**Weekend of Sunday, October 22, 2023**

**21st Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 29/Year A**

**First Reading: Isaiah 45:1-7**

**Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 22:15-22**

**Sermon Title: *“God’s Sovereignty, Faithful Living”***

**Theme**

*In today’s first reading God uses the Gentile ruler Cyrus to accomplish divine purposes. When the Pharisees try to trap Jesus, he tells them to give the emperor what belongs to him and to God what belongs to God. To gather for worship reminds us that our ultimate allegiance is to God rather than to any earthly authority. Created in the image of God, we offer our entire selves in the service of God and for the sake of the world.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Isaiah 45:1-7**

*The prophet announces that Cyrus the Persian emperor is the one the Lord has anointed to end Israel’s exile. The Lord makes this choice so that the whole world will recognize this Lord as the only God. Persia had a god of light and a god of darkness; the Lord claims sovereignty over both light and darkness.*

 1Thus 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.

**Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10**

*Most likely this letter is the first written by Paul. Paul gives pastoral encouragement and reassurances to new Christians living in an antagonistic environment. Their commitment of faith, love, and hope makes them a model for other new Christian communities*

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1Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
  To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
  Grace to you and peace.

 2We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly 3remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, 5because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake. 6And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for despite persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, 7so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. 9For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, 10and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

**Gospel: Matthew 22:15-22**

*After Jesus begins teaching in the temple, religious leaders try to trap him with questions. First they ask if God’s people should pay taxes to an earthly tyrant like Caesar.*

15Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap [Jesus] 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.

**Sermon**

One of my favorite studies that I have ever had the pleasure to lead was Henry Blackaby’s “Experiencing God.” Blackaby is an ordained Canadian Baptist minister. I know, me exalting a Baptist, what is the world coming to? When I led the study I had to explain away some of his Baptist theology that doesn’t mesh well with Lutheranism, but when we get beyond that, his work is phenomenal!

One particular principle that Blackaby coined that I have applied in my life has to do with the providence of God. Blackaby says that when the Christian observes a situation we ought not to jump to judgment and work against it, rather we should contemplate if God is at work in it – and where is God not at work? And if we conclude that God is a work in that situation, we should join God there.

Being fearless, allow me to offer a couple of examples:

Right now, I think the world is on the brink of global war. The tension between Israel and the Palestinians and all Muslims; the war between Russia and Ukraine, the ill-will between China and Taiwan, and North and South Korea. Any single flashpoint could bring all of this to a head at one time.

Blackaby would say that we should observe the situation and discern where God is already at work and join Him there. We could discuss where God is at work in the scenario I mentioned, but that would distract us from the real business of the day.

A second example can be found in our First Reading from Isaiah. Cyrus, who is mentioned in the first verse of our First Reading is the Ruler of Persia. What? Not an Israelite? Do you mean to tell me that God is elevating the ruler of a conquering nation over Israel? Yes, that is what I am telling you.

In the time before the First Reading, the Israelites had been conquered by the Assyrians, then the Babylonians. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was a particularly cruel overlord. His successful military career caused the [destruction of Jerusalem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Jerusalem_%28587_BC%29) which led to what is known as the [Babylonian Captivity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babylonian_captivity) where the Israelite population, and people from the surrounding lands, were deported to Babylonia. This exile lasted 70 years, during which the Israelites lost faith in their God who they determined could obviously be defeated, and were forced to give up the rituals of their worship. Over perhaps two or three generations the religious life of the Israelites was all but forgotten.

It was in this situation that God gave Isaiah a message to give to the people. God Himself was going to anoint a leader for them who would lead them out of their miserable plight and allow them to return to their homeland and restore their lives to what it was before the Babylonians defeated them. And yes, that anointed one was Cyrus of Persia. Following the [conquest of Babylon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall_of_Babylon), Cyrus issued the [Edict of Restoration](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edict_of_Cyrus), in which he authorized and encouraged the return of the Israelite people to the former [Kingdom of Judah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_Judah), officially ending the [Babylonian captivity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babylonian_captivity). And it came to pass that those Israelites, by then known as the Judahites, or more simply, the Jews, that were still alive returned home, rebuilt the walls of the city of Jerusalem, rebuilt the Temple, and resumed their lives of faith.

In the First Reading from Isaiah, we encounter a powerful declaration of God's sovereignty. God, through Cyrus, a foreign king, accomplished His divine purpose. This passage reminds us that God's ways are often beyond our understanding, and He can use even unlikely instruments to fulfill His plans. It underscores that God is sovereign and in control of all things.

Back to Blackaby’s principle, The Jews should heed the words of the prophet, observe what God is doing through this unlikely messiah, Cyrus of Persia, and join God there. We ought to remember that and join God wherever and whenever we see God at work.

Let’s move on to the Gospel Reading from Matthew. In this passage, the Pharisees attempt to trap Jesus by asking whether they should pay taxes to Caesar. Jesus astutely responds, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." This teaches us the importance of fulfilling our earthly obligations while recognizing that our ultimate loyalty belongs to God.

God appoints civil leadership over all people and it is God who allows them to lead. However, sometimes we end up with bad leaders as well as good leaders – and yet, God is sovereign and in control of all things. Mere mortals can't comprehend the mind of God, but the faithful response to every situation is to observe where God is at work and join Him there. Jesus understood that His Heavenly Father had appointed Caesar to rule over the Jews. He wasn’t going to fight what God had ordained. Rather, given the situation is what it is, he continued the godly work he was sent by his Heavenly Father to do.

I must say, that having led Blackaby’s “Experiencing God” more than once, it has truly shaped me. Clearly, in my vocation I am exposed to a lot of sickness, death, and grief. One might ask how I deal with it. My response is, that I trust that God remains sovereign and on the throne, and nothing happens without his knowledge and blessing. And so when I observe God at work in my midst, I join Him there, asking myself, how can anything that God ordains be bad? I may get sad and grieve just like you do. But how can I be sad about observing God at work, even if I don’t like it or understand it?

It is this very attitude that the Apostle Paul lifts up as virtuous in the Second Reading from First Thessalonians. Paul commends the church for their faith, love, and hope amid trials. Their faithful living and witness for Christ serve as an example to others. This passage emphasizes the transformative power of the gospel and how our lives should reflect our faith.

Now, let me see if I can explain the thread I see running through all three of these readings.

Isaiah's message reminds us of God's absolute sovereignty, guiding the course of history according to His divine purpose.

1 Thessalonians illustrates the transformative power of faith, love, and hope in our lives as we faithfully live out our witness for Christ.

And Matthew's lesson reminds us of the balance between our earthly responsibilities and our spiritual allegiance to God.

So, how do we apply these teachings in our lives? I’m so glad you asked.

*First*, we acknowledge God's sovereignty and trust that His divine plan is unfolding, even in challenging times.

*Second*, we strive to live faithfully, allowing our faith, love and hope to shine as a witness to the world.

*Third*, we remember to render to God what is rightfully His, recognizing that our primary allegiance is to Him.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

In conclusion, my friends, these passages encourage us to embrace God's sovereignty, live faithfully, and balance our earthly responsibilities with our spiritual devotion. As we navigate life's complexities, may we remember that God is in control, and our faithfulness to Him is our greatest testimony to the world. Let us render to God what is God's, surrendering our hearts and lives to His loving and sovereign hands. Amen.

**Prayer**

Holy God, you have made us in your image, and we belong to you and you alone. Therefore we offer ourselves to you, in service, love, and praise. Use us for the glory of your Kingdom and for the good of the whole world that you created out of love. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen