

Ascribe to the Lord
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Psalm 96:1-13

- ¹ O sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth.
- ² Sing to the Lord, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
- ³ Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples.
- ⁴ For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods.
- ⁵ For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the Lord made the heavens.
- ⁶ Honor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
- ⁷ Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
- ⁸ Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts.
- ⁹ Worship the Lord in holy splendor;
tremble before him, all the earth.
- ¹⁰ Say among the nations, ‘The Lord is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.
He will judge the peoples with equity.’
- ¹¹ Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
- ¹² let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
- ¹³ before the Lord; for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth.

Matthew 22:15-22

¹⁵ Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. ¹⁶So 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. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?’ ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ ²¹They 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.’ ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

Yesterday I went to see a live broadcast of a Metropolitan Opera production of *The Marriage of Figaro*. The plot in the most general of terms involves two servants of a lord who plan on marrying and who are trying to escape the “feudal right” of the lord to be amorous in the most physical of ways with the female servant. Lords, and those ranked above them, for centuries found ways to take what it was they wanted, using their power against those who stood in their way. You’ll be pleased to know the lord was outwitted in Mozart’s opera and all agreed to be happy forever. Rarely did this outwitting happen in reality, and, if ever, with far less good humor.

The tyrannical ways of kings were well known to the Israelite people for centuries. Back in 1 Samuel 8, the people came to Samuel, their judge, saying, “You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.”¹ Samuel warned them, saying, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.”² The people insisted, “No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations.”³ Since that time, kings over Israel had been abusing their power, long after kings of other nations had already done so. The psalm we read today is written with an intimate knowledge of kings and their ways, even including King David to whom the psalms are credited. “Honor and majesty are before him.” “Bring an offering, and come into his courts.” “Tremble before him, all the earth.”

Mary E. Shields writes that “Psalm 96 is one of a group of psalms called enthronement psalms, because they celebrate YHWH’s enthronement over the people of Israel and the nations.”⁴ The people had come to acknowledge the flaws of the human kings and, in so doing, recognized how different a ruler God was. “The Lord is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity...He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.” Not only did, and does, God judge with justice but God has power beyond any other king or god,

¹ 1 Samuel 8:5.

² 1 Samuel 8:11-17.

³ 1 Samuel 8:19-20.

⁴ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 177.

for our God made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that fills it, and the field and everything in it. It is this God of whom Jesus speaks when questioned in our reading from Matthew.

The question asked of Jesus – is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not – set him up for failure with either expected answer. If he replied “yes,” then he supported the government and betrayed the Jews who were harshly burdened by the taxes levied by the Roman Empire. If he said “no,” then he would show his support of the Jews but walk directly into a charge of sedition, which was punishable by death. There is an elegance of Jesus reply – Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s – that goes beyond the cleverness which gets him out of this tight spot by answering in a way that would not alienate or anger either party. Early church father Tertullian interpreted Jesus’ answer this way: “Render to Caesar Caesar’s image, which is on the coin, and to God God’s image, which is on [hu]man[s].”⁵ To render is to ascribe is to give back. Give back to God God’s image, which is yourself.

I promise when I drafted the pledge cards for last week that I had not yet planned this message beyond the readings and the title. At the top of each pledge commitment card it reads “To you, O God, I give back my gift[s] of:” with time, talents, and treasure being ways of giving back to God what is God’s, which simply proves that giving back is in our faith roots. Of course, these categories are just the beginning, for you are more than your time, more than your talents, and certainly more than your treasure.

The psalm reads “ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name.” Roughly translated? Give credit where credit is due. It’s not always about stuff as we may often think when we hear “Give to God the things that are God’s.” Surely the earth is God’s and all that is in it,⁶ the land and the water and the air we breathe, the resources, the animals, the people. We’re more prone to remember the tangibles, and sometimes more willing to give them back. The intangibles like the idea of control and pride in accomplishments, achievements, and acquisitions? Not so easily remembered nor released. Give to God the things that are God’s; ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. I could give you examples from the lives of others and even from my own, ways in which I’ve not given credit to God, but I suspect that is not necessary. I suspect you know times when you have forgotten that all good things come from God⁷ and have given yourself the credit for what has been accomplished. So, instead, I’ll leave you with this: A man was circling the block, frantically searching for a parking spot. Finally, after the third time around, he prayed, “God, if you help me find a parking spot, I will go

⁵ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 193.

⁶ Psalm 24:1.

⁷ James 1:17.

to church every Sunday and tithe ten percent of my income.” Immediately, a spot opened up, and the man prayed, “Never mind, I found one.” May it not be so for you or for me!

Let us pray: God, to you belong all glory and honor – help us, we pray, to remember. Amen.