

Pentecost 21 / October 22, 2023

Isaiah 45:1-7

“I equip you though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other.”

That people may know that I am the Lord.

This passage from Isaiah is perhaps the most remarkable and astounding passage in the bible. It is addressed not to a king of Israel, but to a pagan king, as if he were a king of Israel. Isaiah writes, “Thus says the Lord to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him...” For those whose knowledge of ancient history is a bit sketchy, Cyrus was king of the Persians and Medes in the sixth century before Christ. He is properly known as Cyrus the Great, in distinction of an earlier Cyrus. He is famous in the ancient world for conquering Babylon in 532 B.C. ending its empire and establishing the Persian-Median Empire in its place. He left behind many monuments to himself and also many clay tablets that record his dealings and accomplishments. He is important in God’s plan of salvation, for allowing the Jewish exiles to return home to reestablish the presence of Israel in the Promised Land.

The 10 northern tribes had been dispersed throughout the previous Assyrian Empire, eight centuries before Christ. The tribe of Judah survived another century, but it too was exiled throughout the Babylonian Empire, which succeeded the Assyrian Empire. The Northern tribes had been dispersed and Judah sent into exile, because of their sin of worshipping idols and serving false gods. God had created Israel to be His own people. He had commissioned the twelve tribes to make Him known in all the earth as the Creator of all people, the world’s only God and Saviour. Instead, Israel turned from the worship of the Creator to serve things that are not gods. Through the dispersal of the northern tribes and the exile of the tribe of Judah, the Lord cleansed their descendants of idolatry and prepared them to again make Him known as the only God and the Saviour of all who believe. God wants all people to know that He is the Lord, the Creator of all things, the Saviour of all people in Christ Jesus, especially of those who believe.

God had promised through the prophet Jeremiah that the remnant of the tribe of Judah would be restored to the Promised Land after seventy years captivity in Babylon. It was an amazing promise. In the ancient world dispersed peoples never regrouped, exiled peoples never returned from captivity to reestablish themselves in their home lands. Exile and dispersion were national deaths from which there was no return. God would raise and restore His people so all people would know He is Lord. Through the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, God promised to return His people from captivity in Babylon even as He had returned their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. God promised, the faithful of Israel expected it, but no one knew how He would keep His promise.

It happened in the most remarkable way, through the actions of the pagan king of a new empire. God raised up Cyrus to keep His promise and fulfill His purpose of making Himself known as the only God and the world’s only Saviour. God said to Isaiah in chapter 55, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways... For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Who would have imagined God would anoint a pagan king to set His people free from captivity and return them to their Promised Land? Who would have thought the Lord would call a pagan king “His Anointed” and through him, prepare the way for the great King, Jesus Christ our Lord? Through Cyrus, God returned the remnant of Israel to the promised land, so that in the fullness of time He would send His eternal Son to be our Redeemer from sin and death. God’s great purpose in the world is to make Himself known as the only God and as the only Saviour of all people in His Anointed Son Jesus.

In Proverbs 21 King Solomon wrote, “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He will.” Sometimes it seems the world is out of control. Sometimes its hard to believe the Lord has any control over the things that happen in the world. Violence and terror are everyday occurrences. The news moves from one atrocity to another, so that what horrifies us today is replaced by another horror tomorrow. It was like that in the life of God’s ancient people too. Israel in the Promised Land was a small nation at the mercy of large empires to the north and to the south. Galilee, where Jesus lived as a child, was a convenient middle ground for opposing armies to meet, fight and abuse the local population. The Lord warned Israel and Judah that their sins were as high as the heavens and that He would send the nations to cleanse them with the sword, dispersion and exile if they refused to repent and return to Him in faith and faithfulness. Nevertheless, even the faithful in

Israel were appalled at the ferocity of the nations and the violence that befell Israel. It seemed the Lord had unleashed a fury that even He could not control. But God is in control and as Solomon said, He works in the hearts of kings and rulers despite their intentions to accomplish His good; making His name known among the nations and preparing the way for salvation through the coming of Jesus. He is the Lord's anointed in the fullest sense.

Cyrus was great because the Lord made him great. The Lord made Cyrus great, so that through His reign He would restore the remnant of His people to the Promised Land. God made Cyrus great, so that in the fulness of time He would send His Son, born of woman, born under law, born into a world of violence, sin, sorrow, hatred and death to redeem the world from the curse of sin and bring the salvation of forgiveness into the world and peace with Himself into the hearts of all who believe. It is God's way to work in the most remarkable and unexpected ways. He wins the victory by suffering apparent defeat. He does this so that people may know that He is the Lord. He does this so that we know there is no other and that nothing is too hard for Him. In fact, He chooses the hardest way, so that we would know that He is the one who does all things. He chooses the way that seems impossible so we would know that nothing can resist His will. He displays His power in the most remarkable ways, so we would know that He alone is God and that in Christ Jesus, He is the Saviour of all people, especially of those who believe.

Empires rise and fall, kings come and go, but the word of the Lord endures forever. In the fulness of time, six centuries after Cyrus became great, flourished and returned to the dust, God sent His Son Jesus, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. At age thirty He was baptized in a small river on the fringes of a different empire. The Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove and anointed Him the Christ. The divine voice declared Him His beloved Son. The Lord made Cyrus a great king in his time, but Jesus is the Great King by the nature of His being as the eternal Son of God and by His human lineage through King David.

Cyrus fulfilled the Lord's purpose in his time, by returning Israel to the Promised Land. Jesus fulfilled God's greatest purpose by bearing the sins of the world on His cross, defeating death through His death and bringing salvation into all the world through His resurrection the third day. God's purpose in the world is fulfilled in Jesus. He makes God known as the only God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He makes God known as love for He gave His only begotten Son to bear the sin of the world, so that through faith in Him human beings would have forgiveness and life.

God is in control. He works all things to the eternal good of those who love Him. Nothing is too hard for the Lord. He works His good in the most impossible of ways. He does this so we would believe the power of His love and know He is the Lord and there is no other. God raised Cyrus to be a great king to accomplish the redemption of Israel in time. God raised Jesus from the dead to be the Greatest King and the Saviour of His people Israel in time and for eternity. God by His Holy Spirit continue to open our hearts through word and sacrament to believe in Him as the only God and Christ Jesus as our only Saviour. In Jesus' Name. Amen.