

## ***“God’s purposes and ours”***

**October 19, 2008**

*Text: Isaiah 44:24-28, Matthew 22:15-22*

### I.

We can say what we want to about these days of our lives, but they’re certainly not dull. I’m sure you’re all as eager as I am to get election 2008 behind us.

In this informational age that we live in, with such immediate access to the most recent events; with things like ***YouTube***, a website, where the most recent video of virtually anything can be projected around the planet; in this world, news is almost instantaneous with our learning about it.

I sometimes wonder what the international community thinks of all this—of *politics American style*?? Are you with me?

We’re watching the presidential debate on Wednesday night; then we wake up on Thursday morning and discover that ***Joe the plumber*** is a national phenomenon.

Just like that. Who’s ***Joe the plumber***?

Well, apparently he’s not who he appeared to be. But the point is, almost instantly, this guy from Ohio is known around the world. CNN and Fox News, and who knows how many other news stations, were seeking him out for interviews. No doubt, we’ll be seeing him on Jay Leno or on David Letterman ... maybe even on *Saturday Night Live*.

I’m exaggerating of course; but it’s crazy. It’s like we’re in some sort of *new informational age* of the global internet. And to complicate things a whole lot more, we’ve got the economic crisis. It’s certainly not going to fade into the horizon anytime soon. How do we sort all of this out? The election, the economy and the uncertainty of relations and events in the international world?

### II.

As people of faith, we have to ask ourselves, ***Where is God in all of this?*** And as we prepare to go to the polls on November 4<sup>th</sup> and before, ***What are God’s purposes?*** And how will God’s purposes be realized; and what vision for our nation are we going to sign up for?

Tough questions. No easy answers.

As a person of faith and as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, all I know is that whatever **God’s purposes** are, they’re greater than our capacity to grasp them.

**Isaiah 55:8-9** reminds us of this, again and again.

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.  
for as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

There are perhaps no more important verses for us in all of the Bible. Whenever we begin to think too much of our own point of view or too fervently in terms of our own self-interest, Isaiah 55 has a word for us.

The Bible will never let us forget: ***God's ways are greater than our ways ... and God's thoughts higher than our thoughts.***

All of which suggests that, much of the time, we don't know as much as we think we know. For sure, the economic crisis we're in stands out as a harsh reminder of this truth.

### III.

**Another word** about God's purposes: however we seek to discern them and sort them out—always—they invite us to higher ground. The high ground is where the values of God's Christ fill the air.

Love and compassion ... patience and kindness ... tolerance and forgiveness ... hope and generosity of spirit. These are the values of God's Christ.

**A further word** about God's purposes is that ... whatever they are, they're about the BIG PICTURE of our lives and the BIG PICTURE of God's creation.

It turns out, friends, that our God is a universalist ... which means that all nations and all the peoples are included at the table. We're reminded of this in Isaiah 56 which says that all people—whoever holds fast to *my covenants*,

- *these I will bring to my holy mountain ...*
- *and their sacrifices will be accepted at my altar ...*
- *for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.*

The purposes of the God of the Bible have a universal ring to them. This is in stark contrast to the very troubling prayer of a Christian pastor at some campaign event last week where the pastor was praying—as if it were a competition—that the Christian God would somehow prove to be *bigger* and *greater* than the God of other faith traditions—of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists or Jews, for example.

As if God could somehow be divided in this way. As a Christian pastor, it's embarrassing to see our faith being reduced and distorted in this manner.

Again, friends, the God of the Bible is the ONE God, the God of all peoples, the God of all religious traditions. These other religions are simply other ways of embracing God, other ways of understanding God's ways and God's purposes.

Our way is *not* the only way. It's simply *our way*, the way God has given us. The best of Jesus doesn't put down or in any way diminish other faiths.

#### IV.

Back to how God's purposes are always greater than ours. Our reading from Isaiah 44 this morning sounds an absolutely stunning note.

It's from the great prophet of the Exile known as Second Isaiah. In this historical period, Israel has been off in Babylonian exile for almost fifty years. If we think times are tough for us in 2008, times were really tough for the people of Israel back around 540 BCE.

- They had lost a lot more than their homes and their 401K's.
- They'd lost their nation, their homeland; and they'd been deported off to Babylon.

However, through this remarkable prophet, a new vision of hope was rising up—hope of one day (hopefully soon) returning to their homeland of Judah and to Jerusalem, the holy city. But check out God's vision on how this is going to be worked out.

Isaiah 44 starts out talking to Israel about *the Lord, your Redeemer ... who formed you in the womb. I am the Lord, who made all things ... who says of Jerusalem, **It shall be inhabited, and the cities of Judah, They shall be rebuilt*** (trying to build up their hope for an imminent return to their homeland) ...

And then, GET THIS, *Who says of Cyrus, **He is my shepherd, and he shall carry out all my purpose ...***

This *Cyrus* that the prophet refers to is *Cyrus of Persia*, the king of the Persians who is now on the rise as a global leader and who will soon defeat the Babylonians, become the dominant world power, and issue a liberating decree to the Israelites ... saying to them that any of them who wishes can return to Judah.

In other words, God uses the mighty leader of a foreign nation to realize God's purposes. The point being—again—we never know what contours and detours God's purposes will take.

Friends, if God can use a foreign king to work out God's purposes, who can't God use, in any circumstance ... at any time?

## V.

What does all of this have to say to us? This is what I think it means.

1. God works in every situation, human and otherwise, doing what God can to realize God's purposes.
2. That doesn't mean—obviously—that things work out in all situations.
3. Much of the time, we don't *get it*. We misinterpret things ... as with the Christian pastor I referred to earlier and as with extremist radicals who shamelessly distort Islam. We don't *get it* whenever the world we live in is too small.
4. As human beings, we mess up whenever we see things too much in our own self-interest and when we, too easily, get lured into short-term agendas.
5. So God has a huge challenge to try and break through to us, and to all human beings.

Still, having said that, God works in all of us, and in all situations, doing what God can to bring about God's good.

God is working in the midst of our current economic hard times; just as God is working, as well, in **election 2008** everyday; working in the lives of both presidential candidates ... and vice-presidential candidates ... and other candidates. They're all children of God. And God does what God can to use them all for good.

That doesn't mean that God approves more of one or the other. It just means that God works to bring about God's redemptive purposes (i.e., to redeem the world) in every human being ... and in every situation.

When we do good, God takes the good we do and builds on it. When we mess up, God takes the mess we've made of things and tries to move us toward a higher good ... always keeping the BIG PICTURE of our lives and of the world in mind.

At the end of the day, we all belongs to God. Every human being ... all the resources of the earth. It's all God's. God created it.

## VI.

In our reading from **Matthew 22** with the trick question about taxes: *Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?* Clearly, the Pharisees and the Herodians (an unlikely alliance in itself, by the way) are trying to trap Jesus. They're hoping he'll say something that will be grounds to have him arrested.

Aware of their evil intentions, Jesus out maneuvers them ... he has them bring him one of the coins used to pay the tax. And then he asks them, *Whose head is this, and whose title?*

***The emperor's***, they reply.

To which Jesus says, ***Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.***

However, let's make sure we get this right. Nothing can be the emperor's without first belonging to God. It's that simple. It's that simple for us, too.

Every Republican and Democrat and Independent in our country is, before anything else (before being an American), a child of God. We belong to God—all of us. Our commitments, our loyalties are first, to God.

The challenge for us, therefore, is to do our best to help God work out God's purposes. We all have something to contribute—gifts and strengths that God can use

All we can do is hope that, at the end of the day, our commitments reflect God's commitments and our vision bends toward God's vision.

Our prayer ought to be, every day, every night: use me God, use me ... that your purposes might be realized both in me and through me.

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz  
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*  
6701 Miami Lakeway South  
Miami Lakes, FL 33014  
On the web at [www.mlchurch.com](http://www.mlchurch.com)

