Worship Testifies Against the Empire
Matthew 22:15—22; Psalm 96:1—13

Many years ago, in a galaxy far, far away, George Lucas got most of us hooked. With the help of several other creative artists from Hollywood, California, the writer got us hooked on *'Star Wars'*—and with the debut of that 1977 blockbuster, no one could have imagined the wide-ranging, mythological saga of sequels and prequels and spin-offs. *Star Wars,* acquainting us with Luke Skywalker, Darth Vader and the Force, has become big business. And yet, when a fanatic-friend of mine asks me if I've seen the latest in this science-fiction-franchise—I think it's called *The Mandalorian and Grogu*—I tell him they lost me with *The Empire Strikes Back*.

You see, any 'Empire' that's obviously evil, and that's imaginatively conceived at a safe distance from where you and I live, doesn't scare me. In fact, it bores me. I don't know about you, but I am bored to tears by the monotonous back-and-forth: the conquering of this, the destroying of that, the invading of this, and the occupying of that. It's tedious. It's tedious to discover: *oh, here's another Emperor*—and another one after that. Here's a power-grab and another one after that. Here's a demand for more territory and more territory after that. And here—as all narcissistic emperors are apt to do, is the demand for more and more praise.

"*Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus."* Among other things, Jesus is reacting to this inscription, to this caption and to this imperial slogan. It swirls around the edge of a coin, known as the *denarius*. And if we read it closely—through the eyes of the first century Pharisees and Herodians—we might also make out the fine print: *"In God We Trust."*

Now, since Labor Day, I've invited you to consider what it means to worship in the tradition of the Crucified and Risen Jesus, and to genuinely partner with *Yahweh*, the God of Israel and the Maker of all things, seen and unseen. But let's be clear: not every reference to *'G-O-D'* is a reference to that Holy Presence. In fact, what emperors and empires often do, as part and parcel of their slick strategy, is make use of how prone we are to worship. Think about the swastikas hung from the sanctuary-rafters in Nazi Germany, and you'll get an inkling of what I'm saying. And in reply to the royal family who thought it was the God-given duty of the British Empire to rule over India, Mahatma Gandhi once said: *"I distrust those people who know so well what God wants them to do, because I notice it always coincides with their own desires."* In other words—what if (without always and consciously knowing it) we ascribe more worth to our *idea* of God than to God? And what if, more often than not, this happens with our money?

"***'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites! Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They 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.'"***

Now, as with everything that Jesus puts out there, my advice would be that we don't automatically presume to know what he means. Let's sit with it. Let's stew on it. Let's hunker down behind the biblical passages with which this Palestinian Jew was probably most familiar. Are there things that belong to the emperor? It sounds as if there are. And yet, are there things that belong exclusively to God? Hmmm. Psalm 24:1 says, ***"The earth is the Lord's and the fullness there of."*** And so, if I believe that, even the things that momentarily *seem* as if they belong to the emperor, belong ultimately to Yahweh. And who is Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel? Well, to answer this question, another psalm—Psalm 96—is very helpful.

For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods.
For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the Lord made the heavens.
Honor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

So I think that helps. It helps to know that God is ***"above all gods"*** and that ***"all the gods of the peoples are idols"***—and for that matter, if I am influenced by the people, if I am a person among the people, who is easily influenced, what this psalm asks of me is DISCERNMENT. I have to discern. You have to discern. We, as a worshipping community of faith, have to discern: *what is it we're are being summoned to REVERE most of all? Is it our own desires? Is it our own family and friends? Is it our own political party? Our country? Our church? OR—*

I'll never forget when our newly chartered congregation in Pennsylvania contracted with the architects who would design our two million dollar building. In preparation for the meeting we had asked the members and friends of the church to pledge their money, which they did. It was a nervous time; and some skepticism started to creep into the conversation. Someone said, *"Well, what if I give $20,000 to the building and $10,000 to the operating budget and the church closes, do I get my money back?"* And the answer, of course, was *NO*. But then, out of the blue, the head honcho of the Presbytery said something that was extremely telling. He said, *"Build the church to look like a bank. That way, if the church falls short and fails, we could sell the building and recoup the money."*

Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts.

Listen: we may as well admit it. Just as frequently as we utter, *"Praise God from whom all blessings flow,"* on Monday morning, it's Benjamin Franklin who makes more sense. Famously he said, *"The only two certainties in this world are Death and Taxes…"* Was he right? Maybe. But what's so great about BEING CERTAIN? 'Being certain' is what the Herodians count on to keep themselves safe, fat and cozy with the emperor. As long as Herod Antipas maintains his power in Jerusalem, they worship their own idea of God, and it's business as usual. By contrast, although the Pharisees want to see the Roman Empire kicked out of Israel entirely, they're the ones who extract denarii from the fishermen, the farmers and the peasants who come to worship at the temple. And that's business as usual too. And it's boring! Isn't it?

It's as boring as hell. It's at least as boring as *The Empire Strikes Back*.

As you know, Hans Christian Andersen wrote his famous fable, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, and I may have mentioned to you before how (I think) it factors into the process of faith; and that is, there's a huge danger in how we try to please people and to avoid conflict by simply conforming to what everyone else seems to believe or to the way we've always done it. And so, in the fable, the emperor is completely naked and doesn't know how idiotic he looks. For some deluded reason, he's convinced himself that he's wearing the most finely-threaded, majestic robe; and yet commanding everyone along the parade route to praise him (or else)—the lingering question is: *will any one, at the risk of life and death, dare to speak 'truth to power'?*

Now, as moral folk tale for little children, the answer's easy. Until it isn't.

Like every good revolutionary or rebel with a cause, I CAN SAY that I'm going to buck the system. I CAN SAY I'm going to stick it to the man (and it usually is a man). I CAN SAY I'm going to testify against the empire. But, as per Matthew 10:16, the recommendation of Jesus is that we become ***"as wise as serpents and (yet) as innocent as doves."*** And if we don't—if we're as belligerent and brutal and braggadocios as the emperor—or if we only utilize artificial intelligence (rather than the wisdom of God)—let's not pretend we're worshipping Yahweh and let's not pretend Jesus is our Savior. (It turns out we have other saviors.)

When I was twelve years old, I had saved up 18 silver dollars. Over the years, various aunts, uncles, grandparents and family friends had given them to me, and I hide them away in an old cigar box in the back of my bedroom closet. Every once in a while, however, I'd take them out and admire them. They were mine. On the one side was the image of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's bald head and on the other, an American Eagle, clawing at the moon. And when I went to worship and the ushers passed around the plate, I'd typically hit up my mother for a quarter or a few dimes and nickels. There was no way on earth that I was going to surrender my private stash of silver dollars… But then, you see, as my adolescent hormones began to rage, I stopped going to church and went to the mall instead. A blond, blue-eyed girl had moved in across the street. Her birthday was October 9th, and I wanted her to know how much I valued the way she held my hand at recess. She was everything! She was my salvation! I worshipped her! And so, you know what happened? I used those 18 precious silver dollars to buy her an opal necklace. I gave it to her… and that so-called 10-karat gold chain turned her neck a peculiar shade of green!

Now, I mention this episode from my childhood not to entertain, but to illustrate what I hoped my limited resources—*my denarii*—would testify to. So desperately I wanted my money to say something about a love that would be just between us, and that would mostly benefit me. But since that time, of course, I've had to re-think things. And my hope is that, during every moment of worship—but especially during the time of offering—you will experience the Spirit of God prompting you to re-think things too. What belongs to God? Hopefully, more and more things. Over the short term and over the long term—what is it you'd like your *denarii*—your *"In God We Trust"* money—to say? Worship, in the tradition of 'Christ and him crucified,' will testify against the Empire. Worship that reveres the Most High will say something that contradicts the Empire—even if no one seems to be paying attention.

In the C.S. Lewis book, *The Silver Chair*, an evil empress convinces everyone from the spirit-filled land of Narnia that there is no Narnia. She's enchanted them with a magical smoke of a burning green fire—green as in the color of money. However, when one of the characters, named Puddleglum, chooses to endure the pain of stomping on the flames, he testifies like this:

"I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia… Not that our lives will be very long, I should think; but that's a small loss if the world's as dull a place as you say."

You see, I'm not the only one who thinks that the Empire is boring. And yet, if you give to the possibility of the Kingdom of God here at Northwood, you are giving to something that's risky. It's risky. It's adventurous and not boring.