to adapt and use our power and influence to serve more than our own self-interest. Cultivating that third way will surely help us broker peace in Christ's name, and surely, the word of God will flourish here, as in Ephesus. May it be so. To God be all the glory. Amen.