

Lectionary 29 A  
The Amazing Jesus

October 22, 2023  
Matthew 22:15-22

Our gospel text ends with the people being amazed at Jesus. Usually, this is the reaction at seeing a miracle: like when Jesus calmed the stormy seas;<sup>1</sup> or when Jesus casts out a demon and a mute man speaks;<sup>2</sup> or when Jesus heals crowds of people, the lame walk, the blind see, the maimed made whole;<sup>3</sup> or at Jesus' command, a fig tree withers.<sup>4</sup> What's so amazing about Jesus in our text? He escapes the trap the Pharisees and Herodians set for him.

They ask a trick question, which they assumed would give them reasons to turn crowds against Jesus. They really aren't interested in Jesus' answer. They just want to trap him with his own words. If Jesus were to say, "Yes, we are to pay taxes to Caesar," they've got him – they will spread the news among Jews that Jesus supports the Roman Empire. That will turn Jews against him. If Jesus says, "No, we shouldn't pay taxes to Caesar," they've got him – they will turn him over to the Roman officials as an insurrectionist. They will get rid of him. They thought that they had pushed Jesus into a corner in which there was no way out.

Jesus knows their malice – their evil intentions. Jesus shows how different he is than they are. They recognize that he is sincere; they are phony. Jesus is true; they are false. Jesus is not swayed by what others think. Earlier we've read that the Pharisees were afraid of the people – they are swayed by what other people think.

Then Jesus says, "Why do you put me to the test, you hypocrites?" The word for "test" is exactly the same word used when the devil *tempts* Jesus in the wilderness. This is the third time the word is used of other people testing or tempting Jesus. It will happen again later in this chapter.<sup>5</sup> Most often our temptations to turn away from God, or our testings to remain firm in our faith, come from other people.

"Hypocrites" is a Greek word that was originally used for "actors". It refers to people who are pretending to be something other than they really are. They come to Jesus to ask a question, but not so that they might learn his answer, but so that they might trap him. They are pretending to be interested in learning what he might teach them.

Jesus finds a way out of their trap. He doesn't answer either way that they expected. The fact that the Pharisees already had a coin for paying the tax indicates that they are planning to pay the tax. They already knew the answer about paying taxes. What they hadn't gotten right was turning their lives over to God.

Our translation misses an important biblical connection. It has Jesus ask: "Whose *head* is this and whose title?" More literally, the Greek has, "Whose *image* is this?" The same Greek word is used in the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament for humans being created in the *image* of God.<sup>6</sup> If the things that belong to Caesar are the things stamped with his image; then the things that belong to God are the things stamped with God's image – namely, us – human beings; our whole lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 8:27

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 9:33

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 15:31

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 21:20

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 16:1; 19:3; 22:18; 22:35

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 1:26, 27; 5:1; 9:6

As I've said before, this whole section begins with the question about what authority did Jesus have for doing what he was doing. He indicates that authority can either come from heaven or from humans. Repeatedly, the Pharisees indicate that their authority comes from humans. Jesus' authority comes from heaven. He lived a life that had been given back to God. His was a life that was lived serving God. He did amazing things as I mentioned above. He also called out the malice and hypocrisy of those who were testing him.

The Greek word for "give" as "give to Caesar" can carry the sense of "to give back" or "return." There was the thought that all the money with Caesar's image on it belonged to Caesar. It was his money that he loaned out for people to use. We can give back what belongs to Caesar. We know what it is because it has Caesar's image stamped on it.

We are to give to God what belongs to God. We know what that is, it is what is stamped with God's image, namely, us. You and I are created in God's image. Our lives are to be seen as giving them back to God. What we say. What we do. What we think should come from our lives being given back to God. They should be seen as a witness to the world that we belong to God. We are people who know that we bear the image of God. We are people who know that others are also bear the image of God – and should treat them as such – even if they don't recognize it.

While there are no texts that say that nature was created in the image of God, many people find themselves close to God when out in nature. The Bible attests that God is the artist who created the universe. God's works both reveal something of its composer, but also hide much of God.

Seeing a group of paintings by an artist, you can sense something about the artist, but not everything. Hearing a collection of works by a composer, you can sense something about the composer, but not everything. Nature gives us a sense of it's Creator – powerful, beautiful, very diverse; but at the same time, there are storms and floods and earthquakes and tornadoes and hurricanes and viruses – nature can be very destructive and deadly. Nature gives a false, or at least an incomplete, picture of God.

Martin Luther used the phrase "mask of God." God is hidden in creation – not fully revealed. That is, the God people find only in creation is likely to be a false God. Where the true God is revealed is in Jesus Christ, and especially, in Christ on the cross. The one who truly gave his life back to God. The one who also received a resurrected life from God.

I bring up creation, because Camp Lutherwood is a place to experience God in creation - God's majestic handiwork. My wife and I stopped at the camp a few weeks ago. We were given a tour around the place. It was a beautiful day. It is a beautiful place. Linda and I, at different times, as youth, spent a number of years going to a Lutheran Camp in Oregon. (We didn't go at the same time. We didn't know each other then.)

Our Lutheran camps are also places to experience God in nature and more fully experience God in the scriptures, in sacraments, and in communities gathered in Jesus' name.

Perhaps most important, in regards to this text, is that we are exposed to many different people in the camp setting – and learn to see each of them as reflections of our God. They also are created in the image of God.

I've wondered: if we could somehow morph together all the people of the world together into one mixed-up human being would we come closer to seeing what God looks like?

I'm pretty sure that if we could all somehow get along together peacefully and work together for our common good, I think we would have a glimpse of our Triune God: three persons

who are united as one.

Jesus is tested. He passed their test like he passed the temptations of the devil in the wilderness. Our lesson ends with the people being astonished or amazed at Jesus' answer. It wasn't what they expected. Then it says: "leaving him they went away." At the end of the temptation story it says: "The devil left him."

This becomes a story about Jesus' victory over his enemies. He defeated those who tried to trap him with his words. He has defeated the devil. He defeats storms and demons and sickness. He will defeat death. Whatever difficulties we might be facing, Jesus has defeated them.

It also indicates that since we are stamped with the image of God, we are to give our whole lives to God – every part of them – all the good and bad – in health and in sickness – in our living and in our dying – from our beginnings to our endings and everything in between. We carry the image of God. We belong to God – and that's amazing.