

22nd SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST “Big G (God) and Little g (government)”**Isaiah 45:1-7**

It was a rag-tag group that finally arrived in the city at the end of the yellow brick road. This group consisted of a man of tin but no heart, a scarecrow stuffed with straw but no brains, a lion with muscles but no guts and a Kansas farm girl who was far from home with only her dog by her side. They were driven by the hope of help, wanting an audience with the wonderful Wizard of Oz. His presence was powerful, his instructions were intimidating, but his actual assistance was imaginary. Having followed the Wizard’s words, Dorothy and the others returned for a second visit. It was then that they learned that this wonderful Wizard was an ordinary man who only projected his appearance upon a wall in an exaggerated fashion. The Wizard had done nothing for Dorothy, the Tin Man, the Cowardly Lion and the Scarecrow except to show them that the abilities they were looking for were ones they already had.

I. God Works Through Human Government Even When It Does Not Acknowledge Him

Now I will tell you the story of another kingdom. This kingdom existed long ago and in a far-away place. But unlike Oz, this kingdom is very real. It is the land of Babylon. For decades Babylon had been the world power 2600 years ago, but at the time of our story it is threatened by Persian forces under King Cyrus. Even though their city was surrounded by enemy troops the people of Babylon felt safe behind their city’s thick walls and heavy gates. The citizens had stored up supplies to provide for themselves for years. They would wait out Cyrus’ siege. But Cyrus was not a patient man. The Greek historian Herodotus records Cyrus’ masterful plan. He stationed his troops where the Euphrates River flowed under the walls of Babylon both into and out of the city. Then, miles upstream, Cyrus diverted the river into a nearby lake. Meanwhile, unawares of the activity outside of their city walls, the leaders of Babylon

partied using the vessels they had captured years earlier from God's temple in Jerusalem. The party lasted until a disembodied hand wrote an ominous message upon the wall of the king's palace. The story is told in Daniel chapter five of how Daniel was called to interpret the words. The king's time was short and the kingdom was about to fall. Even then Cyrus' troops were entering the city under its wall in the now lowered river channel. That night the Persians conquered Babylon and ended its empire.

Almost 200 years before Babylon's capture by Cyrus, God's prophet Isaiah was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write about a man named Cyrus as being God's anointed one who would subdue nations, defeat kings, break down gates, cut through bars of iron, and capture great treasures. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus writes that Cyrus knew of Isaiah's prophecies about him. At the time that he conquered Babylon, Judean exiles had been captives in Babylon for 70 years. Cyrus allowed them to return home and to rebuild God's temple in Jerusalem. Five hundred years later the Son of God, Jesus the Christ, was born to descendants of these returned exiles.

Cyrus was an instrument of God's grace and power for the deliverance of God's people from captivity. Yet, our text lets us know that God knows that Cyrus will not believe in Him. This is an example of how God does work through a human government that refuses to confess faith in Him in order to provide for the good of His people who do confess our faith in Him as the one and only true God.

While we might like to think that ours is a Christian nation, plenty of Christian and non-Christian observers of our society will tell us that this is not the case. We live in what now is called "post-Christian America." We hear pious phrases such as "God Bless America," "In God We Trust" and "One Nation Under God," but such words mean very

little to a majority of our citizens. They do not point us to the one true God whom we know from the Bible, that is, the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They do not tell us of Jesus Christ as our Savior from sin. Instead, our civil religion at best pays lip service to a bland and generic higher power who should help us in our time of need but who had better keep his hands off of our personal behavior.

Even though our government, or any government, may not confess the existence of the one, true, and only God, the example of God's goodness to His people through the unbelieving king Cyrus reminds us that our God does and will continue to bless us through the human government that we have. Government is God's gift for our good to provide peace in the land and order in our communities. As Christians, we are to pray for those who lead our nation that God would bless them with wisdom and success. As a result of such a blessing our earthly lives will be better.

II. The Only God Is the Lord, Not the Government

As Americans, we should be thankful and grateful for the free land in which we live. We rightly honor those who have made great sacrifices to insure the freedom, prosperity and strength of our land. We want to pass on to our children and grandchildren a free, wealthy and strong land in which to live. But has our honor and respect for our human government shifted from rightful obedience to idolatrous dependence? Do we give our government more credit than it deserves by thinking that it should provide for our daily lives? How many people in our land feel that they must rely upon the wonderful wizards of Washington DC or Springfield in order to make it through their day? Why should we think that the government ought to take care of us when it is God who gives us our physical and intellectual abilities to get an education and to earn a living by working at a job? Why would we count upon the government to provide for

our retirement years when we should be earning decades of paychecks, portions of which should be set aside for our future? When wind and water wreck our communities why do we whine that the government didn't protect us well enough or rescue us fast enough? We do all these things when we take the one true God less seriously and instead look upon government as replacing the true God in our lives.

The only God will not allow us to ignore Him. He does and He will make His presence and existence known to us. He is the God who has formed the light and created the darkness. He is the God who brings prosperity into our lives. He is also the God who creates disaster when the people who have received His blessings refuse to thank Him and also reject His will for their lives. Perhaps the disasters that we face from time to time is God sending our government, our nation as a whole, and each of us individually, a message that He still exists and remains in charge of all His creation.

III. As God's People, We Honor Our Government but Worship Our Lord

We need this reminder. While we can be rightfully proud of our American citizenship, do we emphasize that so much that we forget our more important citizenship, that of God's heavenly and eternal kingdom? We might think that all we need to do is to elect the right people to political office and they will be able to solve the social ills that we see in our country. We truly are misguided if we think that if we just had the right kind of Christians in the right positions of government, then our land would be a Christian paradise. Government has its rightful place in ordering our lives, but its laws will never be able to change our hearts in a god-pleasing way.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus' opponents, the religious group of the Jews called the Pharisees, tried to trap Him with a question about paying taxes. If Jesus said, "Don't pay taxes," the Pharisees would have gone to the Roman governor with the accusation that Jesus was a dangerous rebel. But if Jesus said, "Pay your taxes," then they figured that He would lose support among the Jewish people who hated their Roman overlords. Jesus' answer to the Pharisees' question and His escape from their trap is an example of His divine brilliance. Since the coin to pay the taxes has a picture of the Roman emperor on it, Jesus says, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's." But since we have an even more important Lord to honor, Jesus goes on to say that we are to give to God what is God's.

We are to support our government by participating in its elections, by providing it a portion of our income through taxes, and by giving it the honor of our obedience. Christian citizens should serve in elected and appointed government positions and do so honestly, honorably and faithfully. But we support and serve in our government as those who know that we have a higher Lord who deserves our worship. Because of God's gift of His Son Jesus Christ, we know that our God loves us and forgives us of our sins. Because God has summoned us by name in the water and word of Holy Baptism we live with a title of honor, Christian, bestowed upon us. Because Jesus has died upon the cross for our forgiveness and risen from the dead for our salvation, we are citizens of a heavenly and eternal kingdom.

While the land of Oz was a wonderful place for Dorothy to visit, she looked forward to going back home to Kansas. As the people of God in Jesus Christ, when we say, "there's no place like home," we think not of this nation in which we live, but of the heavenly mansions that Jesus Christ has earned and is even now preparing for us. Amen.