

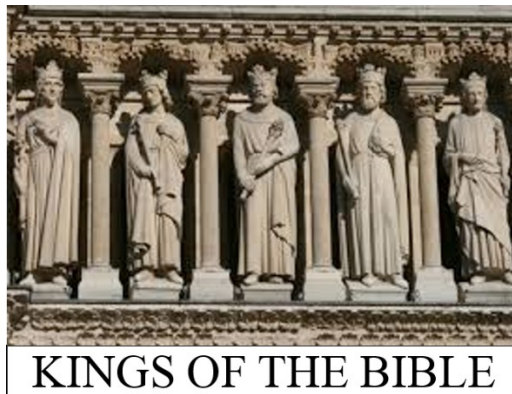
**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, May 24, 2020**

“Adam, Satan, Emperor Domitian, and Us”

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

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

**Hebrew Scripture: Genesis 3:1-5
Christian Scripture: Revelation 1:8-18**



[Welcome to the last of six sermons that focus 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, we conclude with the Roman emperor Domitian (Titus Flavius Caesar Domitianus) and learn about humanity’s desire to be God rather than closer to God.]



Friends, take a close look at the Roman coin pictured here and on the cover of your service order. What do you see? An infant. Sitting atop the Earth. Seven stars. An inscription in Latin. All of these answers are correct.

The coin dates back to 81 to 84 AD, that is, about fifty years after Jesus was crucified.¹ The coin's inscription reads, "Divine Caesar, Son of the Emperor Domitian". The coin's image depicts the Emperor Domitian's deceased son as Jupiter, sitting on the globe in a posture of world dominion. The infant extends his arms to the seven stars in a display of divinity and power.²

1 Brandon Smith, "When the Book of Revelation Takes a Swing at a Roman Emperor", *Church Grammar: Theology and Christian Life*, February 26, 2017. Found at: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/brandondsmith/2017/02/when-the-book-of-revelation-takes-a-swing-at-a-roman-emperor/>, accessed may 26, 2020.

2 Gordon, Franz, "The King and I: The Apostle John and Emperor Domitian, Part 1", *The Shiloh Excavations*, January 18, 2020. Found at: <https://biblearchaeology.org/research/new-testament-era/3080-the-king-and-i-the-apostle-john-and-emperor-domitian-part-1?highlight=WyJqb2huliwiam9obidzliwiJ2pvaG4iXQ==>, accessed, may 26, 2020.



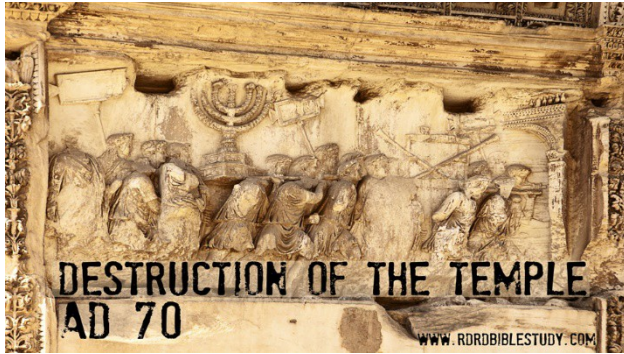
Now, I'd like us to read again our scripture from the book of Revelation. We read in chapter one, beginning with verse sixteen, "In his right hand he held seven stars [...]. When I saw him, I fell at his feet {...] and he laid his hand upon me and said, "Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, and I am the living one [...]". From this one coin and this scripture, we learn many things. One, the man named John who wrote Revelation was exiled to the island of Patmos most likely during the reign of Domitian (81-96 AD).³ Two, the book of Revelation does not necessarily tell us about the future so much as it tells us about the past, the context of first century to be specific. Three, the book of Revelation should not be interpreted literally, but rather metaphorically, because John spoke in code, describing all manner of things through symbol. Much of Revelation's imagery (beasts, numbers, etc...) communicates criticism of the Roman Empire. And last, but not least, John asked his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ: 'To who are you ultimately accountable, to who do you owe your allegiance? To the emperor of the day? Or, to the God of the universe?'

³ "The Mystery of the Book of Revelation: Which Roman Emperor Is the Antichrist", Educational Coin Company, March 18, 2015. Found at: <https://www.educationalcoin.com/blog/the-mystery-of-the-book-of-revelation-which-roman-emperor-is-the-antichrist/>, accessed May 23, 2020.



John of Patmos knew that Domitian as well as many other emperors before and after, deified themselves, or in Domitian's case, deified even his deceased infant son. Domitian declared himself to be "*dominus et deus*" – a god.⁴ He desired to be an absolute ruler, and accountable to no one. By declaring himself a god, by being one of the emperors who began persecuting Christians, and by exiling John to Patmos, Domitian made himself to be an adversary of Christ and his followers. So, in the first chapter of Revelation, John described Jesus in the same manner as Domitian described himself. John portrayed Jesus as divine. John endorsed Jesus' *true* and legitimate reign rather than the Roman imposter's false and repressive reign - and between the two, you and I must choose. Furthermore, John portrayed Jesus as superior to the emperor. On the coin, the god Jupiter sits on the world with the seven stars around him. Yet, according to John, Jesus created the world and holds the stars in his hand!

⁴ Donald Wasson, "Domitian", *Ancient History Encyclopaedia*, April 25, 2013. Found at: <https://www.ancient.eu/domitian/>, accessed 26 May, 2020.



The animosity John held for Domitian goes way back! First, one of the very first persecutors of Christians was the infamous and barking-mad Emperor, Nero (37-68 AD). Nero had a general named Vespasian and Vespasian was Domitian's father. Vespasian was assigned with his eldest son Titus (and thus Domitian's brother) to put down a revolt in Judea (the first Jewish-Roman War). Vespasian soon became emperor himself (69-79), while Titus sacked and destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD.⁵ John likely witnessed the brutal killing, torturing, and enslavement of thousands of Jewish/Christian citizens.



Domitian need not be singled-out as a particularly unusual historical figure. Human beings, in general tend to want to be gods. And when they have enough power, they behave as if they are a god, and do all they can to wield absolute power. Domitian, from the beginning of his

⁵ Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography* (London: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 2012), pp. 155-160.

reign, limited the power of the Roman Senate.⁶ Even today, we can see before us the weakening power of our Senate, our intelligence agencies, our Justice Department, and our career Director-Generals. Governors and their respective states are threatened by executive power on a daily basis. No one politician need be singled-out for what is a common human characteristic: narcissism. This Memorial Day, it is important to remember that our government is founded upon law, separate branches, and checks and balances. Our polity is designed to protect us, the people. When the government becomes a system of loyalty, patronage, nepotism, revenge, and recrimination, then we begin the descent to emperor worship.



Christian orthodoxy understands that the sinful dynamic of wanting to be a god or like God began in the Garden of Eden. The story goes that Adam and Eve wished to have the knowledge and power of God. And they chose disobedience, sin, to get it. Mythologically, the Evil One, Satan, the fallen angel, also wished equality with God. Even the disciples, James and John, wished to rule with Christ in the coming kingdom (Mark 10:37). I am reading the gospel according to Judas right now, wherein, incredibly, even the disciple Peter is pejoratively depicted

⁶ "Domitian", *Wikipedia*. Found at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Domitian>, accessed, May 23, 2020.

to crave power over and against Mary Magdalene. Jesus then granted Peter authority to 'bind and loose' in heaven whatever he chose to 'bind and loose' on earth (Matthew 18:18).⁷ Now, that's power!



Stephanie and I have been watching on Netflix “Turn: [George] Washington’s Spies” and in so doing we are reminded of the great cost of our freedom. During the Revolutionary War, many were hanged for treason as they fought against monarchical, and thus arbitrary, rule. Friends, this Memorial Day, let us be thankful for those with us who risked and those who preceded us who forfeited their lives so that we can live in a democracy where a king does not rule over us.



This Memorial Day weekend, let us as people of faith, as Christians, remember that we choose to be accountable and obedient to the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ. Pledging allegiance to a flag, a nation, emperor, dictator, or any self-infatuated egomaniacal leader can potentially lead to the same slippery slope down which Roman, German,

⁷ Elaine Pagels and Karen King, *Reading Judas: The Gospel of Judas and the Shaping of Christianity*, (New York, Viking Group, 2007), p. 37.

Italian, Japanese, Chinese, Soviet/Russian, and North Korean peoples have slid.

But 'God and country' need not be mutually exclusive.



In a democratic society, administrations can be servant-led. Leadership can be sacrificial. Leadership can be benevolent. Leadership can be accountable. Leadership can be challenged. Leadership can be humble. Leadership can be repentant. This is the type of leadership for which I believe our ancestors fought. Let us remember that ideally leadership is not bullying nor coercive - but rather respectful, self-effacing, and dignified.



My spiritual and Christian hero Albert Luthuli once said, “The road to freedom is via the Cross”.⁸ May our Memorial Day weekend be blessed and may Luthuli’s mantra be reflected in our lives.

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

⁸ Scott Couper, *Albert Luthuli: Bound by Faith* (Scottsville, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2010), pp. 56-61.