

Isaiah 45:18–25 (NRSV)

For thus says the LORD,
who created the heavens
 (he is God!),
who formed the earth and made it
 (he established it;
he did not create it a chaos,
 he formed it to be inhabited!):
I am the LORD, and there is no other.

I did not speak in secret,
 in a land of darkness;
I did not say to the offspring of Jacob,
 “Seek me in chaos.”
I the LORD speak the truth,
 I declare what is right.

Assemble yourselves and come together,
 draw near, you survivors of the nations!
They have no knowledge—
 those who carry about their wooden idols,
and keep on praying to a god
 that cannot save.

Declare and present your case;
 let them take counsel together!
Who told this long ago?
 Who declared it of old?
Was it not I, the LORD?
 There is no other god besides me,
a righteous God and a Savior;
 there is no one besides me.

Turn to me and be saved,
 all the ends of the earth!
For I am God, and there is no other.

By myself I have sworn,
 from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness
 a word that shall not return:
“To me every knee shall bow,
 every tongue shall swear.”

Only in the LORD, it shall be said of me,
 are righteousness and strength;
all who were incensed against him

shall come to him and be ashamed.
In the LORD all the offspring of Israel
shall triumph and glory.

Philippians 2:1–13 (NRSV)

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

What Kind of Lord is this?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: September 28, 2014 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Isaiah 45:18-25; Philippians 2:1-13

Caesar, Kaiser, Emperor, and then just a short step, divine Lord. The Lords of the ancient world bore names like Tiberius, Claudius and Nero. They willed armies to battle, sprung palaces up out of the rocks and assassinated those in their way. They controlled great swaths of geography and history. They were men of the world, and they ruled the world. Their emperor and their chosen emissaries ruled emperor peoples and lands near and far. When the Roman Emperors began to think of themselves as divine, as Gods, they were stating an obvious correlation. If Zeus ruled Olympus with supreme power, Caesar, whose domain and ruthless command stretched across continents and seas was hardly less. Lord Caesar was the ultimate authority in the known world and found it but a small acquisition to extend the realm heavenward. Hamlet may have been able to say to his friend, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy,” the same could not be said of the dreams of the Roman emperor. His encompassed everything.

Of course, it was not just the Romans in the ancient world who dreamt of ruling everything. The great civilizations of Egypt and Assyria, Babylon and Persia, and then Macedonia conquered all they could grasp with the idea that their power might extend beyond even the known horizons. Even the tiny kingdoms of Palestine fantasized that God would come one day in smoke and thunder, with chariot wheels blazing, and deliver all creation into their hands.

The Jewish tradition had its dreamers of kingdoms, to be sure. But always lingering in its language of triumph was a notion of righteousness and peace. “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” It was a pastoral picture, they saw, one filled with peace and pleasantness.

Trouble was, of course, this bucolic picture stood in stark opposition to the world in which they lived. The emperor ran the world, and it was hardly peaceful and pleasant for the great majority. To many of them, it seemed more than a dream that the world would ever be without despots.

And yet, their story persisted. From the ground that had brought them visionaries such as Isaiah and Amos, there came a young teacher from Nazareth who also dreamed of a world of peace and justice—a world in which neighbor loved neighbor, in which evil would not be returned for evil, in which a few fish and a small amount of bread would suddenly multiply and feed the hungry by the thousands. He spoke of the kingdom of God, and told them to pray that it be found on earth as it is in heaven. He talked of the meek inheriting the earth, of the peacemakers being blessed, and the poor and poor in spirit finding blessing, too.

Unfortunately, the emperor’s minions found this young teacher’s message troubling, not in the way they found great armies troubling, though, more like an irritating fly buzzing around. The message was idealistic and simpleminded, not something they ever worried would come to pass. But on the other hand they also didn’t want him filling their heads with dancing visions of sugar plums. The empire worked most smoothly with subjugated subjects, people who knew

their place; the people were the wheels in the machinery, slaves and workers who made the building projects possible, who supplied the feasts of opulence. Better that they have no fantasies of a different reality. Better that nothing distract them from the business at hand. Especially, better that they not think God was on their side. The emperor was Lord. To him they should look for divinity and in him they would find not a beneficent God, but a dasher of dreams who ruled by the threat that it could be even worse.

And, of course, that's just what happened to the young teacher from Nazareth. They made it worse for him. It was easy enough. It was common enough. The securely anchored blood stained poles lined the highways always ready to be a gory billboard. Each time another writhing man was nailed to one he was a living, dying message: Take care, or this will be you. What an effective cinema it was. Equal parts excruciating pain and scandalous shame, crucifixion was meant to convey fear of agony and fear of ignominy all in one. On the wooden beam you were tortured into less than nothingness.

The Gospels tell us that the authorities were incredulous that the young teacher didn't really do much to avoid his fate. It seemed to many that he welcomed it, or at least expected it, and certainly didn't run away from it. That was surprising. A little more respect and submissiveness and he could have walked, maybe let off with just a flogging. There's no accounting for what some people do, they thought. But in the end, it was an easy and usual case for the authorities. Like others before him, he would be a wretched spectacle, another example of what awaits those who annoy the Lord Caesar. The young teacher from Nazareth played just that small part on the stage of the empire.

Except, except the story didn't end quite the way Caesar's lackeys predicted. After three days, something extraordinary happened that surprised even his closest followers. Dead on Friday, on Sunday he rose. Many didn't believe the story. But as time went on, even those who thought the whole thing might be a fiction had to admit that the story achieved more and more traction. And that in itself was disruptive, ultimately much more disruptive than the irritating fly they had crucified. More and more people came to believe that the empire hadn't really finished him. The crucifixion was meant to be an embarrassment for him, but now it was embarrassing the crucifiers.

Of course, the empire could take care of itself. It continued its favorite strategy, persecution. John the author of Revelation called Rome the great evil beast. But then in a really brilliant move, the fourth century emperor Constantine, influenced by no other than his mother Helena, claimed the story of the young teacher from Nazareth and his miraculous resurrection as its own. In one of history's greatest examples of 'if you can't beat 'em, join 'em,' Constantine incorporated the church into the empire. Out of the underground resistance the church emerged into the daylight, sprouting grand cathedrals across all the land, boldly displaying its new conjunction with power. Today you can still find mosaics and other evidence of the great basilicas to the faith that Helena had constructed in the Holy Land.

In another deft move, though, Constantine changed the story, or more likely, the story was already being changed by others, too. They took one part of the story, the victory of the young preacher over death, but they left out the sordid part that the empire played in it. For one, it was easier to claim the story for the empire if the empire wasn't the villain of the piece. In the end, a story about triumph was perfect for the empire.

But there were a couple of troubles with this appropriation, or misappropriation of the story. First, the empire was the villain. Second the quibble the empire had with the young teacher wasn't a battle of two adversaries with the same goal. It wasn't like the days when the American

Football League and the National Football League, separate and bitter rivals, joined and became one. The story the young teacher told about God and life was fundamentally different from the story Caesar told. They weren't two leagues in the same business. And as we've seen, the young teacher wasn't all that subtle about the differences in what he taught. It takes spending very little time in the New Testament to realize that the stories the young teacher told—stories about outcasts who are favored, poor who are given enough, deformed who are healed, disturbed who are made whole; and stories about wealthy who are kept out of the kingdom of God, the powerful who are left off the guest list, and the so-called righteous who will be last not first—it takes spending very little time in the New Testament to realize that the stories the young teacher told are not Caesar's bedside stories. The stories he told are about as anti-imperial as you can get.

And if that wasn't bad enough, the young teacher and especially his followers deliberately stole the divine titles the emperor gave to himself and used them to describe a weak, crucified, and humble Lord. They basically said that the Lord the emperor thought he was wasn't a Lord at all, just the opposite.

The young teacher, "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name (including Caesar's), so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Wow! This is a big deal. This is no Caesar type Lord. To bend the knee to this Lord is to bend the knee to an emptied ego, to humility, to obedience, to lowliness. Those who worry that calling Jesus Lord makes him top heavy and hierarchical misread how much Philippians undermines the whole idea of Caesar's Lord. Their worry is understandable, to be sure. Like Constantine, a lot of people still want to claim the young teacher as power in the world.

And that brings us to the crux of the matter, so to speak. What does it mean to bow our knee to the one who was obedient to the point of death on a cross, to one who humbled himself and to one who emptied himself? What does it mean to bow our knee to such a one? Philippians answer points us face to face with the world without the world's armor, without the armor almost everyone in the world wears. To face the world without power and strength, with only humility is bound to leave us feeling more than a little naked. Hanging in the air then is the question of obedience. Are we ready to be follow the young teacher who was obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross? I don't have an answer to give you. Everyone must answer for themselves. Who is Jesus Christ for you?

But here's perhaps a helpful thought. Caesar's minions thought they were ridding themselves of a minor pest. Soon enough the observant among them recognized that he was not minor nor had they gotten rid of him. In a sermon Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that the two places where tyrants quake are before the manger and before the cross. In a world in which the currency of the day is power, wealth and influence, those who have it and fear losing it the most, tremble before the manger and the cross of the young teacher. There they shiver because there it becomes all too obvious to them that their power, wealth and influence are but dust. They cannot escape. Jesus Christ is Lord. Amen.