

20th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 10.18.20

Isaiah 45:1-7

Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him~ and the gates shall not be closed:² I will go before you and level the mountains, 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 riches hidden in secret places, so 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 surname you, though you do not know me.⁵ I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me,⁶ so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other.⁷ I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things.

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.¹⁶ So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality."¹⁷ Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"¹⁸ But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?"¹⁹ Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius.²⁰ Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?"²¹ They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."²² When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away. (374)

A board book we had in our family library when the boys were babies was *The Runaway Bunny*. Margaret Wise Brown wrote it, she of *Goodnight Moon*, which we also had in our board book library. But I preferred *The Runaway Bunny*.

It features a little bunny who decides he wants to run away from his bunny-mother. He tells her this, and she replies that she'll run after him.

This has him declare that he'll become a fish in a stream, and that he'll swim away from her.

This has her imagining herself a fisherman to catch her little bunny.

So, he will become a rock on a mountain high above her, which has her imagine herself a mountain climber coming to where he is.

For this, the little bunny claims he'll be a bird and he'll fly away, which has her declaring to become a tree to which he'll come home.

This means he will become a sailboat to sail away from her. But this has her becoming the wind to blow the sailboat-bunny to where she wants him to go.

On it goes until, at last, the little bunny says that he'll become a boy and run into a house, which has the bunny-mother claim she'll be his mother and she'll hug him hello.

I loved this book because it was how I felt as the boys' mother, watching them imagine living in a world where they were masterful and where I was unnecessary, watching them play at this world (with peekaboo, with crawling across the room, with toddling away from me) while still being years away from actually realizing this world.

I got in a debate about the book once with some other mothers of young children. They all happened to be affiliated with Austin Riggs—doctors, social workers. They objected to this book, to the mother figure in it. She was creepy and overbearing. She was something of a monster. The conclusion of the book has the little bunny realize he might as well not leave home, after all. Since there was apparently no getting away from this omni-present mother, why should he even bother with the effort?

Okay, that's a little soul-crushing, I had to admit. I could see their reading of it. Mothers can smother.

But I also pressed them: might their work have them overestimating the trauma mothers tend to cause their children? Most mothers tend to love their children the right amount, give or take, and to calibrate it so it's fitting for their age. I even joked, "It would be one thing if the bunny was not-so-little and said, 'I am going to become a college student and go to campus,' and the mother replied, 'Then I will be the student center and will monitor your every move.' But this is a little, little bunny we're talking about."

No surprise, I prefer my reading. A world that coheres, a world that holds and meets you on your way: it seems to me this book isn't simply about a mother and child but about the person amidst their world. I actually always felt it was more theological than psychological or parental how-to. It always reminded me of the 139th Psalm: "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover

me, and the light around me become night', even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you."

The theological concept here is the sovereignty of God, the idea that God is the god of all things, that there is nothing that lies beyond God's power to fill and use, to fulfill and redeem.

It makes for a kinder world in the imagining, it seems to me, less menacing—this notion that God is sovereign of all, this *experience* of God as sovereign of all. I'm actually always surprised when I meet "religious Christians" who seem so worried about falling into something sinful or never managing to strike upon "God's plan" for them, as if it takes terrific daily effort to stay clean in this sullying world or as if it takes constant and anxious attention to figure out what the plan is. The proportions are all wrong, it seems to me, in this approach to life in the world and in its theological underpinnings, as if the things of grace are precious few while the things of sin and sully are overwhelming, as if the givenness of God's providence is less reliable than the figuring out of God's plan is imperative. It's like the religious life is as narrow as a tightrope, brittle as old plastic.

And, yes, Jesus is remembered to have said that the gate is narrow, the way that leads to life is narrow. But, then there are the passages from scripture like the ones we just heard that suggest something far more complicated than that God is good and the world is bad, and our job is to figure out how to be good as God while making our way through this bad, bad world.

Take Cyrus, for example—as many Christians already have. Really, Cyrus is getting a lot of press these days. King of Persia toward the end of the people's exile in Babylon, he was so talented a politician that he won the loyalty of peoples of other empires without ever going to battle. He conquered other lands and peoples simply through the power of his appeal.

This is how he won over much of Babylon, and how he was thought to have won the blessing of one of Babylon's gods, Marduk. His political charisma made for a near peaceful transfer of power in the region from the Babylonian Empire to the Persian Empire, which in turn made it so the exiles of Israel and Judea could leave Babylon, could return to their land and their ways, and could rebuild their Temple. Babylon had held them as exiles. Persia, now in power, would prefer they go home.

So, they did—Israel and Judah returned home, returned to their ways and practices.

This, of course, was felt as God's blessing. Of this recent turn of events, on this mighty, powerful, appealing king: here was sign of God's blessing, borne out in the restoration of this, God's chosen people in their promised land.

But this was shocking. That God would have blessed Cyrus: this was shocking because Cyrus was known not to have known the Lord. That's what the Lord said about him through the prophet Isaiah as we heard just now, but who is more properly known as Third Isaiah. Speaking to us from the time of the return from exile, Third Isaiah is the voice of the third portion of this long book, Isaiah. Here, the people have suffered attack and defeat, have withstood a half century of exile, and now are set about their return—thanks to Cyrus, in no small part, he who was though known not to have known this God of the Israelites.

And yet, according to this prophet of the Israelites, Cyrus had become useful to the Lord's purposes as regarded the people, not to mention the wellbeing of this whole region. Cyrus had become as an arm of the Lord, one whose right hand the Lord grasped to subdue nations and strip kings of their robes. Thus, the Lord would go before Cyrus and level mountains, would break into pieces the doors of bronze and cut through bars of iron.

Shocking! Who would have guessed that the God of Israel and of Judah would have strayed so far outside this given people to work God's providence?

Shocking. Deeply unsettling.

Cyrus, as I said, has been getting a lot of press these days because many evangelical Christians see King Cyrus in Donald Trump. Though clearly not someone who "knows the Lord," Trump is felt to be useful to the Lord's assumed purpose of restoring dignity and cultural power to this self-understood oppressed people. They presume as an article of faith that the Lord, sovereign of all, makes good use of all sorts of things, and all sorts of people, in this world.

As it happens, I presume that as an article of my faith, too. I just don't come to the same conclusion about the president. I don't see in Donald Trump a skilled politician. I don't see him as holding appeal other than of the diabolical sort—divisive, generated by the scapegoat mechanism, which sets up outsiders and enemies, and suggests violence against them, until that suggested violence gets realized in things like kidnapping plots and extra-judicial executions. We are in a very bad way, we of the United States; and *because* this present-day king is no King Cyrus. We should be so lucky.

As I said, though, one thing I can get with in the evangelical assertion that King Cyrus wasn't simply an historic figure or a figure in the biblical tradition, but that he's emblematic of theological truth: I agree with the faithful watching out amidst the world for the Lord's doing, God's persistence and providence always showing up at any given moment to be one of our choices. Soren Kierkegaard said that God isn't as watching over us as we go about making our choices, but that God is ever-present as one of our choices, one option that we ever might choose, and we might choose, and we might choose as we go along.

God calls us from amidst the things of this world.

This is a paraphrase from a poem Richard Wilbur wrote, the poem called "Love Calls us to the Things of this World." It is of someone outside, presumably early in the morning, hanging laundry to dry, and someone inside waking up to the day and relating to that lofty laundry until the real body, heavy, remembers itself to the once-sleeper.

The eyes open to a cry of pulleys,
And spirited from sleep, the astounded soul
Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple
As false dawn.

Outside the open window
The morning air is all awash with angels.

Some are in bed-sheets, some are in blouses,
Some are in smocks: but truly there they are.
Now they are rising together in calm swells
Of halcyon feeling, filling whatever they wear
With the deep joy of their impersonal breathing;

Now they are flying in place, conveying
The terrible speed of their omnipresence, moving
And staying like white water; and now of a sudden
They swoon down into so rapt a quiet
That nobody seems to be there.

The soul shrinks

From all that it is about to remember,
From the punctual rape of every blessed day,
And cries,

“Oh, let there be nothing on earth but laundry,
Nothing but rosy hands in the rising steam
And clear dances done in the sight of heaven.”

Yet, as the sun acknowledges
With a warm look the world's hunks and colors,
The soul descends once more in bitter love
To accept the waking body, saying now
In a changed voice as the man yawns and rises,
“Bring them down from their ruddy gallows;
Let there be clean linen for the backs of thieves;
Let lovers go fresh and sweet to be undone,
And the heaviest nuns walk in a pure floating
Of dark habits,
keeping their difficult balance.”

“Oh, let there be clean laundry for the backs of thieves” for love calls us to the things of this world, God calls us to the things of this world.

A scandalous notion? The Pharisees and the Herodians seemed to think so, or at least seemed to think Jesus might think so, or at least seemed to think Jesus's followers might think so.

These two groups had little in common, the Pharisees and the Herodians, except that both took issue with Jesus.

The Pharisees were interpreters of the Law. Their task was to help people live by the Law, all 613 commandments and all that each implied. It was an exacting task, and a complicated task; and the more exacting it became, the better it was for the Pharisees. They seemed to have

righteousness and purity as their aim, but they had a vested interest in making achieving righteousness and purity as difficult as possible. For all this, they regarded Jesus as dangerous, someone whose blithe attitude about the law was dangerous.

As for Jesus, he objected to how the Law privileged the already privileged and further exploited the already exploited.

The Herodians were, by contrast, those who'd aligned themselves with Herod, who himself was aligned with Rome. These might have been members of his court or advisors for making policy and deciding upon lines of succession. In any event, they'd have been oriented in life utterly differently than how the Pharisees would have been, less interested in how power emanates from the divine and more in how power gets exercised in the world. For this, they'd have taken issue with Jesus for his having mocked imperial power.

As for Jesus, he likely objected to their thrall to imperial power.

So, these two opposing groups, the religious Pharisees and the imperial Herodians, found themselves with a common enemy, and there's nothing like a common enemy to bring two opposing parties together.

The coin of the realm would have been the perfect emblem for their alliance.

The Pharisees would have objected to it—its graven image of Caesar, prohibited by the Law, and its proclamation that Caesar was the son of God, a blasphemous claim.

The Herodians would have had no objection to it, might even have otherwise enjoyed watching the Pharisees in their pique about it all. Snowflakes!

Now, these two could put it to Jesus as to which it was to be. Would he object to the coin and draw the ire of the empire, or would he recognize the value and importance of the coin and draw the ire of the religious authorities?

“Show me the coin used for the tax.”

The coin they produced for him to consider was a denarius, a bit more than a day's wage for a Roman soldier. What it was doing in the Temple is a question unasked and unanswered, though it would have been hanging in the air for most early witnesses to this—an object of empire in a sacred space. Like a gun in church. Like a tank on Main Street.

Even so, Jesus seems to have been unimpressed. “Whose head is this, and whose title?” the asking of which itself casts into doubt the importance of Caesar. Like he didn't know.

Wait, did he not know?

“The emperor’s!”

It’s as if Jesus meant to regard it as the small thing that it was, the silly trinket with its desperate assertion that, were it true, wouldn’t need to be so very asserted. If you’re really the Son of God, you don’t need to go around telling everyone you’re the Son of God. So, “This is what the emperor wants? Give it to him. The rest is God’s.”

Really, everything is God’s. The Lord is sovereign of all, so quit worrying about it all so much.

The Lord is sovereign of all, so quit worrying about it so much. The power of God to redeem is unrestricted by our little legalisms and limited loving sight, so quit your worrying.

Hm.

I think there’s been no time that I’ve been alive when this faithful assurance has been more at odds with the things of the world. The events of any given day have me worrying indeed. It’s very, very difficult to trust that the current disorder and disruption are acts of God’s grace or are held in God’s providence. It just feels so herky-jerky, so utterly destructive but for no reason at all.

I actually think that’s what drives the Q-anon conspiracy theory. Have you heard of this on-line phenomenon? Q-anon would have it known that there’s great evil deeply embedded in the most established and lofty institutions of contemporary life, deep state actors who’ve been trafficking in stolen children for purposes of pedophilia and cannibalism, and that Donald Trump is the savior whose mighty actions are bringing all the evil players to justice. It’s total madness, of course. But people believe it, one such believer recently heard to have said, on a podcast I was listening to about it all, “If it weren’t for Q, I’d be freaking out right now.”

Too bad for her she should be freaking out right now—because there is no Q, or at least not in the way that she should rely on. There is no secret source who is holding it all together. There is no anonymous puppet-master by whose action everything coheres. There is no coherence to all this madness, other than simple, primitive, human reaction, mimetic reaction. You do one thing, and I do its mirrored opposite thing, which turns out to be the exact same thing.

There is no Q. But its nonexistence becomes its reality.

This is dark stuff.

Rest assured, though, there is the Lord, the one who is Being and whose sustaining spirit makes for our being, each on our own and all of us together. This Being is Sovereign of all, is at work in all things for good. This God of life meets us on our way, presents Himself to us as one of the choices we might ever decide upon, presents Herself to us as one of the options we might ever exercise, and is never reactive, is always responsive so that all of the world's happenings do come to coherence, do come to hold in some awesome, astonishing way. Hard to detect from the perspective of any given moment, hard to discern from the perspective of our tragic subjectivity, there it is.

The indwelling of this promise of presence and persistence is where the crisis of our current moment manifests as opportunity. When the given things of the world are no longer given, the givenness of God takes on new urgency and new possibility. The world we're currently losing was a good one in many ways. The world we might realize going forward could be better—more just, more equitable, more ripe with opportunity, more beautiful and sustaining, more serving of the other in our midst, be that “other” a person or a people or any other thing of the creation or the creation itself. Really, we might proceed with such an assertion, “We will become builders of a great cathedral in time, a place for all, where labor is worship and flourishing is the aim,” and comes the reassurance, “Then I will be the master builder, providing the tools and materials, the vision and spirit.”

There's no outpacing this God of ours. There's no wandering off the map He has drawn for our living, no pressing past Her reach and redeeming. It's positively monstrous, this being held in such secure fold—grace enough to increase the desire to come home.

Look! We are home.

Thanks be to God.