

October 22, 2023

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Isaiah 45:1-7; Matthew 22:15-22

Worship that Glorifies God

Throughout scripture we are invited to wrestle with how we reconcile those who exert power in our daily lives – kings and emperors; landowners and religious authorities; military leaders and government officials – with our call to recognize Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, to follow and worship him. This morning we hear two scriptures – one from the prophet Isaiah and one from the Gospel of Matthew that address kings and emperors.

The passage from Isaiah is from what scholars refer to as Second Isaiah or Deutero Isaiah, which stretches from chapters 40-55. This section comes from the time of exile – when those in Israel have been scattered to Babylon. It is scripture of hope during a time of despair, encouragement for those in exile to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city and temple that were destroyed in the conquest. In this morning's passage we hear a reference to King Cyrus. He is the King of Persia, whose army defeated the Babylonians. So he is now in power over the land where the exiles from Israel reside. He releases the captives, allowing them to return home.

I will share the first three verses of Isaiah 45 and then share the passage from the Gospel of Matthew. I will return to the end of the Isaiah passage a bit later in my sermon. Hear now a reading from Isaiah 45:1-3:

Thus says the Lord to his anointed,
to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped
to subdue nations before him and to strip kings of their robes,
to open doors before him—and the gates shall not be closed:
I will go before you
and level the mountains;
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
and cut through the bars of iron;
I will give you the treasures of darkness
and riches hidden in secret places,
so that you may know that it is I, the Lord,
the God of Israel, who call you by your name.

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you

putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. Then Jesus said to them, “Whose head is this and whose title?” They answered, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” When they heard this, they were amazed, and they left him and went away. **This is the Word of the Lord.**
Thanks be to God.

“Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” I have to admit that whenever I hear that verse, I am tempted to respond with “Pizza. Pizza.” From Little Caesar’s Pizza to Caesar salad dressing to Caesar’s Palace to Caesar’s Sportbooks and their ubiquitous ads for gaming, you would think we were living in ancient Rome. More than 1500 years after the fall of the Roman Empire, images of Caesar are still part of our daily lives. “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” You would think that the title of the ruler of a long defeated and defunct regional government would have little brand appeal, but apparently Caesar makes a great logo and marketing strategy.

Scholars believe that a denarius in the era of Jesus featured the head of Tiberius Caesar, along with the inscription: “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus.” Tiberius served from 14 – 37 CE. From our perspective in 2024, it probably doesn’t seem like a big deal that Roman coins featured Tiberius – after all we have George Washington and Abraham Lincoln on our coins. However for the Jewish people of Jesus’ day this was a significant issue. Roman emperors were considered gods. Romans required that all people they conquered not only honor the emperor as a god, but also to worship and call him Lord. That was a line that Jews and the early Christians refused to cross. They would not call Caesar “lord” or bow down to worship him. From a Jewish point of view the coin was to quote one scholar “a bite-sized bit of blasphemy.”¹ It was a “graven image” (prohibited in the Ten Commandments) of one who was to be worshipped as Lord. And to make matters even worse, these coins were how one paid their taxes in the Temple and the fees for items to be sacrificed.

And here is Jesus, just two days after he entered Jerusalem, riding on a humble donkey; just a day after he has overturned the tables of the money changers in the Temple – the money changers using these coins, here is Jesus being challenged by a group of religious leaders about whether they should pay taxes to Caesar. As in the prior confrontations we have heard from the Gospel of Matthew, the leaders were trying to entrap Jesus. This time Jesus did not answer with a parable, rather he made a simple, but profound statement that said so much. It said so much about authority and power and how we pay homage and how we worship. “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.

¹ Salt Project. *Coin Flip: Salt’s Commentary for the Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost*. October 16, 2023. Online at <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/10/12/jesus-and-the-2020-election-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-twentieth-week-after-pentecost>

And while the Romans may have considered Caesar a “god”, Jesus clearly understands the difference between the Roman little “g” god and the big “g” Lord God. Jesus has been sharing parable after parable, teaching after teaching about how the Kingdom of God is like a great wedding banquet where all are invited, where the last shall be first and the first shall be last. Jesus has been reminding his disciples and the crowds that they worship a God who is as vast as the cosmos, and yet is as deeply personal as a whisper of encouragement in a long dark night.

Even as the prophet Isaiah shares the word of the Lord which heralds King Cyrus of Persia as a liberator, the Lord reminds this king of God’s power and sovereignty. King Cyrus may not know or worship the Lord God, but the Lord God is the creator and ruler of all. Hear now the rest of our lectionary passage from Isaiah 45, verses 4-7

For the sake of my servant Jacob
and Israel my chosen,
I call you by your name;
I give you a title, though you do not know me.
I am the Lord, and there is no other;
besides me there is no god.
I arm you, though you do not know me,
so that they may know, from the rising of the sun
and from the west, that there is no one besides me;
I am the Lord, and there is no other.
I form light and create darkness,
I make weal and create woe;
I, the Lord, do all these things.

I, the Lord, do all these things. I call you by name. I form light and create darkness. From the rising of the sun and from the west, there is no one besides me. This is a God worthy of our worship, worthy of being glorified. This morning the handbell choir played *All Creatures of Our God and King*. The lyrics of this hymn remind us and all creation to lift our voices in praise: All creatures of our God and King, lift up your voice and with us sing, Alleluia! Alleluia! O brother sun with golden beam, O sister moon with silver gleam, sing praises! Alleluia!”² As St. Francis of Assisi, author of this hymn reminds us, we worship a God worthy of praise and glory. As our mission statement says: “As members of The Presbyterian Church of Okemos, We believe that in life, in death, and life beyond death, We belong to God. The Church exists to invite everyone to join the lifelong journey of faith that is life in Jesus Christ **through worship that glorifies God**.

What exactly does that mean to glorify God? In our bulletin this morning Marlene has included notes about some of the music in our service this morning, composed by Bach .

² Francis of Assisi. *All Creatures of Our God and King. Glory to God Hymnal* #15. Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.

Bach was heavily influenced by the Protestant Reformation and many of his works are explicitly biblical. Bach got his first organist job at age 17, but there were conflicts with the church leaders. They insisted that he direct the choir—which was notably lacking in musical ability. Bach was writing innovative choral pieces, but his singers couldn't handle them. And he lacked the patience to put up with them. One night, he got into a street fight with one choir member, whom he had called a "nanny-goat bassoonist." So Bach moved on to another church. And yet there were more conflicts. Those looking to reform the church were seeking to move away from what they perceived as ostentatiousness and excess, paring down the church to only those essentials – what we refer to today as the “solas.” Bach was criticized that his music was too ornate and that it was drawing attention away from God. In the spirit of the reformers, however, Bach protested loudly that his intention was to create "well-regulated church music to the glory of God.”³ As Marlene includes in the music notes, at the end of his compositions Bach inscribed the letters “S.D.G.”(Soli Deo Gloria- To God Alone, the glory). The phrase has since become one of the five solas associated with the Reformation, sola scriptura (scripture alone), Solis Christa (Christ alone), sola fide (faith alone), sola gratia (grace alone), and soli Deo gloria (glory to God alone).

Yet, I still sometimes have that nagging question of what exactly is worship that glorifies God. Or maybe to phrase it in a different way – the way writer Debie Thomas phrased it in her column in this month’s issue of *Christian Century*: What is worship for? Surely God isn’t a narcissist who demands our attention. She opens the article saying, “Those of us steeped in church life often take churchy things for granted. For me, one of those things is worship. Growing up, it never occurred to me to ask why I had to worship God; worship was simply a fact of life, as normal and unexceptional as breathing.”⁴ She goes on to share memories from her childhood and camps, saying, “There is no ambivalence in these memories. No sense of weirdness or even curiosity. I was a Christian, Christians were supposed to worship, and so I did. It’s only now, as I spend a lot of time thinking about what my religious practice looks like from the outside, that thorny questions emerge: Why do we Christians worship God? Why does God want us to and even command us to? Why is scripture filled with exhortations to give God honor, glory, praise, and adulation?”

As Thomas explores this question in more detail, she realizes that she is always worshipping something, whether she notices it or not. “We’re wired to ascribe greatness to people, places, ideas, and objects outside ourselves.” And as I shared in the words of preparation in the bulletin she hits on an important point, worship is transformational – not for the one who is the object of the worship, rather it is for the one who is engaged in the worship: “... worship is far more than expressive; it is formational. It makes us. It focuses our attention. It orders our

³*The Life and Faith of Johann Sebastian Bach: 'Soli Deo Gloria' (To the Glory of God Alone)*. December 9, 2022. Online at <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/people/j-s-bach-soli-deo-gloria-to-the-glory-of-god-alone-11635057.html>

⁴ Debie Thomas. What is worship for? Surely God isn’t a narcissist who demands our attention. *Christian Century*. October 11, 2023. Online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/column/voices/what-worship>.

priorities. It teaches us what's important and what isn't. As Richard Rohr puts it, we have to be careful, because we will always become the God we worship. Our prayer, our devotion, our praise—these rewire us. They enable us to see, hear, and think in new ways. What we worship makes us who we are.”

And what we worship – who we worship matters. “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” Jesus says, yes give the emperor his due, but remember to who you belong. The emperor and too often those who those wield earthly power claim authority by oppressing the weak and the marginalized. We claim Jesus as Lord, and worship him, because he humbled himself, served, died, and was risen. He was a different kind of ruler. He was a servant leader. God took on flesh and walked among us, healing the sick, liberating the oppressed, welcoming the outcasts, stretching loaves and fishes so that all could share in the meal; he would soon gather around a table with his disciples – even the one would betray him – and give them a gift to remember him by: the bread of life and cup of the new covenant, sealed in his blood for the forgiveness of sins. This Jesus we worship humbled himself even to death on a cross.

Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s. In the beauty of our music, we glorify God. With our voices raised together in song and prayer, we glorify God. With our hearts and mind moved by God’s word in Scripture we glorify God. And with our hands serving those in need, we are glorifying God. Give to God the things that are God’s. Our whole lives should be “given” to God, seeking to serve as we have been served. Seeking to respond in gratitude for all God has done. Join me in prayer.