

Sermon Title: "Pathfinding in a Post-Christian World"

October 18th, 2020 – 20th Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Isaiah 45:1-7, Matthew 22:15-22



Theme:

What's in it for me?

Sermon Text:

Grace and Peace to you from our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you turn on the TV this time of year, it seems like we are bombarded with political ads. Are you tired of them yet? Me, too. Don't like any of your choices? Feel like you have to choose between the lesser of two evils or vote for a fictional character? It can be quite challenging at times trying to figure our way through this as a Christian.

Fortunately, we're Lutheran, and Martin Luther gave us his "Two Kingdom Theory" to help us navigate our way when church and state intersect, but more on that later. Luther wrote this so long ago and in Germany, does this really apply to using our current situation? I think the answer is "yes," but we'll get to that a little later.

In our Old Testament text, Isaiah is talking about the liberation of the Jews living in exile in Babylon. The Persian Empire just defeated the Babylonians, and as is fairly typical, the conquered kingdom's captives are now released by the new rulers. God had promised an end to captivity, but here God uses the Persian King, Cyrus "the Great (He gave himself that nickname)." Cyrus was barely better than Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian King he replaced. If he didn't like you, he'd feed you to lions or some other gruesome form of execution. Cyrus ranked up there with Hugo Chavez, Manuel Noriega, or some of these other third world dictators, but God still uses Cyrus for his purpose. God promised that the Jews would return to Canaan following their exile and the Temple would be rebuilt. Cyrus believed that the reason that the Babylonians fell was that they neglected the sacred places of the conquered peoples and as a result, their gods were angry. God still used that crazy belief for His purpose, and as

such, the Jews were allowed to return and Cyrus even funded the rebuild of the Temple in Jerusalem, albeit not as grand as the one that Solomon had built.

Fast forward a few hundred years and by this time Judea has passed from Persian to Greek to Roman Rule and another ruler, who liked to call himself, "The Great," set out on a renovation project on the Temple to restore its former grandeur and help keep the people in check. That renovation project would last longer than Herod would live and was only completed about six years before the Romans destroyed it in 70 AD. Ironically, Herod wanted to restore the Temple as a way of using the Jews' faith as a way of controlling the people. This construction is still ongoing while Jesus is there during Holy Week in our Gospel Lesson, when the Pharisees try to trip Jesus up, by asking Him if the Jews should pay taxes to Caesar.

Even though the Jews invited the Romans in, so that they could gain independence from the Greeks, by Jesus' day, the Romans were clearly in charge and had worn out their welcome. Most Jews wanted the Romans out and the Romans ruled Judea with an iron fist. Law and order was maintained through the sword. If Jesus answered the Pharisees that we should pay taxes to Caesar, then He would have appeared, in the eyes of the Jews, that He would be claiming that Caesar was greater than Yahweh. If Jesus, answered, "No," then the Pharisees were ready to turn Him over to the Roman Authorities as an insurrectionist. This was a trap and a no-win situation for Jesus, or so it appeared. Jesus, understanding more than the Pharisees, on how God works, gives His famous, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's." This is what forms the basis for Luther's "Two Kingdom Theory."

In case you didn't know, Luther's "Two Kingdom Theory," says that we exist in two kingdoms, "The Kingdom of the Right (The Church)" and the "Kingdom of the Left (State)." God uses the government to provide rule of law, justice, provide roads, and protection. These are important, but God does most of His work in the Church. It's here that He shares the Gospel, brings salvation, and brings us closer to Him. This is a brief overview, but I don't want to bore you too much with this. Just know this, James Madison, in particular, found this theory very influential when drafting our Constitution and Bill of Rights.

So, what do these texts mean for us? Last week I attended the Northwest District's virtual Professional Worker's Conference. A major source of discussion and instruction was how do we function in a Post-Christian world like we find ourselves in. We see Christians struggling in how to be relevant and we tend to find ourselves in two basic pole positions. 1. We prioritize Church Doctrine and Practices, even to the expense of relationships with other people. Or 2.

We prioritize our relationships with people at the expense of our doctrine, practice, and reality. This is kind of like what Eli did in the Old Testament. Both of these positions have their problems, but we really want to find a place where these two intersect, where we care for both God's Word and the People around us. We need to articulate that showing love for people does not equate to an affirmation of their life choices or beliefs.

Another point of discussion that came out of the conference was the most extreme people politically tend to make the most noise, while the vast majority of Americans feel that their voice is not heard. While many Christians feel the loss of relevance in the outside culture, there are some, particularly the Evangelicals, who try to restore that relevance through political mechanisms. Opposed to them are Christians, who tend to be more focused on Social Justice, caring for the poor, etc., and are more on the left side of political spectrum, spend a lot of their energy opposed to the Christians on the Right. Both of these groups are listening to part of what Jesus is saying to all of us, but they are overlooking part of it too. So how should we go about this?

God wants us to render to "Caesar what is Caesar's." When we vote and participate in the political process, we are being good citizens. God gave us this government for His purpose, and it will always be subject to Him. As Christians, we have an opportunity to model Christian Love and civility to those who we disagree with politically. Showing love for somebody does not equal affirmation. We can disagree and still love them. God wants us to be light in this dark world.

God wants us to "Give to God, what is God's." We do this by honoring God for what He has done for us, receiving His Word and Sacraments, and then loving our neighbors as God first loved us. Don't let yourself be distracted by political life if it is impairing your spiritual life. As we saw in our Old Testament and Gospel Lessons, God uses some pretty wicked rulers to achieve His purposes. In the end, God is greater than Cyrus, Herod, Donald, Joe, Jay, or Loren. God will continue to use those guys for His purpose, and He will limit the damage they cause to His creation. God uses sinners like these guys and you and me to achieve His goals.

The Devil likes to distract us from what is important. He loves to divide God's people and keep them distracted over relatively minor issues in the grand scheme of things. Don't take the bait. Yes, be a good citizen. Study the issues and candidates, and make informed decisions come November. Do your homework, but don't let your civic duties negatively impact your relationship with God. I know many of you hold opinions on who should be in office and who

shouldn't, but don't fret if your guy doesn't win. The occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. won't affect your place in Jesus's household. Jesus is coming soon, and He's preparing a place for you. Jesus is greater than any of these guys, but no, sorry, Jesus is not running for office, and He's not asking you to write Him in although it is tempting sometime. His Kingdom is far better.

For us Christians, we really have a challenge before us. We need to listen to Jesus and follow Him, but we also need to be in this world, loving others, and preparing for the next. We do this by being true to God's Word, and loving our neighbors, even if we don't agree with them. We can still build a good rapport with them. This year, set an example for the world, shine Jesus' light where you find the most darkness. Tough? You bet. Rewarding? Absolutely.

In Jesus name,

Amen.

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Quotations from Scripture come from:

Various Authors. *The Lutheran Study Bible*. Concordia Publishing House. Kindle Edition.