

## SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

October 18, 2020

### Psalm 96:1–13:

- 1 Oh sing to the LORD a new song;  
sing to the LORD, all the earth!
- 2 Sing to the LORD, bless his name;  
tell of his salvation from day to day.
- 3 Declare his glory among the nations,  
his marvelous works among all the peoples!
- 4 For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;  
he is to be feared above all gods.
- 5 For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols,  
but the LORD made the heavens.
- 6 Splendor and majesty are before him;  
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
  
- 7 Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,  
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!
- 8 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;  
bring an offering, and come into his courts!
- 9 Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness;  
tremble before him, all the earth!
  
- 10 Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns!  
Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved;  
he will judge the peoples with equity."
  
- 11 Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;  
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
- 12 let the field exult, and everything in it!

Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy  
13 before the LORD, for he comes,  
for he comes to judge the earth.  
He will judge the world in righteousness,  
and the peoples in his faithfulness.

**Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 45:1-7 (ESV):**

**Cyrus, God's Instrument**

1 Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus,  
whose right hand I have grasped,  
to subdue nations before him  
and to loose the belts of kings,  
to open doors before him  
that gates may not be closed:  
2 "I will go before you  
and level the exalted places,  
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze  
and cut through the bars of iron,  
3 I will give you the treasures of darkness  
and the hoards in secret places,  
that you may know that it is I, the LORD,  
the God of Israel, who call you by your name.  
4 For the sake of my servant Jacob,  
and Israel my chosen,  
I call you by your name,  
I name you, though you do not know me.  
5 I am the LORD, and there is no other,  
besides me there is no God;  
I equip you, though you do not know me,  
6 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.  
7 I form light and create darkness;  
I make well-being and create calamity;  
I am the LORD, who does all these things.

### **EPISTLE: 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10 (ESV):**

#### **Greeting**

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,  
To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:  
Grace to you and peace.

#### **The Thessalonians' Faith and Example**

2 We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, 3 remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 4 For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 6 And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, 7 so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8 For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. 9 For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

### **THE GOSPEL Matthew 22:15–22 (ESV):**

#### **Paying Taxes to Caesar**

**15** Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. **16** And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care

about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. **17** Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" **18** But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? **19** Show me the coin for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. **20** And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" **21** They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." **22** When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away.

## **Sermon 40 – Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost**

### **"An Uncommon Redemption"**

**Isaiah 45:1-7**

Dear friends,

There's a new king in town in our Old Testament lesson, and in this is Israel's salvation. This prophecy from Isaiah, God shows us just how He works. He works silently, He works sideways, in ways that don't fit the description that we've become accustomed to. We are used to cause-and-effect, the logic that the world works by. Passages like this, and what they mean, remind us that God is beyond all that, He is bigger than that, and that the way He thinks is delightfully beyond how we can see things playing out. This is disaster turned to good. This is salvation by way of power-hungry monarch. This is God being God, playing bad dice in a bad game and bringing good things out of it. Who is this man? Why is God talking about Him? These are questions I am happy to answer.

Isaiah speaks these words as prophecy, so its not happening right in the moment, but it fits the rest of what he's had to say. Isaiah's words around this are what you'd expect them to be. He condemns Israel for their idolatry, and then He promises them that despite this sin, God has

not abandoned His plans for them. There will be consequences, serious consequences, a little thing called the Babylonian Exile after all, hundreds of years without freedom, with no home, in the land of a foreign conqueror. But God is gracious in how careful He is to remind Israel that this is all according to plan. They have sinned. They have failed. But He has not abandoned them, He has not forsaken them.

By the time these words come true, the Israelites have been in Babylon for decades. They have settled into the thought that they'll never see their home again. Some have married Babylonians, others have dispersed throughout this rather sizeable Middle-Eastern empire. They've taken jobs throughout many levels of society, you have a lot of white-collar folks helping build and make farms and so on, but you also have Daniel and his friends advising royalty and representing Israel in the royal court. If anyone remembers what the Promised Land even looks like, it's the really old folks. An entire generation of Israelites have grown up in Babylon. Despite that, though, they still mourn. This isn't home and they know it. You get the idea the Babylonians stopped being outright mean to the Israelites, but they weren't their own nation. They didn't have their ancestral lands. Psalms are written during this period, mourning what they lost in Palestine.

**“Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed: 2 “I will go before you and level the exalted places, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, 3 I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name.”** Imagine hearing this words in the midst of everything I have described to

you. You're an Israelite working in Babylon wishing your country could be great again, and this is what God says to you. He's talking about Cyrus, and you've probably heard of the guy, some big king from back East. But what have you heard?

You've heard that this Cyrus is conquering Babylon. He's tearing into the very empire you depend on to take you home one day. Babylon owns the Promised Land, if anyone can tell you to go home, its the Babylonian king, and now the Babylonian king is not taking his phone calls. He's too busy losing to this new king on the block, Cyrus. His armies are marching through the country, killing, burning, and generally doing what ancient people do when they conquer. Your country is falling apart, and your hopes are falling with it. This seems like a setback, it seems like a disaster. How will we go home without Babylon? What happens if Cyrus takes over? What happens if Cyrus loses, and Babylon never really puts itself back together? It's not hard to imagine the Israelites throwing up their hands and giving up on their dream when they hear this news.

I want to emphasize to you that these first words I read for you barely help this impression. I mean, look at what God says in the first three verses. He talks about giving things into Cyrus' hand, that Cyrus is going to break down doors, get his hands on the treasures of nations. Basically, its a prediction that Cyrus is going to be really successful and that God will be responsible for the success of this pagan, Gentile king. Think of being an Israelite and hearing these words. God, what about us? What about your children? What about our tears, our sorrow, our repentance, what about our pleading with you to return us to the Promised Land? You're promising everything to this Gentile king, God! Do we not matter to you?

There's a clue in the first part. God calls Cyrus his anointed, He actually calls Cyrus His Messiah, which is quite a thing to say about a guy who hasn't even heard of an Israelite. This isn't God doing one of those things where He's talking about something completely different than what you're thinking, it is God promising you exactly what you want, He's just not doing it in a way that makes sense. You can see in verse 4 where the shift starts.

**“4 For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me.”** Wait a second, God. You're telling me that this new king is your servant for *us*? Can you envision, brothers and sisters, how hard that was to believe? This Cyrus guy comes from Iran. What does He know of Jews, of the Promised Land? He doesn't know anything. He's just another king. A big guy with too much money, a big army, and a bigger ego, you know how kings are like! And this Gentile king who doesn't even know we exist is going to save us?

God makes this very clear. Cyrus gets a fair amount of words in the Old Testament precisely because He does what God describes here, and He himself does it for the reasons that God tells. This isn't just another foreign despot, guys, this is God's salvation coming in the form of a king who doesn't even know God's name. It looks like disaster to the Israelites. It looks like the end of their hopes. It looks like there's no way in heck they'll ever see home again. It turns out the opposite. Cyrus will return God's people to their land, He will even put up the money to rebuild the city and the temple again. He invokes the name of our God to do it.

God does this. His solutions come from left field. His hope, to us, doesn't look like it. To us, it just looks like more problems. You all know God is bigger than you and smarter than you,

I'm pointing this out to remind you that this is how that disconnect plays out in human lives. We look and we see God moving, we think we've figured out how it will go, but God is always capable of surprising us. He can pull some real unexpected outcomes and some real swift turnarounds. And He orchestrated all of this for His people. He says that with absolute clarity.

**“5 I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, 6 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. 7 I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things.”** This is all for Israel. This is all for God's children. It is not just to teach them a lesson, it is not just to bring them to repentance. You all know the use of that. We sinners have to be knocked to our knees sometimes, and it is never pretty. But this isn't just for that. It is also to orchestrate the return of His people. He's giving them their dream. He's answering their prayer. He's meeting their needs. He's just doing it in a very unexpected way that most of them probably wouldn't even dream of.

Why? He talks about that too. He comforts His people in their trial, He hears their prayers, because they are His people. Moreover, He says that He does this to draw His people back to Him, to bring new peoples into His wing. God loves His people through calamity, game changes, king changes, nations rising and falling. He brings people to Him through those same things. Jesus teaches us that the cross is murder, but it is also salvation. It is the pain and hardship that He suffered that becomes our benefit. None of this exists in a vacuum, and none of it is specifically to hurt us, even if it really really seems like it.



God's work seems grim at times. It's hard to see the good that comes out of it. We know we're sinners, we know we deserve what life serves us, even if its hard to admit it. Through all this, God extends His promises farther and farther, just as He did in those days. Israel thought their hopes were lost. Their hopes were just beginning. Their exile was about to end, but they didn't know that, all they saw was a nation at war, another king coming into power. It's exhausting to keep guessing, to keep trying to see the end. You don't have to. God sees the end. He's had that end in His hands the whole time.

This is a God worth worshiping, my friends. This is a God worth trusting. That is the lesson that Isaiah teaches us through Cyrus. A God who can coordinate the rise and fall of entire nations, changes to an entire power structure, while not forgetting His people, and in fact working it all out for them. This is a God who daily manages the complexities of an entire universe. That level of power is so far beyond us that it beggars the imagination, but its not just about the power, it is about the goal. I don't know about you, but I have never once doubted God is powerful. I don't doubt that God is good, either. What I doubt is that God's good includes mine. What I doubt is that I'm a part of this, I sometimes think that I'm just collateral damage to God. God is doing some exceptional work in our time, and a lot of it is very scary. It involves loss, sacrifice, a lot of accumulated human selfishness, abuse of power, and a fluctuating, uncertain future. Look at this Old Testament lesson and marvel at it. God's been here before. He knows the stakes. He knows the game. He knows just how to work the angles so that it all falls into place just as He wants it to. Furthermore, He knows you, and He knows what you need, and He won't forget you as He puts it all together. He didn't forget Joe Schmoe Israelite who just wanted to return to His family farm back in Israel. He hasn't forgotten you either. You aren't caught in the crossfire between

God and the world that hates Him. You're right in the middle of exactly what God wants to come from this. He brought Jesus back from the dead. He brought Israel home. He brought His Word to a thousand tongues and a thousand nations. And He loves you, and doesn't forget a hair on the head of those He loves.

Amen.