

Scripture: 2 Kings 18:1-4
Message: The End of "Nehushtan"
October 29, 2017; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON
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On the first Sunday of this month, Pastor Marilyn Savage preached a sermon on the story of the revival initiated by King Hezekiah. She read the story as it was told in the book of Chronicles. This morning we conclude the month of October looking at another story of the reforms by King Hezekiah, as told in the book of Kings

This week is the 500th anniversary of an event that sparked the Protestant Reformation. On the evening before All Saints Day, also known as All Hallows' Eve, October 31, 1517, a priest in the Roman Catholic Church named Martin Luther is said to have nailed a document of 95 statements questioning various practices in the Roman Catholic Church. He wasn't intending to leave the church or start a new church. His challenge sparked a controversy, which resulted in what we now call the Protestant Reformation.

One of the themes that came out of Luther's 95 theses was the misplaced emphasis on the traditions and practices of the church as an important part of our salvation. Luther read in the Bible that we are saved by grace, not by anything that we do (Romans 1:17 was a life-changing verse). The Roman Catholic Church, in Luther's time, had added practices like penance and giving money as a way to ensure going to heaven. The church had limited access to the Bible to only the clergy, using pictures and symbols in the church as a way of teaching the people.

Symbols have been used throughout the history of the world and especially in the history of the church. During the time of the persecution, the symbol of the fish was a way for Christians to secretly identify themselves and find directions to hidden places of worship. The letters of the Greek word for fish, *ichthus*, stood for titles of the name of Jesus: Jesus, Christ, Son of God, Saviour. There was nothing Christian about the fish, but it became a symbol for Christianity.

The cross was a symbol for capital punishment under Roman rule. When someone committed a crime against the state, they would be crucified in a public place. The cross meant cruel death and punishment. Yet that cross has become another symbol for Christians to identify themselves, because Jesus our Saviour died on a cross.

In Old Testament times, the Israelites had many different symbols decorating the temple. One particular symbol had taken on special meaning in their temple. It was a bronze serpent. The origin of this symbol goes back to Israel's years of wandering through the

wilderness after leaving Egypt. The people became very impatient with God. They spoke against God, despising his great acts of salvation, and questioning God as to why he brought them to the wilderness. God punished them with an attack of poisonous serpents. Many who were bitten died. The people repented of their rebellion and cried out to Moses. Moses cried out to God on their behalf, God allowed him to make a bronze serpent and to place it on a pole. "Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived" (see Numbers 21:4-9).

That bronze snake became a symbol of looking to God for salvation. The bronze snake itself could not heal; those who looked at it were expressing their trust in God and what he provided. Jesus referred to it later in his discussions with Nicodemus (see John 3). The snake on the pole became a symbol pointing to Christ being lifted on a cross. Anyone who looks to Jesus and believes in him will be saved and will have eternal life.

Symbols have been an important part of worship. Even the sacraments, given to us by the Lord himself, are to be used as symbols. The water sprinkled on someone's forehead has no magical power in itself. It is a symbol of the cleansing which is promised by God through Christ. It's a sign of the promises of God adopting us into his family. The bread and the cup of the Lord's Supper are symbols of the presence and nourishing of Jesus Christ to all who believe.

But symbols have not always been used appropriately as part of worship and our relationship with God. Our scripture reading for today tells us of the destruction of the symbol of the snake from the temple in Jerusalem.

The bronze snake had been made as a symbol of God's healing power. It was a symbol to which the people looked to be reminded that their healing came from God. But centuries later, when the people of Israel had forsaken the true worship of the real God, they worshiped the bronze snake. The people had come to see the bronze snake as a place where God's power dwelled, and as an object for worship.

Hezekiah saw that God was not being worshiped as he had commanded. Therefore he removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He also ordered the bronze snake to be destroyed. The name Nehushtan, which may have its origin in the Hebrew word, *nahash*, became a term of insult with the meaning "a thing of bronze." It was not an object to be worshiped, but only a thing made of bronze. Hezekiah had it destroyed because it took away from the people worshiping the one true God. What began as a good reminder of God's salvation was perverted and became detrimental to true saving

faith.

That is something like the renewal that took place through the Reformation. The Roman Catholic Church in the 15th and 16 century did not allow the people to read the Bible for themselves. Only the priest could read the Bible. The people were taught the stories from the Bible with the use of images and pictures in the churches. From this tradition comes the twelve stations of the cross, for example, teaching the people the various elements in Jesus' last hours on this earth as revealed in the gospels. From this tradition come the various pictures and statues of Bible stories and characters. The people could see these pictures and be reminded of what God had done with his people.

But as in the time of Hezekiah, these symbols became objects of worship. The focus was on the objects and took away from knowing and trusting God's grace as revealed in the Bible. Therefore at the time of the Reformation, Protestants took hammers and axes into Roman Catholic churches and smashed countless images. In their own barren church buildings they made the Bible central. That is why this pulpit is in the centre of the church. The Lord's Supper table and the baptismal font are at the side to show that the Word is of foremost importance.

Now, please do not misunderstand what I am saying. I am not suggesting that Roman Catholic worship is idolatry. They worship God. They have also gone through times of reforming and renewal. I am not judging or condemning the Roman Catholic Church. We could also say that the Protestants at the time of the Reformation went too far in destroying the images, paintings and stained glass. Thankfully we are seeing a restoration of imagery and symbols in our worship.

The warning of Nehushtan is something we must always be alert to. For example, the old form for baptism reminded us that we must not use baptism out of custom or superstition. We must not carry around our Bible as if it is some magical power of God. We must not wear a cross or an angel as if God will watch over us better because of it.

One author commenting on this story about Nehushtan suggests that we can become sentimental pack rats. The tools God uses for ministry in one generation can easily become idols in the next generation. The challenge is to identify what has become like Nehushtan in our lives and in our worship. What method, style, program, ministry, symbol, piece of furniture has become an object of worship, taking away from trust in God and worship of God? We find comfort in those familiar things, but that takes away from finding true comfort in God alone. What is the Neshushtan in your life, or in our church, that needs to be cast aside so we can

embrace what God is doing now?

Our church, the congregation with which we worship, is dear to us, and we react instinctively to any threat, real or perceived. The building in which we meet is more than simply wood and stone; it represents dreams, hopes and was built and purchased with our sweat and blood.

A church building is not evil; it is a gift from God enabling the people of God to worship comfortably in a setting that enhances worship. A Bible translation is not evil; it is a divine gift that enables us to know the will of God as delivered through those who wrote the original words. A congregation is a wonderful community of support. However, any of these can become a Nehushtan.

When we forget that it is God whom we worship and not the building in which we meet, we are guilty of idolatry. When we begin to insist that our Bible translation alone is blessed by God, we are sliding into idolatry. When particular items of sanctuary furniture or certain songs or a particular style of worship become essential items, they have become like Nehushtan. Our worship has become focussed on the thing, rather than on the God who alone is worthy of our worship.

The Reformation was a time of correction, a reminder to trust in the God of grace as he reveals himself in his Word. Our daily and weekly worship, our walk of faith, must be directed by the Holy Spirit and follow the truth of his Word as revealed in Jesus.

That gives us a lot of room for expression. It allows us to make God number one. It permits us to focus all our attention on the Lord our God. It allows us to use symbols and colours and a variety of expressions to direct our attention to the one true God. It reminds us to always look at how we live and worship and to beware that our symbols do not become objects of worship in themselves.

Learn the lesson of Nehushtan. Remember Hezekiah's reforms, the Reformation 500 years ago, as a reminder that we are always reforming. We are always going through renewal and revival, repenting of idols in our lives and returning to focus our lives of faith on God alone. Worship God in the freedom of our relationship with him in Jesus Christ.

Amen.