“Whose Image Do We Bear?”, *A Sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. C. Denise Yarbrough on Sunday, October 18, 2026 at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Penn Yan, NY*

"My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." (Exodus 33:14)

"Render therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:21)

Most of us live with multiple identities. We are citizens of the United States. We are residents of the State of New York. We belong to our neighborhoods and communities, and our church. We have civic responsibilities. We vote. We pay taxes. We obey laws. We serve on committees and boards. We care about what happens in the public square because the decisions made there affect real human lives.

But for those of us who are Christians, there is another identity that lays claim to us as well. At our baptism we were marked as Christ's own forever. We entered into a covenant with God and became citizens of another kingdom, the Kingdom of God. We live simultaneously in two realms: the world of nations, governments, and political systems, and the world of God's reign, a reign grounded in justice, mercy, compassion, and love. A reign that transcends human made national boundaries.

Sometimes those two citizenships coexist peacefully. Sometimes they do not. That tension lies at the heart of our Gospel reading today. The Pharisees and Herodians approach Jesus with what appears to be a simple question about taxes. But taxes are not really the issue. What they are really asking about is loyalty. The Roman emperor claimed ultimate authority over his subjects, indeed he was considered to be divine. The tax itself was a daily reminder that Jesus and his followers lived under Roman occupation. If Jesus endorsed the tax, some would view him as collaborating with an oppressive regime. If he denounced it, he could be accused of rebellion against Rome.

It is a trap, and Jesus knows it. He asks to see the coin. "Whose image is this?" he asks. "The emperor’s,” they reply. "Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God's."

For centuries Christians have debated exactly what Jesus meant. Scholars have observed that Jesus did not have a roman coin on him. He had to ask someone to show him the coin. The inference they draw from that is that Jesus would not carry the coin because it had the image of Ceasar on it. Kerry Hasler-Brooks, a Mennonite scholar writes:

> [Stanley] Hauerwas and [David] Cramer suggest that Jesus lived outside the economics of the empire even as those around him accepted it. So he has to ask someone for a coin to use as a prop.
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> When I read Matthew 22, a chorus of radically different voices are in my head. I have come to understand Jesus as a loud protester against unjust

> systems of power, a divine voice for lived peace and material justice making, a radical lover of people. I take seriously the absence of a denarius in Jesus' own hand. (Kerry Hasler-Brooks, CC, October 2023)

But perhaps the most important clue is found in that question about the image. The coin bears the emperor's image. Therefore, Jesus says, give it back to the emperor. Scripture tells us that there is something else that bears an image. In the first chapter of Genesis, we are told that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. The coin belongs to the emperor because it bears the emperor's image. We belong to God because we bear God's image. Jesus shifts the conversation from taxes to identity. The fundamental question is not "What do we owe the emperor?" The deeper question is, "To whom do we belong?"

And that question connects directly to today's reading from Exodus. Moses is pleading with God after the disaster of the golden calf has gotten God into a rage against the Israelites. The relationship between God and Ancient Israel has been strained almost to the breaking point. Moses knows that the people face a difficult future. They are still wandering in the wilderness. They are vulnerable, uncertain, and afraid. So Moses asks something remarkable. He does not ask for military strength. He does not ask for wealth. He does not even ask for victory over Israel's enemies.

He asks for God's presence. "If your presence will not go with us, do not send us from here." Then he asks a profound question: "How shall it be known that I and your people have found favor in your sight unless you go with us? In this way we shall be distinct." What made Israel distinct was not a flag, a territory, an army, or a king. What made them distinct was the presence of God. Before asking where they were going, Moses asked who would be going with them. "How shall it be known that we are your people unless you go with us?" Moses knew that without God's presence, Israel would simply become one more tribe among many tribes. What made them distinct was their covenant relationship with the Holy One.

Like our Ancient Israelite forbears, what makes Christians distinct is not that we hold certain political opinions or theological beliefs. It is not that we support particular candidates or belong to a particular party or Christian denomination. It is not even that we gather in church on Sunday mornings. What makes us distinct is the presence of God in our lives and in our communities. We are people who have been claimed by God and who bear God's image into the world.

That does not relieve us of our civic obligations. Christians are called to be responsible citizens. We must care deeply about our communities, our nation, and the common good. We have a duty to participate in public life and bring our moral convictions to bear on the issues that shape human flourishing. Indeed, our Presiding Bishop Sean Rowe in a recent message to the Episcopal church said, "We recognize election engagement as an act of Christian stewardship. Our mandate to care for God's world and people compels us to vote—and to help ensure voting access for others."

(https://www.episcopalchurch.org/who-we-are/ministries/office-of-government-relations/election-engagement/)

But there is a difference between engagement and allegiance. The Church's calling is not to baptize the political agenda of the left or the right. The Church's calling is to remind every ruler, every ideology, every political party, and every nation that they are not God. For Christians, ultimate allegiance belongs not to Caesar but to God. And that means there will be times when the values of the surrounding culture conflict with the values of the Gospel. There will be times when Christians are called to challenge systems that diminish human dignity and flourishing, exclude or prey upon the vulnerable, or elevate power above compassion. There are times when our voices are needed in the public sphere as a moral corrective when those in power have strayed far from the values and vision of God.

The prophets did it. Jesus did it. The saints have done it throughout history. Not because they were against society, but because they loved God's vision for humanity more than they feared earthly powers. The challenge for us is discerning how to live faithfully within the world without allowing the world to determine who we are. As people made in the image of God, we are called to live into God's vision for humanity with our lives. That can be challenging when there are principalities and powers that do not share God's vision.

Our world offers countless competing loyalties and identities. We are encouraged to define ourselves by political affiliation, nationality, profession, social status, achievement, or ideology. None of those things are unimportant. But none of them answer the deepest question of all. To whom do we belong? The answer given in Scripture is clear. We belong to God. We bear God's image. We are the body of the Risen Christ in the world. And God's presence goes with us as we move in the world.

The old story says that the Israelites were guided through the wilderness by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. We are not given such dramatic signs. Yet God's presence still accompanies God's people. God is present at the altar every Sunday in the holy mystery of the Eucharist. God is present when we engage in acts of mercy, compassion and love. God is present in hospital rooms, nursing homes, classrooms, workplaces, and homes. God is present in the beauty of Keuka Lake and the autumn leaves that surround us. As Carl Jung famously wrote over the doorway of his home, "Bidden or unbidden, God is present."

And because God is present, we can live with courage in uncertain times. We can fulfill our responsibilities as citizens while remembering that our deepest citizenship lies elsewhere. We can render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. But we can also remember that our hearts, our lives, our gifts, our hopes, our loves, and our very selves bear another image. They belong to God. When we remember whose image we bear and as we embody that presence in our daily lives, the world catches a glimpse of God's kingdom breaking into the kingdoms of this world. Amen.