



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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October 12, 2008

22nd Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 45:1-7

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Isaiah 45:1-7

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 96

Second Lesson: 1 Thessalonians 1:5a

Gospel: Matthew 22:15-21

God Acts through Governments

To show he is the only God

For the sake of his people

I don't know how many of you got to see it when they were repainting the interior of the church, the scaffolding that was set up in here. It was pretty impressive to see, to stand here and watch them work, to see the scaffolding reaching up to the top. It didn't quite reach far enough, so they had an eight-foot ladder sitting on top of the scaffolding so they could reach the very peak up there and redo all of that. Pretty neat to watch, kind of amazing to see it all set up. I've seen pictures of it when they were redoing the bricks around the bell tower. I saw the pictures of that being done before we got here. It's kind of neat to see. Do you ever wonder why we don't leave it up if it's so neat to see? Do ever wonder why you aren't sitting under scaffolding right now?

Probably not, right? You don't leave it up. You use it for what it is there for, to paint the walls, to fix the bricks, and then you take it down because it served its purpose. You don't sit around and say, "Wow. That's neat scaffolding. Let's leave it here forever. That'd be really cool!" That's just not the way it works, right? It's there to serve a purpose, but it's not the focus of your attention.

Listen to the words that the Lord spoke to Isaiah the prophet this morning, and in a sense our God is telling us "all these governments that around you in the world, they are all scaffolding. They are there to serve a purpose. I work through them. I am going to work through a guy named Cyrus that hasn't even been born yet." He hadn't been born when God spoke these words through Isaiah. "But remember, don't sit around and bow down and say 'Oh great and mighty scaffolding.' Recognize that it's a blessing that comes from me." God works through governments. He does it at times to bless his people. And he does it at times because he is also the God who brings disaster, as he reminds us this morning.

We probably read these words from Isaiah and miss the amazing nature of what this is. Like I said last week, the first part of the Book of Isaiah was written to call the people to repentance. The people ignored the call to repentance. They knew better. Things were going well. They didn't need to listen to this goofy prophet who told them God was upset with them. Their pockets were full. They didn't need to hear that God was upset with them. Their god was pretty happy because their god was in their pocket, right?

They didn't listen. So then Isaiah, from Chapter 40 on, writes to the people that are going to be in exile. He writes to them even though they haven't been carried off by the Babylonians yet. He writes to them and says, "Don't despair, you who are sitting far away from the temple and far away from the presence of God." He tells them of how God would deliver them even though they hadn't been carried off yet and in Chapters 44 and 45, he describes not just the guy that is going to come do it, but he names him. Cyrus, the king of Persia, would come and conquer Babylon and then would send the exiles back and see to it that they could rebuild Jerusalem and rebuild the temple so that God's people would be in the Promised Land so that the Savior could be born there.

God calls the shot, not by standing at home plate like Babe Ruth; God calls the shot about six or seven generations before it happened. That's why some people read this today as "Bible Scholars" and say, "Oh, this obviously couldn't have been written by Isaiah. This had to be written later. How could he possibly identify by name the guy that was going to do this?" He could do it because God told him what to say and God is a little bit brighter than people. We have a hard time remembering that at times though, don't we?

God, in his almighty power and his omnipotence acts in ways that we can't always see and understand, but in the end he makes it clear to us if we just shut up for awhile and listen to him instead of always telling him what to do.

What's even more amazing is that if you understand what the City of Babylon was like when God says to Cyrus, "Before he is born, I am going to subdue nations before you. I am going to open doors before you so that gates will not be shut." He is talking about the gates of Babylon. Any idea what Babylon was like? Have you seen a History Channel thing on this lately? Babylon had two walls around the outside of the city. The walls were 42 miles in length. The outer wall reached a height in places of 334 feet.

Have you ever been to Lambeau Field? One end zone to the other – that's about what we are talking, including the end zones, right? Or pretty close to it. Set that on end – that's how high the walls were if you tip Lambeau Field on its side, upside down lengthwise. That's how tall the walls were. How wide were they? Eighty-six feet wide; that's about 30 yards wide. Thirty yards wide on top of 334 feet, and that's the outside wall. Then the inside wall was 75 feet high and 32 foot wide.

Babylon was considered to be an undefeatable city. You couldn't lay siege to it because it had a source of water—the Euphrates River ran through the middle of it. Then it had these walls and it was thought to be something that could never ever be defeated; this jewel of the Babylonian empire. The thing to remember of course is that while God has Isaiah write this, it's the Assyrians that were the world power. The Babylonians would come after them and then after the Babylonians would come the Persians – Cyrus, the king that is mentioned here by name.

God did do exactly what he said, “to open doors before him so that gates would not be shut; to break down gates of bronze.” The walls of Babylon had 25 bronze gates on each side. One hundred bronze gates and God broke them down. If you have ever studied history, how he did it, how he enabled Cyrus to conquer Babylon is amazing. Cyrus diverted the Euphrates River so that the river bed dried up and then his troops at night went through the river bed underneath those walls that had been built across the river. He entered in and conquered the city. God went before him and used him as his instrument to subdue the Babylonians who had carried off God’s people, whom God has used as his instruments because his people would not listen to the warnings of repentance.

God works through governments whether or not those governments acknowledge him, as it said over and over in our reading. He does it so that God’s people will know that he is the Lord and they will tell others that he is the one who has done this and so that throughout the world people will know that he is the Lord and there is no other. All the other “gods” are just figments of peoples’ imagination.

God works through governments to bring blessings and to bring disaster. Did you notice he said that at the end? “I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.” We read that and we immediately want to say, “God, why do you bring disaster? That’s not right. You’re a God of love. Love wouldn’t let you bring disaster on your people.” God brings disaster on his people because his people, like you and me, are at times sinful idiots and we forget that it is the Lord that is in control of everything. When disaster comes, quite often big, small disasters, we look at the scaffolding and say, “Oh great and mighty scaffolding, help us.”

As the financial markets around the world are facing a crisis, what is it that we want to have happen? We want the government to fix it all, right? Do we forget at times that God is the one that is in control of all the governments? Maybe at times the Lord gives us a government that does not acknowledge him because it is going to lead to disaster so that difficulty comes so that we have to learn to recognize who it is that we rely on for our help.

Governments can make decisions obviously that are not God-pleasing. This last week, I was in the car driving some place and I heard the news on the radio. I think it was Connecticut that had the ruling that permitted same sex marriage. If you hear that, you think “governments can be terrible,” right? “Maybe that’s why God is sending all these different challenges into the lives of a nation because of things like that.” We are quick to think that way, aren’t we?—that it’s someone else’s fault. If God is bringing disaster so that people look at themselves and re-examine their relationship to him, where do you think he wants you and me to start? By going to Connecticut and telling them that they are screwing up? Or by looking in the mirror and saying, “Where am I screwing up? Where am I looking outside of God’s Word and Sacraments for my strength? Where am I turning except to the blood of Christ for my comfort and my confidence?” The fact is that you and I turn to other places quite often besides those things.

So at times difficulty comes so that God will lead us to see the most precious thing in the world we have is not something that we spend. The most precious thing in the world that we have is not the scaffolding that protects us (our armed forces). The most precious thing that we have is the knowledge that we who are filthy rotten sinners have a God who loved us enough to die for us. We have a God who loves us enough to patiently keep reaching out to us time and time again to call us back to himself, to remind us of his love, to show us the depth and the intensity of his love for us as he gives us his very body and blood that was given and shed for us. A God that tells us “all these other things that you worry and fret about during the week are nothing compared to me. I am greater than them all. I, the Lord, do all these things. I will strengthen you,” he says. He said it to Cyrus and he certainly has said it to us, and he strengthens us through his Word and Sacraments so that we can live with a peace that we often say passes all understanding. Those aren’t words. All these things that we say in worship, they aren’t just words to fill time until we get to the sermon of the Lord’s Supper. There are things there that God is speaking to us to comfort us and strengthen us, to direct us back to himself.

Know that God is still in control. Know that God will use governments to achieve his purpose and know that he has taken a long view of things. God doesn’t day trade. He is buying whole. He has bought you and he is holding on to you for the long term.