

October 22, 2017 – Isaiah 45:1-7

Let's face it: there are some bizarre stories in the Bible. I think most of us have opened up our Bibles at one point or another to a passage that is downright weird. Visions of apocalyptic beasts that ravage the earth. Accounts of God's wrath poured out on the unrighteous. Miraculous events that stretch the imagination. I'm not going to deny that God's Word has some pretty surreal moments in it.

And then there are others, like our Old Testament Lesson today, that are less obvious, but certainly strange in their own way, if you understand what's going on. At first glance, this passage from Isaiah looks pretty ordinary. A prophecy that a guy named Cyrus is going to do some important things for God's people. What's so unusual about that? Well... everything, if you know who Cyrus is.

But before we talk about Cyrus, we need to understand something about Isaiah and about his message to Israel. Isaiah's prophecies can generally be divided into two categories. They're either talking to the Israelites around him in the present. Or they're talking to the Israelites long after him in the future.

His message to the people of his own day is generally a message of warning. You see, if you were to look at Judah and Israel at that time, you would likely see a nation of prosperity. Most of the people were wealthy and powerful and safe. They had everything they could ever ask for on the outside.

On the inside, though, they were corrupt to the core. Injustice and immorality were ruled the day. Idolatry and paganism had become commonplace. They went through the motions of offering sacrifices and trying to please God, but inwardly they had hearts of stone. Far from God. Far from his Word.

And so Isaiah had a message of wrath and judgment for them. To try and wake them from their indulgent apathy. So that they could turn from the coming punishment and live once more as God's people. They didn't, of course. Isaiah's call fell on deaf ears. And in response, God sent them into exile in the nation of Babylon. Far from their homes. Far from the Temple. Far from God himself, they thought.

Which is where Isaiah's second category of prophecies came in. His messages to the future. To the Israelites already in exile. Already suffering from sorrow and despair and shame. Israelites whom Isaiah knew would be far more receptive to what he had to say, once they saw his previous warnings come true and knew that God had taken everything from them.

And our reading today comes from this second set of prophecies. Because this man, Cyrus, that Isaiah speaks about won't be born for close to hundred years after Isaiah writes this. And we know exactly who Cyrus is. He more commonly went by the name Cyrus the Great. And he was king of Persian. Who conquered Babylon and single handedly built one of the largest empires to ever rule on the earth.

Now, back to our original question, why is this such a strange thing for Isaiah to be discussing? Well, look at the way God talks about Cyrus. Cyrus is the Lord's anointed one. That's a big title. The king of Israel is usually the only one who holds the title of God's anointed one. Jesus is called God's anointed one. But now God is saying that Cyrus is also his anointed one.

God says that he has grasped Cyrus' right hand, to subdue nations, to conquer kings, to break open doors. God says that he himself will go before Cyrus and carve a path of destruction everywhere Cyrus goes. God says that he will give to Cyrus hoards of treasure.

And yet, God also says that he will do all this despite the fact that Cyrus will not have one ounce of faith in the one true God. "I name you, though you do not know me... I equip you, though you do not know me." And it's true. We've got the archeological records to prove it. We've found the first hand historical records of Cyrus' campaign. He credited the Persian god Marduk for all of his victories.

Why? Why in the world would God give a man like Cyrus the Great all of these blessings. Power and victory and wealth and fame. Cyrus had it all because God handed to him. Cyrus changed the entire history of the earth because God went before him. Despite the fact that Cyrus never gave the God of Israel any credit at all for what he had done. Why?

Well, partly, this goes back to Isaiah's original audience. Isaiah wasn't writing this to Cyrus. He was writing it to God's people in the future. And he was telling them, don't lose hope. God hasn't abandoned you. God has been watching over you all this time.

And when you see this man named Cyrus show up. When you see him subdue nations and conquer kings and break through doors of bronze as if God himself were going before him. Then you will know that your salvation is near. Then you will know that God has done this for your sake.

And he did. Cyrus conquered Babylon in 540 BC. Just two years later, in 538 B.C., he allowed the first wave of Israelite exiles to return to Jerusalem and resettle the city. Cyrus never knew the God who had given him victory after victory. But that didn't mean he wasn't an instrument of God's grace and mercy. That didn't mean that God couldn't use a bloodthirsty conqueror like Cyrus to accomplish salvation for his people.

And yet, it wasn't just for the salvation of a handful of Israelite exiles who wanted to go back to their homeland that God did this. Yes, because of Cyrus, God's people were permitted to return to Jerusalem, just as God had always promised.

But it was also because of Cyrus that those people rebuilt the walls and Temple of Jerusalem. It was also because of Cyrus that this new nation of Israel was later subjugated by first Greece and then Rome. It was also because of Cyrus that Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. It was also because of Cyrus that a young virgin gave birth to a son in the town of Bethlehem.

You see, the God who forms light and creates darkness. The God who makes well-being and creates calamity. The God who is over all and in all and through all. This same God was bringing everything together for that moment when His Son would be born of Mary. Live. Die. And rise again.

Cyrus was but one very necessary domino in a line stretching back all the way to Adam and Eve. When God first said that one of their descendants would crush the serpent's head and lift this great curse of death off of them and all of humanity forever.

And it's a line of dominos that has stretched forward all the way to you and me. Gathered here today. To hear of God's great plan of salvation. To hear that God can use the most absurd circumstances to bring grace and mercy to this people. To hear that the God who created this world has always had you in mind for his redemption.

That while you were yet a sinner, condemned to death and hell, held captive in your own exile of sin, Jesus died for you. That while you were yet separated from God, alone in despair and sure that he had abandoned you, he had already set in motion everything you needed to bring you back into his kingdom.

There has never been a moment in the history of the earth when your salvation wasn't on God's mind. And there will never be a moment for as long as the earth exists when God isn't working to keep you in his grace. And bring you to that day when we are freed from sin and death forever. When, as a St Paul tells us, the Son of God who was raised from the dead, will come to us from heaven and deliver us from the wrath to come. Into the resurrection of all flesh and a kingdom that will have no end.

For those who don't know the history of Israel, Cyrus is a meaningless name to read about in Isaiah. For those who do know the history of Israel, Cyrus is a bizarre name to read about in Isaiah. But for us who have seen God's plan of salvation. For us who are a part of God's plan of salvation. Cyrus is the most amazing, incredible, hopeful name to read about in Isaiah.

Because if God loves me so much that he would use a man like Cyrus and alter the course of human history to bring about my salvation, then there is nothing in all the world that will stand in his way to bring about my resurrection on the last day. Amen.