

LIFE AND TAXES

Sermon, October 18, 2020

Texts: Exodus 33:12-23; Matthew 22:15-22

Benjamin Franklin famously wrote in a 1789 letter to French colleague Jean Baptiste, *"Our new Constitution is now established, and has an appearance that promises permanency; but in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes."* As one cynic put it, *"Death and taxes may always be with us, but at least death doesn't get any worse every time Congress meets!"* Well, I believe today's Scriptures assure the people of God of the certainty of LIFE and taxes.

In our previous hymn, these words are in the final stanza, *"O use me, Lord, use even me, just as You will and when and where; Until Your blessed face I see, Your rest, Your joy, Your glory share."* And in today's Old Testament reading, God said to Moses in Exodus 33:20 -- *"You cannot see My face, for no one may see Me and live."* Now, we know the hymn writer is referring to that day when he shall enter his eternal rest in the life beyond the shadow we call death, and there behold God's blessed face, but why does God remain out of our view in this lifetime? Why does He remain out of view to His faithful servant Moses? Why does He say, *"No one may see Me and live."*? When we looked at this passage six years ago, I pointed out one way this phrase *could* be translated from the Hebrew is, *"No one may see Me and go on living."* The Hebrew tense is roughly similar to our grammatical term *"present progressive;"* implying continuous action.

I then referred to that scene from the movie **Braveheart**, Mel Gibson's popular and engaging cinema depiction of Scottish liberator William Wallace of 1280 AD that premiered in 1995 (!). The narrator begins, *"I shall tell you of William Wallace. Historians of England will say I am a liar. But history is told by those who have hanged heroes."* Most of you know the story line: After Wallace's life-long sweetheart is killed, cruelly and unjustly executed by an English lord shortly after Wallace's secret marriage to her, Wallace starts an uprising demanding justice that eventually leads battles and wars for Scottish independence. In one scene midway through the film we see Wallace resting in a darkened wooded area. He is awakened by the furtive sounds of a hooded person walking quietly in the darkness among the trees. He is dreaming, but we aren't told that it is a dream, at least not yet. With his sword drawn, Wallace closes in on this mysterious character, and the hood falls back to reveal that this mysterious person is actually Murrin, his slain wife. When Wallace sees her, he falls to his knees before her and with choked emotion says, *"I'm dreaming."* His beloved Murrin replies, with her hand on his face, *"Yes you are, and you must wake."* Wallace replies, *"I don't want to wake. I want to stay here with you."* Murrin softly responds, *"And I with you. But you must wake now. Wake up, William. Wake up."* And then he awakens to the (much deeper) voice of his friend Campbell trying to wake him, calling: *"William, a royal entourage comes, flying banners of truce, with the standards of Longshanks himself!"* William Wallace is then taken to a large, ornate tent where he meets the Princess of Wales, Isabella (*not Queen Isabella; that was Christopher Columbus last week*).

Wallace; dreaming of his slain wife, just doesn't want to wake up. In a sense, having seen her again he doesn't want *to go on living* ... he just doesn't want to awaken. He just wants to stay in the dream, he doesn't want to get on with life ... the (*literally*) dreamy experience of her presence is too sweet, too wonderful. Even as he is in the dream, he knows he is dreaming and he has to wake up, but he doesn't want to. Ah, but William, you have to wake up. You have things to do, places to go, and a princess to meet. I've had dreams like that since my wife's passing ... even to this day, twenty-one years later, though not nearly as frequent as in the first ten or so years. In these dreams Ann's alive and we're having normal conversation about the children or the home or whatever, and I just don't want to wake up! Like Wallace, even as I'm "in" the dream, I know I have to wake up, but I just don't want to ... being "with" her, seeing her in the dream, is too sweet, too pleasant. I don't want to leave. I don't want to wake. When I do awaken, I lie there in bed with a sense of longing and I really just don't want to get up (*actually, not being much of a morning person I don't want to get up a lot of mornings, but especially after one of these dreams!*). Yes, I'd like to stay in the dream, but I can't. I have to get up. I have to go on living. I have responsibilities. I have things to do, places to go, and who knows ... maybe one day I'll have a princess to meet. I'm sure others of you have had such dreams; dreams of conversing with beloved but departed spouses, siblings or parents, dreams where your once healthy body is restored and vigorous, dreams of times when tranquility reigned in your home, but the reality is that everything in your waking life is anything but tranquil. And we all have to eventually wake up and face the everyday realities that make up our lives and go on living ... this side of heaven.

I think that's something of a small taste, a hint, of why God wouldn't let Moses see Him, and why He won't let us see Him. I'm convinced God won't let Moses see Him because Moses just wouldn't be able to stand it ... the experience would be too intensely *wonderful* for Moses, too indescribably sweet and joyful; he may not want to go back down that mountain and get on with life, to "go on living." To behold God in all His beautiful, joyous, eternal glory, to be in the presence of the God he loved and served with all his heart ... well, Moses just wouldn't want to leave! He wouldn't want to "get up", he wouldn't want to go back down the mountain to lead that large mob of cranky people to the Promised Land. Now, the life certainty we are promised is that we will see God one day! And we will see our dearly departed loved ones in that glorious company of the redeemed, all healthy and whole and

joyful and energetic and full of life and eternally young ... would YOU want to leave, if you were in Moses' shoes (or sandals)? Would you want to "go back down the mountain" to this imperfect world? How could anything else in this life compare to the wondrous beauty, delight, glory and joy of being a part of all that? "No one may see Me and go on living."

The good news is that Moses and, indeed, all of us will one day see the unveiled and unmasked face of God; that is the divine hope the theologians refer to as the Beatific Vision, the Visio Dei, along with enjoying the company of all the redeemed ... but we won't see it just yet! We may be given glimpses of glory from time to time this side of heaven to keep us going, to keep us inspired, to keep us keeping on. Moses is given just enough of a glimpse of God's glorious Presence to assure him there is LIFE beyond this life and to inspire him to keep on going. LIFE, full and rich and eternal life in the unveiled, joyful, living presence of God ... that's our certain destiny! Death is *not* the final curtain; it's a *portal*. But until that time, we live here. In this world. With all its laws ... and politics ... and taxes. While our destiny is life eternal, we still live in this world as sojourners. And while we are here, we are subject to certain responsibilities and obligations, which brings us to our Gospel text this morning.

People always resent taxation, but the Israelites really resented their hard earned money going to the treasury of the occupying Romans. Politics can make for some strange alliances, and it seems one such unlikely alliance has formed here. The Pharisees team up with the Herodians, a party they normally (and often bitterly) opposed. The Herodians were called such because they openly supported King Herod. Herod was Jewish, but a pro-Roman puppet monarch. The Herodians were sort of the inside-the-beltway-government crowd, and they made it their business to try and reconcile the rest of the Jews to the "status quo." Or, as George Bernard Shaw put it, "the Government that robs Peter to pay Paul can always depend upon the support of Paul." Well, the Herodians were "Paul;" they benefited from this political arrangement. However, most Jews, and the Pharisees in particular, chafed under Roman rule, and despised paying taxes. But here the Pharisees and Herodians unite to try and entrap Jesus.

They pose a question to Jesus. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to the position of men." Now that's high praise! Would that all of us could have the reputation of being people of integrity and honor known to live in accordance with truth, God's truth, and not easily swayed by others! But as someone once cautioned, "The person patting you on the back may only be determining where best to stick the knife." And here is the "knife" of the question they are "sticking" to Jesus: "Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the taxes to Caesar or not?" Whichever way Jesus answered He'd be in trouble, or so they thought. If He said it was not right to pay the tax, the Herodians could report Him to the Roman officials for sedition; He'd be promptly arrested. If He said it was right to pay the tax, the Pharisees knew Jesus would then be largely discredited in the eyes of many faithful and patriotic Jews.

And you know the story: Jesus asked to see a denarius. Jesus asked whose image was on the coin. The answer: "Caesar." "Well then," said Jesus, "Render (or, give back) to Caesar what belongs to him; and give back to God what belongs to Him." By inference, Jesus is saying, "Whose image is stamped on the coin? Caesar's. And whose image is stamped on you? God's! You are created in the image of God, His image is stamped on you, so give to God what is due! As His image bearer, you owe Him your allegiance, your obedience, your honor, your very lives!" With this answer Jesus is also laying down an important principle: Every person who responsibly and consciously bears God's image has dual citizenship while in this world. We owe allegiance to the sovereign God of Heaven and we are citizens who owe allegiance to the sovereign nation in which we live. This side of heaven, we have duties and obligations to both. It is our Christ-given duty as citizens to render which is due according to the laws of the nation as far as we are able in accordance with the truth. To be clear, though, where Caesar claims what is God's, the claims of God have priority.

It wasn't long before the early Christians faced the wrath of Rome because they refused to obey a bad law, a law unlawfully enacted, which was to worship the emperor. No, that's an honor that belongs only to God, so conscientious Christians refused to say "Caesar is Lord" ... and it was a refusal judged to be treasonous, punishable by death. Many conscientious men and women of integrity and honor lost their lives because they confessed "Jesus is Lord." To them, their words mattered; they would not obey this bad law and/or give lip service to it.

While Christians live in this world, we may enjoy the truly good blessings this place has to offer, including (but not limited to) its rights, its protection, and its preservation of order, but this place is not our true home. By helping civilly maintain the preservation of order, safety and security, we are activity looking out for the welfare of our neighbor as well as ourselves. We long to be in the presence of God we love, we long to SEE God, and one day we will. But while we are here, out of obedience to God we are to love our neighbor, which includes the obligations of citizenship: pay taxes, get involved, VOTE intelligently, support civil and constitutional government, and in all cases render unto Caesar as far as we are able, because that is all consistent with the command to love our neighbor as ourselves.

That's one way we give to God what is God's by taking every opportunity to honor and serve and love and help the neighbor who also bears God's image, and to do so until that day we enter into the saving, life giving, blissful and eternal presence of God.