

Sermon: To Form Light and Create Darkness

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Psalm 96; Isaiah 45:1-7; Matthew 22:15-22**

In our call to worship, the psalmist asks us to ‘sing to the Lord a new song,’ and says, ‘all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.’ This is a song about the one, universal God of all. And in Isaiah, when God says, ‘I form light and create darkness,’ that tells us that it is God who guides the movements of the sun, the moon, and the planets.

Only God can do these things. All the house gods we hang onto in our ancient tribal customs, they’re just clay. But the Lord made the heavens.

Isaiah presents an interesting situation. In the entire Bible, this is the only time a non-Israelite is called ‘messiah,’ anointed. Cyrus is the king of Persia, and it was the Persians who overthrew the Babylonians. It was Cyrus, said to be a benevolent king, who let the exiles go back to Judah to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. But to Isaiah, it was God who empowered Cyrus on behalf of the Israelites.

Listen again to verses 5 and 6, spoken to Cyrus:

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.

Besides the Lord, there is no other god, no human king, no emperor. Because he did not know the Lord, Cyrus chalks up his success to the god of Babylon, Marduk. This episode shows how the Israelites imagined God dictating the course of history, with God using Cyrus to liberate them, and so God’s power is universal.

Which brings us to Matthew and the familiar story about paying taxes.

In their effort to entrap Jesus in what he said, the Pharisees sent in their own students and ‘the Herodians,’ a Jewish political party who supported the Herods on the throne. They sent in *students* to entrap Jesus – perhaps not the best plan.

When they ask Jesus a question about paying taxes, he answers with his own question, which is a bit typical of him. He ends up exposing them as being either corrupt or in collusion with Rome. They might be corrupt because, as religious leaders, they ought not to have any material possessions at all, let alone money, and they might be colluders because the money they do have is Roman money.

So Jesus engages in some civil disobedience here. The coin belongs to Caesar, not to the people, so when Jesus says to give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, he's basically saying, 'get that thing out of here; send it back to Rome where it belongs.' At the same time, he's declaring that, along with everything else, the human emperor belongs to God, and so, therefore, must the coin.

This loops back to Isaiah where we heard that besides the Lord, there is no god – and the Caesars considered themselves gods.

There is an old story told about King Canute, the Danish king of England, of how he tried to hold back the tide. Canute was also king of Denmark, Norway and parts of Sweden, and he died when he was only 40.

Most people believe that Canute sat his throne on the beach and commanded the tide not to rise so that his royal presence would remain dry, but this was not actually the case. What he was really doing was proving a point about kings and God. When the tide came up and Canute got wet, he is alleged to have said, '*That's* what I'm talkin' about!' What he really said was, 'All the inhabitants of the world should know that the power of kings is vain and trivial, and that none is worthy the name of king but He whose command the heaven, earth and sea obey by eternal laws.'

After failing to hold back the tide, King Canute removed his crown, hung it from a crucifix, and never wore it again in honor of Almighty God.¹

If the power of kings is vain and trivial, why would anyone want to be one? Imagine how hard it must be for a king or emperor simply to keep the crown. In the Greek translation of Isaiah, God tells Cyrus, 'the strength of kings I will tear up.'

The daughter of a friend recently attended a New York Yankees playoff game. She was with a New York friend and the Sox weren't playing, so she decided to wear a Yankees cap to the game. This girl is an athlete and a born Red Sox | Celtics | Bruins | Patriots fan, but as she put the cap on her head, she thought, 'Do I really want to do this?'

She sensed that her loyalties were divided. They went to the game and everybody had fun. No problem. If they had been playing the Red Sox in New York, she would have worn her Sox cap.

More seriously, religious people who live outside the centers of their faith have always been accused of having divided loyalties. Early Christians in Rome were persecuted because they just couldn't be trusted to serve the emperor before they served God. Jews in medieval England were banished by Edward I in 1290 after a series of persecutions and they were officially banned for almost 400 years. Jews were also expelled from Spain and Portugal in 1492.

In the twentieth century, persecution of Catholics occurred before and during the Spanish Civil War in 1936, and involved 'the murder of almost 7,000 priests and other clergy, as well as thousands of lay people' because of their faith.² We know what happened to Jews in Europe during the Second World War, and the list goes on and on.

This is serious, no-questions-asked stuff. Throughout history, it has always been dangerous to profess a faith in God publicly, regardless of your tradition. These days, in this country, where it is fairly safe to publicly state one's beliefs, it comes down to asking ourselves how we balance our responsibilities as citizens of both a heavenly kingdom and an earthly nation. What does conscience demand when the emperor's actions and the teachings of our faith come into conflict? When do we remain silent and when do we speak up? What makes us decide which cap we'll wear, and when?

Cyrus did eventually come around. The Book of Ezra records that 'the Lord stirred up the spirit' of Cyrus, who decreed that 'The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah' (Ezra 1:2).

The Pharisees had hoped that Jesus would support paying taxes to Caesar, so they could portray Jesus as a Roman sympathizer, even though they themselves carried the Roman coins. The Herodians went the other way: they would have preferred it if Jesus had *opposed* paying taxes, because then they could accuse him of treason.

But he gave them a typical Jesus answer, which a third-century theologian named Tertullian interpreted as meaning, 'Render to Caesar Caesar's image, which is on the coin, and to God God's image, which is on [people].'³

Has anyone had the chance to catch any of the Orionid meteor shower this month? What you're seeing are bits of ice and debris cast off by Halley's Comet. Looking up at a night-time sky makes it hard to sense the movement of the heavens, until you glimpse your first meteorite. On the other hand, in watching an eclipse, as most of us did this past August, you can't help but be aware of how the sun, the moon, and the earth all move in tandem; everything is connected in an amazing, mysterious way.

The psalmist says to 'sing to the Lord a new song.' Modern times in the church might require new songs, new ways to communicate with the always-changing culture around us. New songs might help us re-imagine our world of faith, give us a renewed sense of identity, and help us adopt new ways of thinking and talking about God in the world. Psalm 96 reminds us that God is God for all the nations; God is universal.

Maybe we need songs that remind us that God intends to bring justice to all the world, an impartial justice without favorites, and to judge all the people with integrity.

Maybe we need a new perspective on God, who moves the heavens and the earth.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.firstclasssailing.com/blog/the-king-canute-dispute/>

² Julio de la Cueva, 'Religious Persecution, Anticlerical Tradition and Revolution: On Atrocities against the Clergy during the Spanish Civil War' *Journal of Contemporary History* 33.3 (July 1998): 355.

³ Tertullian, *Tertullianus De idololatria* (ed. J. H. Waszink and J. C. M. van. Winden; Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1987) 51–55.