

A Savior to Come

In the name of him who came to seek and to save the lost, dear friends in Christ: I suspect that most of you would agree that we live in uncertain times. Things we once felt confident about and more or less took for granted like our country's place as a leader among the nations, the inherent stability of our political system, the financial strength of our currency, the productivity of our business and industry, the basic goodness and moral fiber of the American people, the justice of our laws ... we're not so certain about these things anymore. Indeed, we see in these and other measures of national health cause for alarm.

In some ways we are victims of our own success. We've had it too good for too long. We're spoiled. Witness the fact that the majority of students on our college campuses today actually think socialism is a good idea and that we should implement it here in this country because, after all, it's worked so well in ... well, no place that it's actually been tried ... but, I don't know, this is America and we're used to getting our way. And that's the problem: young adults who have always been given everything they wanted when they wanted it, and who have never been told "no" or "wait" or "you'll have to work for it" naturally expect that they are entitled to what others have worked for. And because no matter how foolish the ideas they adhere to and speak about are, no one has ever been allowed to tell them "You're wrong". Now, if you do, you are decried as a hatemongering Nazi who needs to be silenced. You have no right to say something that might offend their precious feelings!

And I'm just scratching the surface here. There are a lot of other disturbing trends in the works that you are well aware of. In the first draft of this sermon I listed some of them. Four or five pages later, I gave up the idea thinking you wouldn't want to sit through a two-hour sermon. You're welcome. But you add up all these looming problems facing our nation, and it's small wonder that we're feeling a sense of anxiety about the future. Some might call it "fear", others "grave concern", but it seems increasingly that our nation is being carried along the wrong path in that proverbial hand basket made in the Montana state capital. (That's Helena, in case you didn't remember.)

I don't mean to say that the situation is hopeless. Despite the problems, we Americans remain an optimistic people. And it's fair to say that a lot of us think that what we're suffering from more than anything is a lack of proper leadership – at all levels, but especially at the top. If we could just get the right people elected, people with the right combination of integrity and wisdom and sure, a little charisma wouldn't hurt either – if we could do that, we could change this around. I have no doubt that's why our current president was elected. Not that he fits the bill I just described, but that he was decidedly something other than the standard politician we've grown to distrust. We're looking for someone better, someone truly great: another George Washington or Abraham Lincoln or someone with their combination of gifts who could inspire us, unite the nation, cut through the red tape, drain the swamp, and lead us out of this mess. Why, we're looking for a savior: a savior for our nation.

That brings me to today's text from Isaiah in which the Lord speaks of a coming savior for the nation of Israel. And I don't mean his only Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. No, I mean a very earthly savior to save a very earthly nation.

I'm speaking of Cyrus who was the first king of the Medo-Persian Empire who came to power in the middle of the sixth century before Christ. In the passage we read, we heard the Lord addressing this man Cyrus by name and telling him that he had anointed him to be a savior for his people, Israel. That's what it means to be one anointed by the Lord. In Hebrew that's a messiah: an anointed one. In Greek it's a christ. So, this man Cyrus was to be a messiah or a christ for God's people.

That's truly remarkable for two reasons. First, Cyrus was an idol worshipping pagan. He didn't know or acknowledge the Lord as the one true God. Indeed, when through God's mighty hand he came to power, he had probably never even heard of the Lord. And yet he was the Lord's anointed. The second thing that's remarkable about this is that Isaiah recorded these words of the Lord in the eighth century before Christ, somewhere around 150 years before Cyrus was born. The empire he would rule didn't exist. As a matter of fact, the empire he would defeat in order to rule his own, the Neo-Babylonian Empire, that didn't exist yet either. And yet here we have the Lord prophetically speaking of persons and worldly empires and events that would come about in the fairly distant future as if they existed already.

That this is true highlights one of the major themes of the Old Testament Scriptures; namely that the Lord God of Israel is driving all of world history. It is he who raises and lowers nations and their leaders. It makes no difference whether they acknowledge him as Lord and God or not; the rulers of this world work for him. The decisions they make, the policies they implement, these serve the Lord's greater purposes – the chief of which is to bring salvation to his chosen people. That's what it's all about.

In the case of Cyrus, he was chosen by the Lord to be the king who would end the exile of his people in Babylon. We've talked about that before: that seventy-year period in which the remnant of Judah was taken into captivity. Because of their constant rebellion against him, their idolatry, their immorality, their injustice, their oppression of the poor – and because of their stubborn refusal to repent and return to him – the Lord said, "Fine. You don't want to be my chosen people living in the Promised Land, have it your way. I'm throwing you out!" It was sort of the ultimate act of tough love. If I have to whack you with a two by four to get your attention, that's what I'll do. That's how determined God is to save his people.

As it happened, the Lord used another pagan king, a man named Nebuchadnezzar, to execute this act of discipline upon his people. He was the Lord's instrument to destroy the nation of Judah and carry the captives into exile, where for seventy years they were in what parents who want to correct their wayward children through nonviolent means call "time out."

And it worked. Seventy years of absence, of living in exile, of longing for what they once had, changed the hearts of God's people. It brought them to repentance. And when came the appointed time for their exile to end, the Lord sent Cyrus to destroy the nation that had captured his people, and to issue the orders that would allow them to return to the land of Judah and reestablish their own nation.

Cyrus himself would not have been aware of this, of course. He would have said that he rose to power all on his own, with his own wits, ingenuity, and ambition. But who gave him those? And who gave him victory in the many battles he fought on his way to the top? Certainly not the idols of the false gods he prayed to and to whom he gave thanks.

That comes through loud and clear in the passage we heard. While Cyrus is named as the Lord's agent, note who the subject of all the verbs is. It's the Lord who does the anointing.

He says to Cyrus, "I take you by the right hand". That's significant because we know that in these pagan cultures when a king ascended to his throne, there was a ritual swearing in ceremony. And part of it was for the king to reach out and physically grasp the right hand of whatever idol god was the head of his pagan pantheon. The idea being that he was going to act as his god's right-hand man. The Lord changes that around. He says, "I take your hand". You're working for me. And then he says, "I will go before you." "I will break down the doors for you." "I will give you treasures." "I will equip you."

He also explains why he's doing all this for Cyrus: "So that you may know that it is I, the Lord God of Israel, who calls you by your name. 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. I am the Lord, and there is no other ..."

As it happens, Cyrus did come to know the Lord. He was the king who was tricked by his advisors into issuing the decree that forbade for a month anyone making a petition to anyone or to any god but himself. It was a vanity thing that he was only too happy to agree with. It was also, however, the decree that one of his top advisors, Daniel, could not comply with. He continued to pray to the Lord as before. And thus, it was that Cyrus was forced against his will to have Daniel cast into the lions' den telling him, "May the Lord God you worship rescue you."

You know the story: how the next morning the king rose early, rushed to the sealed cave, and cried out, "Daniel! Was the God you worship able to save you?" Yes. He did. And though they are not recorded for us in Scripture, we can well imagine the conversations Daniel had with his king after this extraordinary event. Talk about an opportunity to do some evangelism. And then Daniel taking out his 150-year-old copy of the Isaiah scroll and showing Cyrus where his name appears in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Lord has a job for you. Set his people free. Cyrus did. In the same year that Daniel came out of the lions' den unscathed, Cyrus issued the decree for the exile to end and for Jerusalem and the Temple of the Lord to be rebuilt.

And this part of world history is a prophetic foreshadow of the greater salvation the Lord planned for his people in exile; in exile from paradise due to our sin. That salvation was accomplished in world history by another man whom the Lord anointed, a man who was more than a man: he was also God's only begotten Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. At that time, as at all times, the Lord used humans, sinful, unbelieving humans to work his will. It's a strange paradox. The Lord does not cause humans to sin; but even their sins serve his greater purpose, which, as stated before, is to work salvation for his chosen people.

The same is true of what we call natural disasters or sometimes "acts of God". In the last verse of today's text, the Lord says, "I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the Lord, who does all these things." Nothing just happens. All things that happen serve the Lord.

And that brings me back to where we started: our justifiable concerns about where this nation of ours is headed. None of us knows what the future holds for these United States of America. The Lord hasn't promised us an earthly savior to come like he did for Old Testament Israel. And we very much want to avoid the sin of making an idol of our country or any of its leaders by trusting in them to save us. They can't. God has given us a better Savior and a better salvation in his Son, Jesus Christ. It's his second coming that we're looking forward to. Knowing this and trusting in him, we also know that whatever happens to our nation, for better

or for worse, will serve God's purpose of keeping his people repentant and faithful to his truth. It may well be that we're in for harder times and darker days. Perhaps in God's wisdom the so-called American Era is ending. I hope not; but if it does, we need not be worried. God doesn't save nations. He saves his people out of all nations. Our task is to be faithful to him and to do our best to be good citizens of whatever nation we live in while we await in joyful hope and eager expectation the return of our Savior to come.

As the Psalmist said, "We will not fear though the earth give way. The God of Jacob is our fortress." By his Word and Spirit may the Lord work in us such confidence in him and the salvation he will surely bring to us through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!