

21st Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 10.22.23

Isaiah 45:1-7

Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him~ and the gates shall not be closed: ²I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, ³I 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. ⁴For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me. ⁵I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me, ⁶so 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. ⁷I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things.

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶So 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. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" ²¹They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away. (374)

How to live in this world? How to live in this sullied, sorry, worn out world? How to tolerate the corruption, the compromise?

Pay your money to Caesar and live to see another day.

But what of your hope? But what of your dream of an order of things that doesn't insist that you forget all that's happened up 'til now and turn a blind eye to all that's currently going just to have some peace of mind? What about *actual* justice?

The question the Pharisees and Herodians brought to Jesus: their bringing it to him: they did this out of malice. That's what the story says. And it must have been something like that because otherwise you hardly ever see these two groups working together. A common enemy would have been the only thing to bring them on the same side. A common enemy can do that. That said, you hardly ever see the Herodians at all, not in the gospels anyway, not in the life of Jesus.

Yes, it's true that both groups sought political independence for the Jewish people. Both the Pharisees, these many-in-number interpreters-of-the-Law, and the Herodians, these more explicitly political actors, wanted Rome off the people's back. But the Pharisees wanted to restore

the kingdom to the ancient house of David in the north, while the Herodians wanted the kingdom restored to the much more recent Herodian dynasty of the south, of Judea.

Both, however, apparently felt only malice for Jesus, who seems not to have taken sides in this matter, or in much of anything, come to think of it. He seems never to have taken sides. That's why they say to him in their flattering approach: "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." See, somehow, Jesus had managed the trick of living close in without ever taking sides. Somehow, Jesus had managed the trick of being intimately concerned with the concerns of people without ever aligning with an ideological camp.

That's not easy. People can tell when you're trying to stay above the fray—and often, people, people in the fray, don't like it when you try to stay above it all. That's a power move, often times, and cowardly one at that.

The Herodians and the Pharisees, those with a recent claim to power and those with an ancient claim to power: they could tell. They could see what Jesus was doing, what Jesus was managing to do. Really, there's some fray that, to stay above it, is itself to take a provocative stance. You have to pick a side. Otherwise, you're complicit to the greater evil: Rome.

Elizabeth Spiers is a writer, an entrepreneur in new media. She also writes opinion pieces for *The New York Times*. Earlier this week, an article of hers appeared under the headline: "I Don't Have to Post about My Outrage. Neither Do You." She gets right to it:

I am neither Jewish nor Palestinian, and none of my six regular gigs have anything to do with foreign policy, but the other day I opened Twitter (now called X) after some time offline to find people I don't know demanding that I make a public statement about what's happening in the Middle East. It seemed that most of the people on social media had made a statement, including various corporate brands, celebrities and miscellaneous lifestyle influencers.

...[Not] everyone was taking a side. As I scrolled through my timeline, I saw lots of random citizens being told that if they didn't speak out, they, too, would have blood on their hands.

People speaking from both the right and the left seemed to attribute [any] silence to depraved indifference to human suffering, though they were divided on which humans were suffering...[The] voices yelling at me and anyone else who failed to post seemed to believe that not making a statement was itself a statement — and an immoral one, at that.

...[But the] impulse toward loud, reductive declarations reflects genuine fear about horrors that lie beyond words. Simple binaries imply simple solutions. And it's much more pleasant to tell yourself you stand on the side of good, against evil, than to question whether the lines of demarcation were drawn correctly—[or if they can be drawn at all this world, which is my edit].

Sitting with uncertainty is hard...

Knee-jerk social media posts are not what bother me most, though. Instead, it's the idea that not posting is wrong somehow — that everyone needs to speak, all the time. It discourages shutting up and listening and letting the voices that matter the most be heard over the din. It implies it's not OK to have any uncertainty about what's going on or any kind of moral analysis that does not lend itself to presentation in a social media post. It does not leave time or space for people to process traumatic events in the sanctuary of their own minds or to gather more information before pronouncing a judgment. It pressures people who don't have an opinion yet or are working out what they think to manufacture one and present it to a jury of total strangers on the internet who will render an instant verdict on its propriety.

So, which will it be, Jesus? Whose side are you on? The Pharisees would have known that to pay the tax to Caesar is to corrupt your status as one among the people of God. The Herodians might have been more willing to pay the tax, as a matter of political expediency, which isn't as cynical a thing as it might sound. You can't change things if you're dead. You gotta play the game if you want to change the game. The Herodians: maybe these were players, while the Pharisees were more purists.

So, which would it be?

Really, which?

We're in the last week of Jesus' life. We're in the Temple, now, which is to say in the last remaining days before he would be killed, before he would be raised. Would it be a stretch to suppose one reason he was crucified is because he resisted taking a side? Because in some situations that won't win you any friends, but it will win you a whole lot of enemies.

Isaiah, for his part, was still reading the signs of the times, and in ways that would have troubled lots of people. The book of Isaiah, from which we heard just now, is likely three books, three prophets prophesying from three periods of time.

1st Isaiah prophesied from the time prior to the exile, prior to when Babylon attacked Judea, though they had previously attacked Israel. For 1st Isaiah, the world was full of foreboding, impending doom. Terrible things were about to happen, and the only thing the people could do to prepare was to understand how it had come to this: how they'd practiced injustice as a nation, how

they'd forgotten their purpose to be a people of true justice. All they could do was confess, brace themselves, and trust that somehow the will of God would play out.

2nd Isaiah, from which we just heard, prophesied from the time following the attack, after Jerusalem had fallen and the Temple had been torn down and the people had been forced into exile. For 2nd Isaiah, there was hope only in that the worst had happened and a but dawning hope that there would ever come a time to return and rebuild, that a new way would be made.

3rd Isaiah, the shortest portion of this long book of prophecy, lived and worked at a time when return was a new possibility. Babylon would fall to Persia, and the Persian Empire would release the exiles, would allow them to return to their homeland. And the emperor to bring Babylon to its knees was Cyrus, so-called Cyrus the Great.

He did not know the Lord, of course. How could he? He wasn't of the Jews and the Jews were neither a big group nor a much-known-about group. Nonetheless, according to Isaiah (2nd Isaiah), though Cyrus didn't know the Lord, the Lord knew Cyrus and knew what history had laid out as a possibility for him, and by virtue of him as possibilities for the people, namely to return home. It was by the brutal acts of Cyrus the Great that the people could live again as they'd originally been called to live, which made it so Cyrus the Great must be understood as making a way for God in the world.

But how can that be? How can it be thought that it was God to arm the emperor? How can it be thought that it was the Lord to grasp the hand that would subdue lesser nations?

This is the problem of the so-called sovereignty of God. To imagine that God is sovereign is to trust that the world, and all that is therein, belongs to God, is in the hand of God—which is but a short walk to thinking everything that happens in the world is an expression of God's will. Cuz God's in control, right? 'Cuz God's got a plan, got a plan even for you, and your job is to figure out what that plan is, 'cuz, God's got this, right?

That is a common faith claim among a certain type of millennial Evangelical: "God's got this." Google it and you'll find it's the title of several different books, and lots of sermons and sermon series from lots of suburban independent churches. It's printed on wristbands and bumper stickers and memes special made for Instagram with backgrounds of millennial pink. And if it's a faith affirmation that gets you through a rough day, then God bless it, I'm not about to take it from you. But don't expect it to bear much weight in, for example, Gaza today, or in the now ravaged kibbutz, Nir Oz.

Or, if it does bear weight in such places among such situations, be very careful, because you might be taking God to be more of a partisan than God is. You might be imagining God as taking sides, as most likely taking *your* side.

I had a professor in divinity school who imagined God not as partial to one side or another, but also not as impartial, that neutral gaze that's not going to get too involved in all this messy conflict, that patronizing, bemused gaze that's above it all. No, he imagined God as omnipartial: God is on *every* side, God is passionately, urgently in love with the yet unlikelihood but very worthy aim that all should have life and have it in abundance.

And how I imagine this taking effect is less that God's in control, and more that God is responsive; less that "God's got this" and more that God dwells in our midst in every circumstance, even in every terrible clash or utter breakdown, as a response to turns of events, as one of the choices we might make or as a playing out of things that is beyond our choosing.

There are so many factors that come to play in history's unfolding!

There are so moving parts that make up an eventually completed epoch or era or event or day.

How could it possibly be that God is in control of *this*, this whole thing, which is so clearly not in any *one's* control, but is very much a group effort, and a chaotic one at that?

To claim such a thing, that God's in control: that's a totalitarian faith, a corruption of the classic faith that the modern era foists upon us, and it's both cheap and flimsy while also brutal and ultimately violent because it pins on the sovereignty of God the worst of history's offenses—and often blithely so. "You're family's been slaughtered? Well, God's got this."

It's no wonder you tend to hear such faith claims from those who enjoy worldly privilege, even power, who can indeed turn a blind eye to savagery without even knowing that's what they're doing. Look at those book covers, the ones with that as a title. The pictures of the authors: they've all just had their hair done, but it's been done to look natural.

God isn't in control; God is responsive. God is the warp to history's weft. And God-with-us is the tacking of our boat as we sail into headwinds of history that, though sometimes gentler than others, will never let up.

The question for life: it isn't, "Where did it all go so wrong and how will ever be made right?" It is rather, "Where is the Lord in this now, this moment, this circumstance, however wonderful, however terrible?"

This is the sovereignty of God. This is how Cyrus the Great, one of history's worst, bloodiest, more brutal emperors might also accidentally have made a new way for God. That doesn't make it good, but it does recognize that even he isn't beyond redemption, even his acting in terrible power isn't greater than God's acting in gracious power, and to glorious end that has been all creation's end since the beginning.

So, pay your dues to Caesar, the trinkets that Caesar has decided are important, the wealth of the world that we've all decided is so important. This you can do because it all dwells in the gracious grasp of the Sovereign Lord. It might be Caesar's today, but tomorrow will bring new turns, and then, who knows?

Therefore, as for you, you who are not Caesar, put your trust in something more true, more enduring. And look, with such trust as your vision, for the opportunities to opt for the Lord in all that you do. They will come—these opportunities. They will come.

The Lord is with us—with us each and all. God is with us.

Thanks be to God.