

Wednesday October 19, 2005

7:00am

Sermon

I wanted so badly to talk about Isaiah 45 in Sunday's sermon. I *had* to do St Matthew and Caesar's coin—God wouldn't give me any peace if I did not—but my fascination with the unsettling usually gets the better of me, and Isaiah 45 is unsettling. I read from the NRSV, but once again our translation—while much better than most that you'll find—has smoothed over a problem. It's avoided controversy but in doing that it's avoided the great faith matter in the text.

The text introduces itself as a declaration regarding Cyrus, God's anointed. The Hebrew word for anointed is *meshiah*—anglicized it is “messiah”. Now, in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE Messiah was a title reserved for the King of Israel and the High Priest. They were anointed as God's chosen at the starts of their reigns. So, we've kind of solved the problem except for Cyrus. If you reach way back in your memory banks, probably to sometime around 6<sup>th</sup> grade social studies, you'll recall that Cyrus was the emperor of Persia. This is the guy. Yes, he is Cyrus the Persian Messiah. Allow me to update his nationality and use a more familiar term for Messiah, and call him Cyrus the Iranian Christ.

You see the problem.

Since we're still back in middle school social studies allow me to assume my alter ego as Professor Leitzke. These verses were written in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE when Israel was in captivity. In 587 King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered

Jerusalem and hauled the upper and middle classes back to Babylon as spoils of war and political exiles. In those days, a city was as strong as its gods. The priests had been claiming for some time that the only god was the God of Israel, but they did an awful lot of claiming that, so chances are that people needed to be reminded of it a lot. So, exile in Babylon might look like Babylon's god had beaten Israel's god. Or, it might look like Israel's god, the one God, had simply forsaken Israel. Babylon's days were numbered however. Persia was gaining power. A war with Persia loomed on the horizon. The Israelites dared to hope. Cyrus of Persia might just liberate Israel.

Okay, I'm done playing Professor.

The text from Isaiah 45 speaks to us in one sentence, a sentence that can have three different nuances, and in this case all three nuances are intended: God chooses us.

First, *God* chooses us. The promise of Cyrus defeating Babylon to free Israel reminds us that God is in charge. Babylon's gods are idols. *God* decides what is going to happen. God picked Cyrus. There's no indication that Cyrus ever believed he was doing the Lord's work. Maybe God just seized upon the moment and used Cyrus to free Israel. God uses the materials at hand, the people and places and times, to do God's work.

Second, God *chooses* us. Cyrus is the only non-Jew called Messiah in all of scripture. As unsettling as that might be to us, it would have been a scandal when it was first written. It forces us to expand our definition of messiah. It forces us to consider that

God will work through whatever means available, and that those means are chosen as much as any political or religious leader could be. Furthermore, let us not forget that Jesus of Nazareth would redefine messiah. This man, expected to lead Israel to glorious military victory over Rome, expected to bring the end of time and God's final victory, instead died on a cross. Yet he is indeed the Messiah, the Christ, God's anointed and chosen. Jesus the Christ, crucified and risen, reveals God to us, God who is willing to become the lowliest and humblest creature in order to be with us. Cyrus the Iranian Christ reveals God to us, God who does not forget or forsake us, but who frees and saves us.

Thirdly, God chooses *us*. Friends of Christ, it is God who does the choosing. Israel did not have a monopoly on God. God had revealed God to Israel. God had chosen Israel. Israel was not somehow better than other people. God was at work in Israel, and the presence of God in Israel was what made Israel special. The same is true of us today. We are indeed precious in the eyes of God, and are forgiven, freed, and saved *because* God lives in us. We are chosen. We are anointed. We are marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit forever. That is the best thing that anyone could ever say, and we can say it.

God chooses us. Amen