**Who’s in Charge Here?**

**Text: Jeremiah 23:5**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**November 17, 2019**

I want to begin by quoting a verse from a familiar hymn. At least the first verse is familiar. We know it as *My Country, ‘Tis of Thee*; the official title is *America*. But it’s the *third* verse that I want to quote:

“Our fathers' God to Thee,

Author of liberty,

To Thee we sing.

Long may our land be bright,

With freedom's holy light,

Protect us by Thy might,

Great God our King!”

It’s especially the last line that I want you to pay attention to: “Great God our King!” It speaks of the Sovereignty of God; a theological concept that arrived on these shores with the Pilgrims.

The Sovereignty of God: It was one of the reasons for the American Revolution. Folks said, “We don’t need a human king across the sea; we have a Holy King right here in our hearts.”

The last Sunday before Advent is typically celebrated as Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday. But the theme gets short shrift in the U.S. because that Sunday is often Thanksgiving Sunday as well. So this year I’m lifting-up the Reign of Christ and the Sovereignty of God on this 3rd Sunday of November so that we can give the theme it’s due and next week we can still have a great celebration of gratitude for all of God’s blessings.

Now, I’ve already made what some would call a theological error: I’ve spoken of the Sovereignty of God and the Reign of Christ as if they’re the same thing. You might think that I’m confused about which person of the Holy Trinity I’m talking about. And maybe I am. But I don’t get too worried about these finer points of theology. The words Father or Creator or Christ or Spirit are all references to the Holy One. As Bruce Walker said in our Pastor’s Class: “God is a 3 for 1 package!” And the most important number in the Trinity is…One! Here’s the thing: all of our words about God are but feeble human attempts to express the inexpressible. Even the most refined theological language is like baby talk to the ears of God. But God, like any loving parent, can somehow translate that gibberish into something that makes sense. So, as much as I enjoy theology, I don’t get *too* worried about theological nicities. Christ is our King; God is our Sovereign; today we celebrate the One who rules over all the earth.

The prophet Jeremiah is looking ahead toward the Reign of Christ in today’s scripture. He says, “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch…he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and…execute justice…in the land” (Jeremiah 23:5). It was quite an audacious hope because the track record of the Davidic kings hadn’t been great up to that point. These descendants of King David –these shepherds of God’s people, to use Jeremiah’s language – had done a lousy job of shepherding. More often than not they had been incompetent kings, atrocious administrators, adjudicators of injustice, and faithless followers of the Holy One. From a biblical point of view, a king or a president or a prime minister is supposed to govern with justice and righteousness. Justice means that nations are to be governed by the rule of law. Justice means that laws are to be applied equally to all. Justice means that the resources that God has so graciously provided are to be available to everyone. When we read through the Old Testament, especially the books dealing with the law and the prophets, it becomes clear that justice is the kind of righteous public policy that God expected of the kings of Judah and Israel.

More often than not, they blew it! Jeremiah and Isaiah and Ezekiel and the other prophets: they tell us how badly the kings had blown it. These descendants of King David, these kings who are of the house and lineage of David, they had proven to be so incompetent that by the time of Jeremiah, God had cut-off the entire Davidic line. God had taken an ax to that royal tree, and it was no more.

But, God can raise-up a new King from this dead stump of a royal lineage. Jeremiah says that God will “raise up for David a righteous Branch” (Jeremiah 23:5). A new King will emerge from the house and lineage of David. “With righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth,” to quote from the prophet Isaiah (11:4). Two and half millennia later it has come to pass. And we call his name…Jesus.

Christ is our King. God is our Sovereign. The Lord rules over all the earth, and the nations are but a drop of water in the great ocean of the Kingdom of God (see Isaiah 40:15). Who’s in charge here? *God* is! God rules over the whole inhabited earth.

I want to offer you three takeaways from this foundational idea of the Sovereignty of God.

First: If God governs the whole earth, then human governments are extensions of God’s rule; at least in principle they are. Jesus said, “*All* authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18). It follows, then, that those human entities whom we entrust with authority bear some degree of Holy authority. This is the point of Romans 13:1: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.” Of course, in reality, most human governments have been no more faithful to their calling to serve God then were the kings of Judah and Israel, but nevertheless the principle remains: human governments are an extension of Holy rule.

It’s become a fashionable thing to disparage those who serve in government: both elected officials and civil servants. And well we should be critical when public servants fall short of the high and holy calling outlined in scripture. But our problem is with particular governments and particular public servants, not with the principle of government itself. It’s an important distinction. Many of the attacks upon the principle of government in recent years have been financed by a network of donors who want to further pad their bottom line and limit government regulations that protect both the environment (that is, God’s Creation) and the work force. Jane Mayer documents the workings of this network in her book *Dark Money*. “Government is by definition evil and we need to trust free enterprise,” we’re told. But they’re not really against government per se; it’s government policy that opposes their self-interest that they’re against. It’s interesting that these same self-proclaimed advocates of freedom are silent when the federal government *counter-acts* the free market in order to protect favored enterprises such as the coal industry; or when the Feds counter-act free enterprise by establishing protective tariffs. Don’t be fooled by self-appointed guardians of freedom who are more concerned about *their* freedom than they are about *your* freedom or the freedom and the care of God’s Creation.

Particular governments and nations always fall short of the high ideals of God’s Kingdom and ought to be criticized for doing so. That’s what the Old Testament prophets were all about. But the principle remains that the God who is the Author of both liberty and the law has created human governments to enact *just* laws; laws that extend the Reign of God upon the earth. That’s what we pray for every Sunday: “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven.” That’s a thread of biblical thought that runs from the 10 Commandments, through the Prophets and St. Paul, to Jesus himself. As the late baseball manager Casey Stengel would say, “You could look it up.”

Second: If governments are an extension of the Reign of God, then it follows that God’s people are called to obey the laws enacted by governments, so far as those laws reflect the justice and the wisdom of God. And when those laws *fail* to reflect God’s justice and wisdom, it is the responsibility of a free people and their elected servants to *change* the law. Not to disobey it, but to change it. Not to argue that they have some special exemption from it, but to change it.

There are, of course, a variety of religious groups who claim that they are exempt from certain laws, on the basis of the First Amendment and its guarantee of the free exercise of religion. But if you read the writings of our nation’s Founders, it becomes clear that the Founders’ concept of freedom of religion is focused on freedom of worship and freedom of belief but not…some kind of exclusive freedom of action. You can worship however you want. You can believe whatever you want. But our actions are governed by the law; laws that are enacted by the representatives of a free people. A free people are guaranteed equal protection under the law and have an equal obligation to *obey* the law. That’s the plain meaning of the Constitution if you read it in its historical context and again, you could look it up. Sinful human beings cannot govern themselves. Both the Bible and the Founders are clear about that. They must be governed by norms and customs and laws that have come into being under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the reflections of wise men and women as honed by experience over decades and centuries. And when the representatives of a free people fail to honor the justice and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, it’s the responsibility of the people to throw the rascals out!

Third: It is a dangerous thing to identify God’s will and God’s Reign with a particular nation or political party or public servant. In this fallen world – in this sinful world – no human being, no human institution, is capable of bearing such a heavy burden. As St. Paul reminds us, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Not even Washington or Lincoln where quite the paragons of virtue that subsequent mythology has made them out to be. And don’t even get me started on Jefferson or Jackson or Johnson. Christ alone is King and he stands in judgment over *all* nations and *all* parties and *all* public servants; just as God stood in judgment over the Davidic kings in the days of Jeremiah.

Who’s in charge? God’s in charge!

And yet…God has entrusted a portion of God’s government to the very nations and parties and public servants who always fall short of the Kingdom’s ideals. “We have this treasure in earthen vessels, Paul says, “to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Corinthians 4:7) Yes, the transcendent power and authority belong to God, and yet God has entrusted a portion of this power and authority to broken human vessels such as you and me and the nations and governments of the earth. No nation is virtuous enough to be called a Christian nation, yet our nation and other nations have grown from soil that has been cultivated by biblical faith. So many of our core values are grounded in the wisdom of scripture, and it is to those core values that we have returned over and over again in our times of greatest trial: liberty, justice, equality, the rule of law. All of these are expressions of the Reign of God. And the God in whom all things are possible can raise-up governments and public servants who will honor these values, just as God promised to do so even as God was busy wracking down the rotten tree that had grown from the roots of his chosen servant, David. “I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed…says the Lord” (Jeremiah 23:4).

I suspect that all of us, of whatever political philosophy, are afraid for our nation and our world right now. And we have good reason to be. But in the midst of our fear, don’t forget who’s in charge. “God is our refuge and strength, a very presenthelp in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea…” It is for times such as these that Psalm 46 was written. God rules over all the earth. God is in charge. And the firm hand of Providence continues to guide history toward the completion of God’s Kingdom. Fear not, for the Lord of hosts is with us; fear not, for the God of Jacob is our refuge. Amen.