

October 19 2014

Scripture Lessons ~

Psalm 96:1-9

Isaiah 45:1-7

Matthew 22:15-22

Sermon *Our Sovereign Lord*

Politics and religion don't mix. "I don't want to hear about politics from the pulpit, pastor." Over my years of ministry those were two of the unwritten rules I was expected to live by. Often times what people meant, other people's politics and my religion don't mix, or I don't want to hear about my pastor's political positions from the pulpit, especially if they are different from my own. Or perhaps, a little more poignant, I don't want to have to consider what the Bible might have to say about politics because it might change my own position.

At any rate, our desire to separate our politics from our faith runs into some snags when we actually read the scriptures, such as our lessons for today. Passages that are, in fact, blatantly political, and there are many more like them. You see, we might like to keep God out of our politics, but God refuses to surrender the whole political realm of the world to the hands of politicians.

Blessed are you, our Lord, our God, king of the universe. Do you ever take a moment to consider what a political statement that is? To declare God, King of kings, and Lord of Lords, that is a political statement. In fact, in Christianity one of the most important confessions of faith that we have, is Jesus Christ is Lord-right-Jesus Christ is Lord. And that phrase, that phrase was the Christian response to the Roman emperor's demand of allegiance that was required of every citizen of the Roman Empire that they proclaim Caesar as lord. And the Christians, even to the point of being sent to their death to be killed by wild animals like lions or nailed on crosses. Many Christians refused to proclaim Caesar as Lord, instead boldly proclaimed Jesus Christ as Lord. It was a political statement.

After all is said there are a lot of traps that we fall into when people of faith enter the world of politics. That is exactly why the Pharisees asked Jesus to speak to whole issue of paying taxes. They wanted to entrap him. Let's stop before we go into that and seek to understand a little bit exactly what the they were asking Jesus. You see, the tithes that were required of Jewish people; the tithe is actually is what supported the Jewish government as well as the temple during Jesus' day. There was this flat tax of 10 % of all that you earned. The first fruits covered all the expenses of the Jewish state as well as the Jewish religion and it wasn't a question of tithing that was the issue in Jesus' day. That is not what the Pharsees was talking were talking about. Specifically, they were concerned whether or not Jewish people should be forced to pay taxes to Rome, taxes that were collected by various tax collectors, and by so doing, support the occupying government which they all despised. If Jesus said yes, pay the taxes then he would be despised by the Jewish people. If he said no, don't pay the taxes, then he would be considered an insurrectionist and be in deep trouble with the Roman government. If, in either case, the Pharsees had carefully crafted their question as no matter how Jesus answered it, Jesus would come out the loser and they would win the day. Then Jesus speaks, "Give God the things that are God's and to Caesar the things that are Caesar's". That would be the spot where they were amazed. They may have been amazed not so much by Jesus' wisdom as by the fact that he managed to escape from their trap. "Give therefore the emperor the things that are emperor's and give to God the things that are God's."

In my first parish over in Thompson Falls there was a crusty old guy by the name of Jake. Jake almost never came to church, even though his wife had helped found the congregation and remained a pillar of the congregation. However, Jake felt that this was his Christian service, Jake would take the pastor fishing. He and his wife would often times have the pastors out for dinner. It was on one of those occasions Jake brought up this matter of paying taxes. "You know what, pastor, Jake said. "I remember one year when I had to pay \$25,000 dollars in taxes, it was just me and my bulldozer making roads in the woods and I had to pay \$25,000 in taxes. What I don't understand, he went on to say, is why people

grumble and complain about paying taxes. He said, there were also years, he let me know, when he didn't have to pay any taxes at all. "You know what, pastor". He said, "the years when I had to pay taxes were a whole lot better years than when I didn't have to pay any at all. I had never thought about it that way before." We should be grateful for the opportunity to pay taxes, since it is a sign in fact that we had prospered during the course of the year. Of course the same thing is true regarding our tithes to support the work of the church. What a wonderful thing it is to have prospered and to have the opportunity to give a tithe to the church. What a wonderful thing that is and how can we not respond any other way than with gratitude to God for all that God has given us.

The other side of the gratitude coin, whether we were talking about the church or the state, is to consider all that the Lord is doing through both church and the state. If I were a stewardship consultant and hired to come in here now and speak about stewardship it would seem quite natural to speak about what God is doing for this congregation here locally here and abroad. I would encourage you to gratefully support that work with your tithes. But I am just a guest here and I am going to guess that you have never heard about paying taxes with a grateful heart, because all that God is doing for the government. Anybody want to raise their hand if they have heard that sermon. I parked my car in the right corner of the street outside so that I might make a quick escape when the service is over before anybody has the time to heat up a tub of tar and feathers.

But before we go down that road, I want to call your attention to the Old Testament lesson that was read for today. I am fascinated by Cyrus, God's anointed. Cyrus the Great, historians know as a Persian Emperor is not clear in the passage we read from Isaiah. He was the Emperor of Persia. He was not a Jew. In fact, he probably never even heard of Jews, or at least if he had heard of them, he did not much care about them. And yet, it was Cyrus who is repeatedly referred in the book of Isaiah as the messiah, God's anointed. The history of this was that in 539 BC the Babylonian Empire had conquered the nation of Israel, bringing an end to the rule of King David's descendents and the sovereignty of the nation Israel. Not only had Babylon conquered Israel, but in order to subdue its people, they had taken the people of Israel out of Palestine and herded them all the way over to Babylon where they were put to work for the Babylonian Empire in an area actually near to modern day Iraq. So the people of Israel had been hauled off to work as slaves once again; forced to leave behind all the hopes and dreams associated with the Promised Land. The land which had been promised to Abraham; the temple they had built had been destroyed; the people were deported and the land lay in waste; and there by the rivers of Babylon they cried.

A generation later their salvation would come from a most unlikely source. The Lord's messiah that would save them was yet another emperor of a foreign country, enter Cyrus the Great. In the time that had passed when Babylon had conquered Israel, a new empire was arising, that was the Persian Empire headed by a king Cyrus the Great. And Cyrus was able to lay waste to Babylon. Iran was Persia in temporary language. Cyrus laid waste to Iraq or Babylon in what may have been an arbitrary act, or seemed like it to the people of Israel. Once Cyrus conquered Babylon he issued a decree that sent all the captive people of the Babylonian Empire home to their own land. So Israel set out on that journey across the desert to Palestine. Isaiah tells us that this was no accident of history. It was not a fortunate turn of events that the Israelites profited from. Isaiah declares Cyrus the Persian Emperor, although he didn't even know the name of the Lord, was nevertheless God's anointed messiah, God's servant. "I call you by name, a surname you do not know me, God says. Isaiah says all the conquests of Cyrus, all the conquests that Persian empire enjoyed were victories that God has given to him for the sake of saving the people of Israel. Cyrus the messiah, the savior of Israel and yet a foreign emperor and he didn't even know the name of God- remarkable.

Going back to today's gospel reading, I remember what it said, Jesus says, "give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to give to God the things that are God's". When you consider all the things that belong to God there is not much left for the emperor. There is something quite attractive about that statement, especially for those of us who are a little bit anti-government.

What this Isaiah passage makes clear to us, and what I find so intriguing, is that it is not about the church vs. the state or religion or politics, but the declaration of God's sovereignty over the entire

creation. God is our sovereign Lord. God is sovereign over all creation, both over church and the state. What Isaiah recognized is that when God needed someone to get Israel out of exile all he needed to do was whistle and call Cyrus from the East. Cyrus would come to God's call and do God's work, even though he didn't even know the Lord's name. Sovereignty, God is in charge. It doesn't always look like that, and sometimes it looks like the whole world is going to hell in a hand basket-right. And again in spite of our fears there is only one Lord, and one Father. God is in charge. Politics are his realm and religion is his realm. When you are king of the universe there is little that falls outside your realm. God is in charge. For this we can be extremely grateful, because no matter how dire our situations may seem, God is finally in charge and has the last word. God's word to us is he will deliver us as he delivered Israel from captivity in Babylon