

Epworth Chapel on the Green
October 19, 2014
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 45:1-7
Psalm 96:1-9
I Thessalonians 1:1-10
Matthew 22:15-22

Although this is not a year for national elections, in just a few weeks, Idahoans will go to the polls to elect a Governor and other officials to office. Many Idahoans are concerned, nervous, and even fearful about the outcomes of those elections.

Perhaps, then, it is a small act of providence that we are led today to the Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 45.

The backdrop to this text, you may recall, is that the children of Israel are in exile, living as captives to the hated Babylonians. For years, they've been asking, "what is to become of us, and what is the future of our homeland?"

Our text begins to provide the answer to those questions, although the answer is not necessarily one that the people would endorse or understand. The prophet says that God has called Cyrus to take over the kingdom of Babylon and to establish the Persian empire.

In fact, God calls Cyrus by name before Cyrus ever knows who God is.

Verse 4 tells us, “I called you by name when you did not know me,” and verse 5 says, “I have prepared you, even though you do not know me.”

The reason for this is both simple and extraordinary. The prophet writes these words, and calls Cyrus by name, *more than a hundred years before Cyrus is born!* The prophet speaks forth God’s call on Cyrus, and his role in breaking the back of Israel’s captors, in powerful images. Images of rival kings being paralyzed with fear. Images of mountains being leveled, of bronze gates and iron fortresses being smashed.

As history unfolds, Cyrus is indeed born and eventually comes to power in Persia. From historical sources, here is some of what we know of Cyrus:

- Cyrus ruled the largest empire the world had seen to date, spanning from Pakistan to modern day Greece and beyond. In fact, the Persians ruled more territory than the Egyptians or Babylonians before them, and more territory than the Greeks who would come after them.
- Cyrus was able to win two armies of Medes over to his cause without a drop of blood being shed.
- The people of Babylon opened their gates to him in 539 B.C. without incident, and without resistance. (Note verse 1: “Before him, mighty kings will be paralyzed with fear. Their fortress gates will be opened, never again to shut against him.”)

And, of course, it is Cyrus who defeats the Babylonians and drafts the edict that enables the children of Israel to return home to Jerusalem. You can read about this in the Book of Ezra in the Old Testament. Cyrus gave the children of Israel a

once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. They were in exile, they were powerless, they were dispossessed. And he allowed them to return to their native land without requiring them to forfeit their religious allegiance or their cultural traditions.

So, let us summarize briefly what we have here. God, in his providence, calls and anoints a foreign ruler before he is born. God paves the way for this ruler to come to power, and eventually enables him to become the head of the largest empire in the world to that point. This ruler subsequently breaks the back of the Babylonians, the hated oppressors of the children of Israel, and declares an edict that allows the captive Israelites to return to Jerusalem.

Now, it is hard to read this passage from Isaiah and not be impressed with Cyrus. He is truly an amazing man, who does amazing things on the stage of human history.

But ultimately, this passage from Isaiah is not about Cyrus. For God allows Cyrus to do all that he does *not for the purpose of making Cyrus known, but for the purpose of making God known!* Cyrus is allowed to do what he does so that all the world may know that Yahweh, the Lord, the God of Israel, is GOD. In the words of verse 6, “so all the world from east to west will know there is no other God. I am the LORD, and there is no other.”

In a few short weeks, many anxiety-ridden Idahoans will go to the polls. You may even find yourself among them. As we do so, hear this good news:

Earthly rulers come and go, taking their place on the stage of human history. But be not deceived -- the stage is God's. And every player who plays his/her part on the stage does so because God allows it. Each plays his/her part, large or small. But the end result is this: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob -- the God who eventually comes to us in Jesus Christ -- is revealing Himself and making Himself known. And the players on the stage of human history do what they do only because God in his sovereignty is doing what He is doing.

God calls and uses all kinds of people to accomplish His divine purposes. Many strange and unlikely characters may come and go, and take their place on the stage of history. They may have names like Cyrus, or Herod, or Caesar. Or their names may have a more contemporary ring. But never forget that it is God who writes the script. And it is *His* will, not theirs, that shall be done.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, these tokens of bread and wine remind us that God is never caught off guard, and that God never has to resort to "plan B" or develop spiritual "contingency plans." They are reminders to us that God writes the script and controls the play, though the actors may come and go.

The great hymn, "All My Hope on God Is Founded," says it like this:

*Mortal pride and earthly glory, sword and crown betray our trust;
Though with care and toil we build them, tower and temple fall to dust.
But God's power, hour by hour, is my temple and my tower.*

So come with faith, knowing that we place our trust ultimately not in the leader of a *state or a nation*, but in the God who allows them to share the stage so that He may make Himself known to the *nations*.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.