

Maker of Life

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St. Andrew's Episcopal Church

This past week Google held their annual Google I/O developers conference. All the big tech companies hold these conferences, during which they announce products, changes, and their vision for the future. Among other things, Google announced that soon you'll be able to pay for things with only your voice. The demo involved ordering and paying for lunch to be delivered from Panera (I think it was a cranberry salad with steak and an agave iced tea) — all just by talking to the Google cylinder on the countertop.

If this all works by voice, and if they ever sign Chick-fil-a up as a partner, I might have to duct tape my kids' mouths shut.

This idea fell under a broader description of the future Google imagines for all of us. Whereas the last decade has seen the rise of the “mobile first” world, in which cell phones have become the primary communication and computing devices for most of us, Google's vision of the next decade is an “AI first” world, AI being short for artificial intelligence.

This may seem a strange place to begin a sermon on based on Paul's preaching in Athens, in which ordering salads for delivery by talking to a cylinder would have caused Paul to get the exorcism liturgy out. But Paul's preaching was aimed at things artificial. The AI Paul had an issue with was not not artificial intelligence, but artificial idols. Paul contrasted what was made by human artifice — what was artificial — with what was made by divine artifice. Because we have fewer artificial idols running around — statues made of gold or silver or stone — I'm going to talk about artificial intelligence. But I'm only going to do that to get you to think about God.

First though, let's go back to Paul's world.

The Athens in which Paul stood up to speak was a cosmopolitan place. Though far past its prime as the leader of the Greek city states, Athens still had a reputation as a place where big questions were asked and debated, questions about life and meaning and happiness, and those kind of questions always get religious. In a polytheistic pagan culture — those religious answers naturally multiply. As Paul said, “I see how extremely religious you are in every way” (Acts 17:22).

But Paul found a point of contact — an altar to “an unknown god.” Paul said he was going to make this God known. And then he proceeded to preach about God as creator — the one who made the world and everything in it, heaven and earth. It stands to reason that since God made everything, God can’t need anything he made. God rather is the giver, not the recipient. And the thing God gives above all else is life. This is an extremely important point. Look at it there in vs. 25: “he gives to mortals life and breath and all things.” Then, after referencing two Greek poets, Paul pulled out the trump card — vs. 29: “Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals.”

Now, none of this was what got Paul in trouble — we’ll get to that. But let us note here that our world is actually nothing like 1st century Athens. Our culture is not “extremely religious...in every way.” I’d say we’re loosely religious in some ways. And what religion is infused in our culture is not polytheistic, piling gods upon gods. The golden statue set upon an altar at the far end of an enormous temple before which we offer incense is not our spiritual risk.

So you’ll have to use your imagination. I want you to imagine that one of those Greek idols was given the power of voice recognition and could speak back, out loud. If you could somehow get Alexa (Amazon’s famous virtual assistant) back to the ancient world and set her up in a temple somewhere, don’t you think she’d earn a rabid following? I mean, she predicts the weather! Correctly!

Today we don’t put Alexa in a temple; we put her in the kitchen. And we talk to her. We tell her what we need, and she does things for us. Some of us surely talk to her, or Siri, or Google Assistant — more than we talk to God. And if we’re honest, some days she seems somewhat more responsive. And pretty soon, sometime this summer according to Google, she’ll make food appear at our house. Which is all most people have ever asked of the gods anyway.

Oh, and she is literally listening, all the time. Just like God.

We are closer than humankind has ever been before to making things that are fully interactive and which carry out our will. Though these items are not explicitly religious, like the Athenian idols in Paul’s day, we offer an enormous amount of devotion, attention, and power to things (as v. 29 puts it) “formed by the art and imagination of mortals.” In Paul’s day these idols were dumb blocks covered with silver and gold; in our day it’s their insides that are laced with precious metals, and they are not so dumb. Artificially intelligent idols.

Now let me be clear. I don’t think Alexa or the Google Assistant or Siri pose a deep religious threat to our lives today. I think Alexa is great, actually — I use it all the time, and I’m excited by the thought of what it can’t quite do yet, but which

suddenly seems possible. This sermon is not encouraging you to rethink your relationship to technology; it is an encouragement to think about your relationship with God.

A generally positive response to these new technological marvels is normal. This is because when we human beings make things, especially things with which we interact — from a cabinet, to a computer program, to cylinders that talk to us — we have a natural fascination with and attachment to these objects of our creation. I built a step-stool for the Westridge campus a few weeks back. It's not an amazing piece of furniture, but it came out well enough. And I'm only slightly embarrassed to admit that when it was completed, I spent like five minutes in the garage just stepping up on it, then stepping down. Up and down. Up and down. It wasn't like it needed stress testing; I was just fascinated with my own creation and what it could do.

We have this devotion to the objects of our creation because we are made in God's image, and God is maker and creator. Remember, that's where Paul begins his address in Athens; that's where the creed we'll say in a few minutes will start. God as Creator is the starting point for talking about God at all.

Idolatry is related to this creative instinct that we have from God the Creator. Paul defines idols as things human beings imagined and made out of the material world. But if you step back a moment, human beings are just things God imagined and made out of the material world. We are, by that definition, God's idols. God is fascinated with us; dedicated to us; constantly taking care of us.

Both Isaiah and the apostle Paul use an analogy to talk about this relationship: we are the clay and God is the potter. It's a metaphor rooted not just in everyday life, but in the story the Bible tells about creation itself: "then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground."

Then human beings started forming stuff from the dust of the ground themselves, imitating our maker. And we haven't stopped since. Now the stuff we make tells us where to go, what to wear, it even brings light out of darkness (provided you have the right kind of lightbulbs). Alexa, turn on the lights.

What I'm trying to get at is that idolatry — even though we're comfortably past the pagan temple stage — is so easy for us to fall into because it's so closely related to something at the core of who we are. We are makers of things because we are made by a maker. Our God and our making all wrapped up together; and idolatry happens when we get confused about what made and what is maker.

There is an ancient and archetypal story that takes many forms. Human beings tell it repeatedly to remind ourselves of a truth we tend to ignore. As a parent of young

children, I heard it most recently in an episode of Mickey Mouse Clubhouse, so I'll tell you that version. In this episode, Goofy constructs a robot in his own image, in the image of Goofy he constructs a robot. He calls it his "Goofbot." It looks like a stiff metal version of Goofy; it talks in a slightly robotic cadence. The Goofbot is great, useful, responsive — Mickey, Minnie, Daisy, Donald, they all love the Goofbot. And then something goes awry (someone pushes his buttons), and then Goofbot refuses to listen and becomes defiant and destructive.

Thus far, we basically have the story of the creation and the fall. Goofy is like God, the Goofbot is created in his image; at first everything is great; and then it all goes to hell in a hand basket.

Someday, when artificial intelligence goes wrong (though rather not be around to see it), I hope somebody says, "Not only the Bible, but even Mickey Mouse, told us this was a bad idea."

The question for Mickey and the gang is how do you fix the Goofbot (and the answer, as it turns out, is to replace his spring). This works because the Goofbot is an animate dead thing. Something that is not alive (like a Goofbot, or an automobile) can be fixed by something that is not alive (like a spring, or a timing belt).

This is why, at this point — at the point of saving — the story about Goofy the Goofbot and the story about God and you could not be more different. Goofbot's problem was material; our problem has to do with life. Life is what separates us, God's creations, from the idols of our own creation.

I mentioned earlier that it wasn't his critique of idols or of pagan religion that got Paul laughed at. What got him laughed at was when he spoke of Jesus' resurrection from the dead (our reading ends with Paul's speech, but the next line is "When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed").

The issue that divided Paul from the world of pagan wisdom and philosophy was whether or not God was in charge of what is alive. Make no mistake, this is still the issue that divides us from the world of secular wisdom and philosophy today.

Paul started with God as creator, the one who "himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things" and ends with God as resurrector, "raising [Jesus] from the dead," and in the middle reminds us, "In him we live and move and have our being."

The reason this story from Acts is read during Easter season, the reason it is an Easter story, is that it's about life. To understand who God is, we have to understand what God can do that we cannot. He can make things; we can make

things. He can fix things; we can fix things. He can make things live; we can make things...artificially intelligent.

The question about God is literally a matter of life and death. And what makes us alive is not our intelligence, but our God. The way the Bible talks about this is spirit. In Genesis God breathes into Adam the “breath of life” (the same word means spirit); the Wisdom of Solomon speaks of people’s need “to know the one who formed them and inspired them with active souls and breathed a living spirit into them.”

Idols don’t have that spirit. Artificial intelligence is going to bring us idols (things to which we devote our time and energy and resources) that act ever more alive. But their intelligence is not going to make them alive; making them alive is not within our power. When we sin, and idolatry is the chief sin in the Bible, we turn away from the spirit that makes us alive, away from God, and instead choose something that cannot make us alive. Whatever the idol, money, sex, power, a statue in a shrine, the progress promised by technology, even another human being, to devote ourselves to the idol is to devote ourselves something that lacks the power to make us alive, and so, in the end, will leave us dead. God comes to us in Jesus to show us that dead is not the end; that God ultimately is in charge of life. God doesn’t come to fix our sin; God comes to fix our spirit, the thing that we have that no AI — idol or intelligence — ever will.

Artificial intelligence is great. But do remember there were two trees in the Garden of Eden: one of knowledge, one of life. We were destined for the tree of life; we chose the tree of knowledge. That’s where it all went down. We’re supposed to choose life.

From creation through Christ, God is the God of life; let us not exchange anything for that life. Amen.