

“Aligning Allegiances”

Based on Revelation 1:4b-8

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Imagine living in a society where we are targeted for elimination. The phrase, “If you see something, say something” is targeted at you and me. If our neighbors, employers, people on the street, see us representing the Christian faith in any way, they are to report us to the nearest law enforcement. The FBI is investigating our leaders and trying to infiltrate our churches. Fellow Christians are being rounded up in night time raids and held for questioning, kept in confinement, thrown into prison. Militia groups and other vigilantes take matters into their own hands: setting fire to our churches, vandalizing our places of business, shooting us dead on the streets. Protests all across the country and people on cable news railing about how Christians are destroying the nation, undermining the rule of law, threatening to bring down civilization itself. Some even suggest that it would be good for the whole if all the Christians were simply wiped out.

Where would you find hope in a situation like this? It must be such a strong temptation to publically reject Christ, to prove that you aren’t one of them. It must be so frightening. And so frustrating. We are a peace loving people. We follow the way of love. Society is better because we are here, because of our lived out faith. Why are we hated and despised so much? It’s so unfair. Is it all worth it? Is this society even worthy of us? I wonder where hope can be found in such a time of massive persecution.

Writing to a church that was living through this level of persecution, John begins his revelation with the basis for hope. He begins by making it clear who is really in charge. The government, led by the tyrant Roman emperor Nero, who fancied himself to be the son of a god, imposed his will on his subjected peoples. But there is one whose authority is greater than the feared emperor. John begins by naming who God is, the one who is, who was and who is to come. Emperors come and go. Empires rise and fall. God alone endures. And one day God will

come to us. When it comes to authority, no one compares with God, not even an emperor. God says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." No one has greater might than God. Where is hope found in times of great persecution? Hope is found by placing faith in God, who is everlasting and almighty, who one day will come to us. That's what John declares. God is the one who is really in charge.

John goes on to give three titles to Jesus Christ. He is the faithful martyr, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Hope infuses these titles. Think of all your friends and family who have been killed because of their beliefs and remember that Jesus was also killed because of his beliefs. Just as they were killed by state power, so was Jesus. We grieve our loved ones who have been martyred but hope remains because Jesus rose from the dead. He conquered death and the grave. He is the firstborn of the dead, meaning that others will follow, including our loved ones who have been martyred. So there is hope for them and for us. And finally Jesus is the ruler of the kings, the king of kings and lord of lords. Who else ought we to put our hope in than Jesus who rules over all?

John doesn't just declare Jesus as king of kings. He also makes the case for how this is true. Jesus is the king of kings because he loves us. A king is one who loves his people. Does Nero the emperor? No. Jesus liberated us, not from human enemies but from sin, the enemy of our souls. And he did this, not by sending an army to fight and die but by offering himself, shedding his own blood and not the blood of others. A king sacrifices all for the liberation of his people. Does Nero the emperor? No. Jesus has made us to be a kingdom of priests who serve God, giving us all dignity, status and purpose. Jesus has shared his authority with us so that we all, together with Jesus, can serve and give honor to his Father, who is the everlasting and almighty God. Has Nero the emperor done anything like that for us? No. What exactly has Nero the emperor done for us? Better, what has he done to us?

One of the points I see John making in the beginning of his revelation is that the empire does not deserve our allegiance. The empire constrains and oppresses. The empire seeks to destroy us. The empire is

only temporary in the grand sweep of time. Sure, it exercises power and demands loyalty. But it is nothing in comparison to the authority and power of God, the very source of life itself.

Instead, our allegiance rightly belongs to God, the everlasting, the almighty; and to Jesus Christ, who has made us into a kingdom of priests to serve with him to the glory and dominion of God forever and ever. We have no need to bear allegiance to the empire. Our allegiance is with God. The empire can try to wipe us out of existence. But it is a fool's errand because our kingdom is established by God and Jesus Christ. We will not be erased. For us, as Christians, loyal to God and Jesus, there is always hope. One day God will come and make things right. The empire will fall.

Now obviously, we don't live in a society dedicated to our elimination. I invited us to imagine ourselves in the shoes of our ancient ancestors in the faith, to imagine the horrific situation they were in and the need for hope to endure what truly is unimaginable suffering. We can try to put ourselves there but can't really imagine what it must have been like. Two thousand years later the Roman empire has fallen. There is no longer a Caesar. Other empires have risen and fallen. The British empire has risen and fallen. The American empire has risen and one day our empire will fall. They always do. But right now, in regards to our Christian faith, we don't live in a society in which our government has a policy to wipe us out. Many would claim that the United States is a Christian nation. We are protected by the Constitution to practice our faith. This is not the case for many of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world, where being a Christian very well may put your life at risk. In this land we are not afraid to live out our Christian faith.

But a question of allegiance remains. In the days of John, allegiance to the Roman empire was imposed on the conquered peoples, including the Christians who belonged to the seven churches in the land of Asia, known in the present day as Turkey. For our ancestors in the faith, they rejected allegiance to the Roman empire and instead claimed allegiance to another kingdom, a kingdom not of this world yet one day would be established on this earth, when God would come down from heaven and dwell with us, a new heaven and a new earth. For them it

was a choice: allegiance to the Roman empire or allegiance to God and Jesus.

For us, we have multiple allegiances. We pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America. We have allegiance to our family, however we define it: the family we were born in to, married in to, or created on our own to be like a family for us. We have allegiance to the society in which we live grounded in the rule of law, individual liberty, and free enterprise. We have allegiance to the high school we went to or for some of us the universities we graduated from. Some of us have a rabid allegiance to our sports teams. We have allegiance to our church. And we have allegiance to God. We have multiple allegiances that sometimes generate tension. Should we go to church or to the family reunion? Free enterprise makes it possible for me to get what I want at a competitive price but at what cost to the creation God has made me responsible to protect and the exploitation of workers who are God's beloved children? Our multiple allegiances sometimes put us in difficult situations. They don't always align.

I wonder what it would be like if we take all our allegiances: to country, to church, to family and friends, to school, and placed them under our primary allegiance to God and Jesus. How would life be different? If our primary allegiance is to serve God, how would that overriding allegiance affect the decisions we make about other allegiances we have? I am thinking of the time when some opponents of Jesus tried to trap him by asking him whether Jews should pay taxes to Caesar. Jesus asked for someone to show him a coin. He then asked, "Whose head is on this coin?" "It is the head of the Caesar." "Then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." But wait, doesn't everything belong to God, the source of all of creation? Yes, it does. So if everything belongs to God anyway and doesn't belong to us, does it really matter if we pay our taxes? Nothing really belongs to anyone anyway. So, out of allegiance to our nation and to its laws we pay our taxes for the sake of the common good. Everything belongs to God anyway so what sense does it make to hoard what we have for our own private ends?

I believe that if we make our allegiance to God and Jesus Christ as our primary allegiance, and put all of our other allegiances secondary, that it would impact what we value, and thus how we live. God is the source of all creation. God loves all of creation. So we must value all that God has created. If we value every person God made then we treat each person as valuable to God. If we value the earth that God has created, then we treat the earth as valuable, not for our own use, but with intrinsic value, worthy of our love and care. If we value and love every person God has created, and we love and value the earth that God has created, then we love and value our Creator. To love and value is to be in relationship, with God, with each other, and with the earth.

Living our lives in which our primary allegiance is to love and value God, each person, and the earth, may or may not make us popular or successful. To love and value people that society often doesn't love and value may not be the popular thing to do. To associate with the vulnerable and the despised may cause others to look down on you, dissociate from you, keep you from the centers of power and influence. But popularity and success are secondary to being true to the one who created us, the one who loves us, the one who saves us.

To realign our allegiances and make our allegiance with God primary, the place to begin is with gratitude. Give gratitude to God for the land we live on and the nation we are citizens of. Give gratitude to God for your family and friends, for your school you graduated from. Give gratitude to God for this church you belong to. Give gratitude to God for all that you hold allegiance to. Acknowledge that God is the source of all to which you give your allegiance.

And then, ask the question to God, "What would you have me do?" Especially when you find yourself having to navigate between competing allegiances, go to God in prayer, ask the question, "What would you have me do?" and then listen for the answer. What does your gut tell you? God speaks to us through our intuition. Trust it. Trust that inner voice. And then go do it. Trust that this voice, the one that comes from God the everlasting and almighty one, and of Jesus Christ, the king of kings, is the voice to heed. Let the one who loves us and saves us be the one who leads us on our life journey.

