

## Sermon, October 18, 2020

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome our good friends Debi and Sean Beachy, St. Mark's Directors of Music, who are providing Special Music for our worship.

We are still waiting for a safe time to resume regular public worship. Pandemic cases, COVID hospitalizations and deaths are again rising. Both the CDC and our own ELCA say people who are at high risk for serious illness from Coronavirus should NOT attend indoor worship services in person, and those who regularly spend time with families or friends in high risk groups shouldn't either.

We do not want to endanger anyone unnecessarily. Which is why we are here, worshiping together while staying safely apart. If you have friends or family members who do not have internet service, you can easily record this service on your laptop and sit down and share it with them. I would be glad to show you how. Meanwhile, if you want to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is [stmarksoakland.com](http://stmarksoakland.com) (no spaces or caps). Now today's stupid joke.

It was Ben Franklin who first observed that death and taxes are life's only certainties. But it turns out only the latter of the two allows you to file for an automatic six-month extension. Comedienne Paula Poundstone quotes the Apostle Paul, when she says, "the wages of sin is death." But she says these days, once all the taxes are taken out of the wages of sin, it's no longer death. It's more just kind of a tired feeling. More about taxes in a bit.

*Music*

**The Lord be with you. Let us pray.**

Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ you have revealed your glory among the nations. Preserve the works of your mercy, that your Church throughout the world may preserve with steadfast faith in the confession of your name. Through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

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**A reading from Isaiah, the forty-fifth chapter.**

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: I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, I 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.

For 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. 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. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the LORD do all these things.

**Here ends the reading.**

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## **The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the twenty-second chapter.**

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap [Jesus] in what he said. So 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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They 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." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

## **The Gospel of the Lord.**

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**Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.**

Some folks see the Bible as outdated and largely irrelevant in this day and age. I can see why they might think that. After all, our first reading from Isaiah is all about Cyrus, the King of ancient Persia. It talks about Persia's relationship with Israel and alludes to Persia's relationship with Babylonia. Big whoop, right? But then again, modern day Persia goes by a different name: Iran. Babylonia now goes by a different name too: Iraq.

Our Gospel reading is about taxes and the proper role of government in our lives. So in America today, especially in an election year, who cares about irrelevant topics like big government, taxes, Iraq and Iran? Oh wait...I guess we all do.

Iran was actually called Persia from antiquity all the way up until 1935. Situated north and east of the Arabian Peninsula, contrary to popular opinion, Persians are ethnically NOT Arabs, and they don't even speak Arabic. Well, okay, some do. But that's another sermon. But their native language is Farsi, which is Indo-European in origin and not Semitic like Hebrew, Aramaic or Arabic. Persia is perhaps the oldest continuous major civilization on the face of the planet.

There are existing urban settlements in modern day Iran that date back to at least 4000 BCE. True, Iran's current leadership is probably the greatest threat on earth to the modern state of Israel. And WE have been known to call THEM the Axis of Evil, while THEY like to call US the "Great Satan." But that seems tragic to me, because Persia and Israel and Iran and America in the past have been the best of friends.

My next door neighbors are Iranian and still have friends and family there. In fact, Ali still calls it Persia. Another neighbor worked in Iran for years with the Peace Corps and she still keeps in touch with the many friends she made there. One of my dental school classmates signed up with the Public Health Service and asked to serve in the Consulate in Iran. He just loved the Iranian people when he spent a semester there in college.

My neighbors say for the most part Iranians still love Americans, and while they wouldn't dare announce it publicly, they don't like their current government leaders any more than we do. And that's the real shame, because they have certainly had some awesome leaders in the past. Probably the greatest and most influential was a guy named Kurosh Buzurg. The Hebrew Bible transliterates his name as Koresh. Filtered through Greek and then English Koresh became Cyrus for us. If you translate rather than transliterate his name, it literally means "like the sun."

And you know, I guess Cyrus WAS a little like the sun. He was certainly very bright and shed fresh new light and warmth on the often dark, cold and dismal world around him. For thirty years in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Cyrus the Great ruled over Persia, turning it into the largest and most

powerful empire the world had ever known. We know from history that Cyrus established his empire pretty much just like Isaiah said he would: subduing nations before him, stripping corrupt kings of their robes, and acquiring great wealth from their treasuries.

Cyrus was a military genius. According to ancient sources, based partly on facts and partly on legend, In his own war with Iraq, he didn't even consider opening with a campaign of "shock and awe." He used a different strategy: Surprise!

You see, the capital city of Babylonia normally felt pretty safe from foreign invasion. Babylon City was about fifty miles south of modern-day Baghdad, and well-protected by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers that surrounded it. For an army like the Persians to invade, either the soldiers had to swim the deep rivers carrying their weapons with them; or cross a wide river in small boats. Either way they'd be sitting ducks for even a small army of defenders.

Laying siege to cities was a common and very effective wartime strategy in the ancient Near East. You essentially surrounded and starved your enemy until he surrendered. But that would never work against Babylon, which was perhaps the most fertile part of the Fertile Crescent, producing its own endless supply of food and water.

So most assumed nobody could EVER successfully invade ancient Babylon. Well, except maybe Cyrus--who marched his troops around and then up to the north of the city, where they dug a canal and then built a dam. Water from the Euphrates was quietly diverted by the dam from its natural riverbed into that canal.

And late at night under cover of darkness the Persian army waded into Babylon through water barely ankle-deep. The Babylonian army was supposedly so surprised, it laid down its arms and surrendered without a fight.

Then there was the so-called battle of Thymbra. Severely outnumbered on the battlefield, Cyrus put his camels out in front of his soldiers. The horses of the much feared Lydian cavalry had never seen or smelled camels before. They were so spooked by them, many threw their riders and bolted from the battlefield, setting up another easy Persian victory.

My favorite Cyrus war story is about the Massagetae, a formidable group of seasoned desert warriors. But Cyrus knew that because of their nomadic lifestyle, they had virtually no experience with rich food or any form of alcohol. As the battle drew near, the Persian Army suddenly fled their encampment leaving behind lots of fine foods and hundreds of gallons of wine. When the Massagetae plundered the abandoned camp, they got so stuffed and so drunk that they were easy prey when the Persian army doubled-back.

Of course, Cyrus was much more than a clever soldier. He was also known throughout his vast empire for generosity and humanitarianism.

He spoke-up for human rights, demanded equality among his ethnically-diverse subjects, and like nobody else in the history of the region, outlawed slavery. That's how he found his way into Jewish History, becoming the most honored and respected non-Jew in the Hebrew Bible.

You see, back when those Persians waded their way to victory at Babylon, they discovered thousands of Jewish immigrants who had been enslaved by the Babylonians for more than sixty years.

Cyrus the Great set them free and allowed them to go back home.

Many folks credit the United States Constitution with first mandating the official separation of Church and State. Others say Jesus invented the concept in today's reading from Matthew. But I think they are off by five centuries or so. Because even though the Persians had a highly developed religion of their own, Cyrus didn't think it was the job of government to impose any religion on anyone in his empire.

The newly freed Jews were free to worship their own God as they saw fit. If they wanted to rebuild Jerusalem's Temple as the worship center of Judaism, that was okay by him too.

The Persian Empire continued to be the most influential force in the world for centuries after Cyrus. Historians say no culture before and few since have contributed as much to the world's literature, philosophy, mathematics and science. It's amazing what a people can accomplish, once they learn how to get along.

Isaiah says God reserved a special title for the non-Jewish Jewish Hero named Cyrus the Great. You'll find it in verse one of today's reading, where he is called God's "anointed"—or in the original Hebrew, God's Mashiach, meaning Messiah.

So it's easy to see why in Jesus' day under a very harsh Roman occupation, some of the Jews of Palestine were reluctant to embrace Jesus as their Messiah. They were hoping for someone more like Cyrus.

But no, Jesus did NOT build a great empire. He didn't topple corrupt kings. He didn't end slavery or forcibly institute individual rights, social justice and human equality, even though many such efforts have subsequently been launched in his name.

Still Jesus was, like Cyrus, a generous humanitarian, who also recognized politics and religion as a dangerous mix. It brought political Herodians and religious Pharisees together today to try to trap him. Those were two groups that normally wanted little to do with each other; but in an unholy alliance earlier had already taken down John the Baptist.

Jesus may have gotten the better of them this time, but it wouldn't be long before politicians and religious authorities would unite once more, this time to take his life.

As clever as it was, I doubt the Jesus Tax Plan will be talked about much in Congress this week. It says essentially that God has more important things to worry about and leaves the politics of taxes up to politicians. Oh goody. I suppose the logical corollary would be that politicians have no business telling you what your religious views should be either.

So yes, we got lucky this week. Rarely do issues like Near East politics and taxes jump out of the headlines directly into our lectionary.

I'll be the first to admit that the Bible does NOT directly address many of the decisions we face in our lives, be they political, personal or otherwise. The Bible says nothing about wind turbines, abortion rights, the Coronavirus or Black Lives Matter. Still, while our faith doesn't always teach us exactly WHAT to think, it does teach us a WAY to think. And when you start thinking faithfully it is amazing how much easier it is to find right answers.

They're the ones that best honor our God and show love and respect to our neighbors, regardless of their gender, their race, their politics or religion. Which brings me back to Cyrus.

We're not certain, but most historians agree he was eventually killed in battle. One account says it was at the hands of those Massagetae, even though he tried to avert that war altogether by offering to marry their leader Tomyris. But of course he had fooled her before, hadn't he? And I'm guessing she probably still blamed him personally for what had to be the world's worst hangover.

Sadly today Iran and much of the rest of the Muslim world has fallen out of touch with Cyrus the Great-- his genius, his compassion, his sense of social justice, reason, fairness and tolerance. I hope that we, as followers of Jesus, never fall out of touch with him, or his sense of social justice, and reason, and fairness and tolerance.

**Amen.**