

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, June 7, 2020

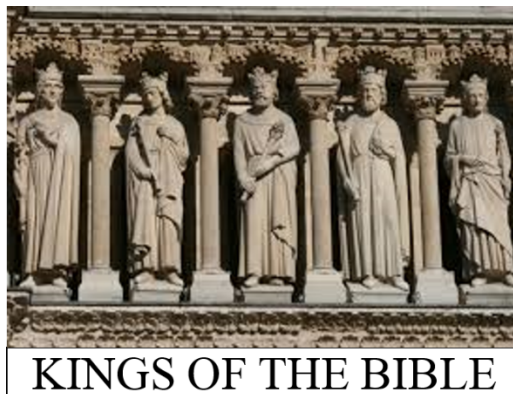
“A Message Antithetical to the Teachings of Jesus”

Seventh of six in a sermon series entitled **“Kings of the Bible”**
Trinity Sunday

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Hebrew Scripture: Daniel 11:36-39

Christian Scripture: Matthew 24:15-25



[Welcome to the encore of a sermon series that focuses on the historical biographies of biblical 'kings'. In this series entitled “Kings of the Bible”, we have moved from one end of the Bible to the other mining spiritual lessons learned from scriptural rulers. My aim is to apply these lessons to our own lives and to those who we choose to be our leaders. This week, our encore examines Antiochus IV Epiphanies (215 BCE – 164 BCE) and learn about the desecration of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.]

Since we concluded our series “Kings of the Bible”, I have pondered what to do next. This week is Trinity Sunday, so I thought it a great opportunity to return to the lectionary calendar.



But then early in the week, I heard the Bishop Mariann Budde, the Episcopal Diocesan Bishop of Washington, D.C., express outrage after her church was used as a backdrop for a photo-op. I quote the Bishop: “The President just used a Bible and one of the churches of my diocese as a backdrop for a message antithetical to the teachings of Jesus and everything that our church stands for. To do so, he sanctioned the use of tear gas by police officers in riot gear to clear the church yard”.¹ These words by a colleague in Christ, compelled me to preach on it this morning.

The question I would like to explore this morning is ‘what is this message that is “antithetical to the teachings of Jesus”’? As Christians, it would seem to be to be a very important question to ponder this week. There are a number of ‘messages’ that can be considered.

¹ Stephen Proctor, “D.C. Bishop ‘Outraged’ Trump Used Tear Gas on Citizens for Photo Op at Church”, *Yahoo! Entertainment*, June 2, 2020. <https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/dc-bishop-outraged-trump-tear-gas-citizens-photo-op-church-062228439.html>, accessed June 8, 2020.



We need to agree on what are the teachings of Jesus'. To agree on that, let us recall Jesus' first sermon preached in the synagogue of his hometown. Quoting from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus effectively declared that the Spirit of the Lord anointed him to "preach good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:18-19). After Jesus read these words, he rolled up the scroll and sat down – the modern day equivalent of dropping the mic and leaving the stage! These are the teachings that Bishop Budde indicated were violated by the so-called 'antithetical message'.

What was this message that was antithetical to Jesus' teachings? Well, antithetical to Jesus' teachings is a call for the 'domination' of other people.²

² Sonam Sheth, "Trump Congratulates Himself for the 'Overwhelming Force' and 'Domination' Law Enforcement Officials Used against Protestors in Washington, D.C., and Minneapolis", *Business Insider*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-congratulates-overwhelming-force-domination-against-protesters-2020-6>, accessed June 8, 2020.



Antithetical to Jesus' teachings is the use of militaristic violence to crackdown on what was in Lafayette Park a non-violent crowd advocating for justice and solidarity with the oppressed.³ Antithetical to Jesus' teaching is the use of smoke canisters, flash bang grenades, rubber bullets, riot shields, batons, and chemical irritants (pepper balls and tear gas) against peaceful protestors.⁴

Antithetical to Jesus' teachings is arrogance. Jesus preached the "first shall be last and the last shall be first" (Matthew 20:16). Jesus taught "blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). The photo op in front of St. John's church was accompanied by much boasting. The only thoughts expressed when holding-up the Bible were, "We have a great country [...]. We have the best country in the world". The constant quest to be the best, the greatest, and most powerful country in the world is in and of itself a great heresy. Our faith teaches us "there is no east or west in him nor north or south, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide world"; our faith

³ Morgan Philips, "Park Police Walk Back Tear Gas Denial in Aggressive Lafayette Park Clearing", *Fox News*, June 6, 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/us/park-police-walk-back-tear-gas-denial-in-lafayette-park-clearing>, accessed June 8, 2020.

⁴ "Donald Trump Photo Op at St. John's Church", "Clearing Lafayette Square", *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_Trump_photo_op_at_St._John%27s_Church#Clearing_Lafayette_Square accessed June 8, 2020.

teaches us there is no Jew or Gentile (Galatians 3:28). No Mexico nor United States. Last week, in front of St. John's church. A Bible was used a prop. The Bible was *not* opened. *Nothing* was read from that Bible. *No* prayer was offered.



Finally, our Congregational faith tradition and the Episcopalian church in the United States believe in the separation of church and state.⁵ For the political head of our country to hold a Bible in front of a church, with few words of qualification or context, is a conflation of church and state. To hold a Bible in front of a Christian church is also an act of division in the midst of a national crisis.⁶ It excludes Jews. It excludes Muslims. It excludes agnostics and atheists. It excludes Buddhists, Hindus, and Baha'i faith communities which are every bit part of country as Christians. Furthermore, to have the Secretary of Defence and the Attorney General included in the all-White photo-op is truly theological and political sacrilege.

⁵ "The History of the Episcopal Church", Early Period, The Episcopal Church. <https://episcopalchurch.org/history-american-church>, accessed June 8, 2020.

⁶ Trump repeated a similar photo op at a Roman Catholic site.

Bill Chappell, "Catholic Archbishop Criticizes Trump's Visit to St. John Paul II Shrine", *National Public Radio*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/02/868188511/catholic-archbishop-criticizes-trumps-visit-to-st-john-paul-ii-shrine>, accessed June 8, 2020.

"I find it baffling and reprehensible that any Catholic facility would allow itself to be so egregiously misused and manipulated in a fashion that violates our religious principles". – Washington Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory.

What we witnessed early this week was blasphemy in real-time. Bishop Budde understood that St. John's church was desecrated for purely political purposes. The desecration of a house of God has happened many times in the past. Though it is trite to say, "Those who forget history are doomed to repeat it" (George Santayana). Hence, the importance of this sermon and the series in which it is included.

The desecration of a house of worship is recounted in our scriptures. The books of Daniel (9:27, 11:31, 12:11), Mark (13:14), Matthew (24:16), and Revelation (13:14) refer to it.



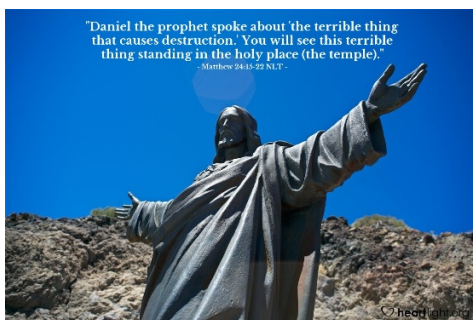
All four references likely recount the blasphemy of a particular king named Antiochus IV Epiphanies.⁷ Antiochus Epiphanies was a Syrian ruler (r. 187-175 BCE). The Syrians (A.K.A. the Seleucid kings) ruled after the Greeks (Alexander the Great). In my Bible, our reading from Daniel is entitled "The

⁷ Jean-Pierre Isbouts, "Kings of the Bible", in *National Geographic*, 2019, pp. 82-83.

King Who Exalts Himself”. This king was characterized by narcissism (vs 36), bullying (vs. 38a), love of wealth (vs. 38b), and patronage (vs. 39).



A very expensive military campaign against the Egyptians rendered Antiochus' empire almost bankrupt. So, he decided to raid the Jerusalem temple and steal all of the Jewish nation's gold and treasures. Antiochus converted the temple sanctuary so that it honored the Greek God Zeus. According to the apocryphal book II Maccabees, the gentiles filled the temple with “debauchery and revelling” while the front of the Temple was covered with “abominable offerings” (6:4-5).⁸ This desecration of the temple sparked a rebellion called the Maccabean Revolt which Jews celebrate during Hanukkah.



⁸ Robert Dentan, “The Second Book of the Maccabees”, in *The Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible Including the Apocrypha with General Articles*, Charles Laymon, ed. (Nashville: Abington Press, 1989), p. 602.

In our Christian reading, the author of Matthew has Jesus indicate that one of events that will signal the 'end times' is when "when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes the desolation'" (Matthew 24:15).⁹ Jesus warned that we are to worry when a leader becomes outrageous enough to declare that he represents and stands of God when his actions are precisely the opposite of God's will. (Jesus and Paul repeatedly warn against those who come in sheep's clothing, who claim to be what they are not, and will even say they do what they do in God's name and thus deceive even 'believers').¹⁰

Please do not misunderstand me, I am **not** warning of an impending Apocalypse, as Jesus seemed to. I'm **not** warning you that the anti-Christ is on the scene, as Saint John of Patmos seemed to. What I am saying is: Learning the lessons of history allows us to be very wary of megalomaniacs and those who would make our country a theocracy.

This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".

⁹ 'Abomination' refers to pagan offerings and the 'desolation' refers to he who 'makes desolate' (that is, Antiochus).

¹⁰ For Jesus, Matthew 7:13-27 and for Paul (and pseudo-Paul), Romans 16:17-20 and I Timothy 6:3-5, respectively.