

Pastor Joe Polzin
 Isaiah 45:1-7
 “God’s Will Is Always Done”
 Year A – Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
 October 22, 2017

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

It’s a conversation I’ve had many times as a pastor with people. It’s probably one you’ve heard or had with others, as well. And studies have shown that it’s actually one of the reasons so many people today struggle with coming to church or believing in God. I’m talking about the issue of sin and evil, why God permits it, and what this means for His control on the world.

It doesn’t take long for us to look around, and see all the evil without and within. The sin and evil in our world, our nation, our communities, and even, within ourselves. And when we take all of it in, we may even begin to be tempted to conclude that evil actually has a shot at winning the day. After all, the world, which has wandered away from God, can be terribly dark, and wicked, and unfair. And it causes us to wonder if this world is simply too far gone, and if it’s a foregone conclusion that evil will triumph.

To explain this struggle, many societies and religions believe in a continuous duel between good and evil, each having equal powers. And it may even be enticing for us to adopt this sort of yin-and-yang view of life, which suggests that there will always be a balance between these two opposing forces. God and His armies in one corner, and Satan and his in the other. And if that’s true, then it means that if evil is on the rise, it only stands to reason that God and all good things are on the run, like a zero sum equation. Which is disconcerting.

But today, God, in His Holy Scripture from Isaiah, tells us that this is not the case. And one of the many examples of God’s true authority over all things, whether good or evil, is given in our Old Testament reading, in the prophecy of Isaiah, as he predicts the rise of a king named Cyrus from the Persian Empire.

And in his prophecy, we discover that all that evil can muster against God is no competition for the Holy Trinity, whose intent is our salvation and righteousness. Isaiah proclaims that God uses someone, in this case Cyrus, for His divine purpose, even when Cyrus doesn’t even acknowledge Him as God. In other words, everything that there is, whether good or evil, is still in submission to God and to His will.

Turn with me to Isaiah chapter 45, beginning at the first verse. God calls Cyrus, King of Persia, “his anointed” one: “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” (v. 1).

Now, this is surprising, maybe even shocking, because Cyrus is not a king of God’s people; he’s not even a man of faith. He’s a pagan. He’s the ruler of a foreign empire who will come to rule over God’s people in exile only because he’s a conqueror. Our text says twice, “you do not know me,” in verses four and five. Cyrus didn’t know, didn’t believe in the true God. And yet, God calls Cyrus His “anointed,” or in Hebrew, *meshiach*. That’s the title of—guess who!—the Messiah, the Christ! Pagan Cyrus shares the same title as Jesus?!

So what’s the Messiah got to do with Cyrus? Well, God says in vv. 2-3, “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, 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.”

Through Cyrus, the king of Persia, God would subdue nations before him, enabling Cyrus to conquer foreign powers—even mighty Babylon—almost as if the gates of walled cities would just swing open for his army to march in. And Cyrus would collect the plunder, the wealth of all his enemies. And so it happened. History actually records that the Medo-Persian Empire, led by Cyrus, conquered lands with unprecedented speed and ease. Even the great Babylonians seemingly fell almost without a fight.

And we may wonder, what’s going on here? What’s God doing? Why does He give such success to evil? Such prosperity to unbelievers? Isn’t that the same question we asked earlier about our own world?

What are we to think when we see the effects that sin and evil have had on our world in forces in nature, such as storms and famine and fire? When we see evil among nations, as wars continue, and as rulers commit atrocities to their own people and to their neighbors? How about in our own country, when we see the vulnerable remain unprotected, the widows, the orphans, the immigrants, the unborn? When we see our own leaders constantly face-off with one another, sometimes leading the people they represent down destructive and unhelpful paths? When we see the evil within other people? Bullies in our children’s schools. Violence committed in the name of religion. Mentally-unstable people causing devastation with assault weapons. The tragedy of yet another case of workplace violence. And, if we’re really honest with ourselves, what are we to think when we can even see or feel the evil within *us*, as *we* are daily led astray into things we should not be doing, saying, or thinking?

What has God been up to? Has He been sleeping on the job? Is evil really winning the day? Is God on the run?

Cyrus led the Persians to defeat the empire of Babylon. And God is saying through Isaiah that He has directed this for a very important reason. Look at verse 4: “For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you [Cyrus] by your name, I name you, though you do not know me.” What does this have to do with Israel, we may ask? Well, Babylon was where the exiles from Judah were living. They had been there for 70 years, after Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem.

And the people of Israel were in exile due to their long-standing sin against God. But they also received a promise from God that He would not abandon them, and would even return a remnant to Judah so that they may wait for the fulfillment of the covenant promises of God. But if you were living through the destruction of your homeland, and a lifetime in captivity, you may begin to wonder if any of those promises were true, and how God could possibly work through any of this evil.

But that’s exactly what He does. God will use Cyrus, He says, to destroy the captors of Babylon, and then it would be Cyrus, with some of his very first decrees, who announces the Jews can go back home. God would use Cyrus to return His chosen people back to their homeland, back to their worship, and back to their ability to wait for God’s unfolding plan of salvation.

And in case there was any doubt from their perspective, or any doubt in ours today, that this is indeed God who’s directing all the successes of Cyrus, and the eventual return of His people, keep in mind that this prophecy of Isaiah was written 200 years before a king named Cyrus even existed in world history. That’s God saying, “Look, here’s what I’m going to do, so that you know, when you see it, that this is My will.” This is not a zero sum equation, where if we see evil prevail, that must mean God is decreasing. No, we are assured that God is always in control, even when it doesn’t seem like it.

Throughout Holy Scripture, there are examples of this. God makes it abundantly clear that in the midst of evil carrying out its diabolical plans, tempting us as Christians to believe that hope is lost and God is no longer in control, the Lord has in no way lost His hold. The promise He has made to you in your Baptism is still sure—that you are His and He is governing all things for your benefit. While Holy Scripture makes it clear that evil is judged by the righteousness of God, it goes even further, assuring

you that even evil must submit to God's will.

The primary example of this is what Judah's return from exile actually meant in history—a history that God steps into, intervenes in, and guides. Judah returned to their homes so that, as a people, they could await the arrival of another promised *meshiach*, another “anointed one.” This time, it would be *the* Messiah.

And this Messiah, unlike Cyrus, submitted perfectly to his Father's will. And what kind of evil did we see come upon this, the Son of God! Satan himself attacked him in the wilderness; Judas betrayed him to death; Caiaphas sent him to Pontus Pilate with false charges; the crowd called out for his crucifixion; the Roman soldiers mocked him, beat him, and nailed him to a cross. Look what evil does even to Jesus. Look at how it appears as if God is out of control, leaving evil to succeed in snuffing out the holy intentions of God.

That is, until you hear the words of Jesus call out to his Father from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And then you marvel at the acknowledgment of Jesus that his Father *chose* to forsake him. And you marvel even more to find out that the condemnation of Christ, the begotten Son of the Father, whom He loved, was the very purpose of his being sent in the first place—for the evil in you to be forgiven.

Sin and evil exist in this world because of our own sin. But the amazing power of God burst through Christ's sacrifice on the cross, which definitely demonstrated to us, that though *we* could do nothing about it, he has and always will defeat every evil intention that would separate us from our God. Sin and evil *must* bow down to God's will. Which is wonderful news for us—that not even the sin and evil within ourselves could ever keep us from being forgiven, saved, and eternally within God's glorious and righteous will. It has no chance of winning, no chance to affect what Christ has done for us!

Martin Luther, whom we will speak much more about next week when we observe the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, wrote this about the Third Petition of the Lord's Prayer, *Thy will be done*: “God's will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature... and when He strengthens and keeps us firm in His Word and faith until we die. *This* is His good and gracious will.”

May you rest in the assurance that God can use those like Cyrus and others for his purpose: “I equip you, [Cyrus,] though you do not know me, 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. I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the Lord, who does all these things” (vv 5c–7).

May you rest today, in spite of what still goes on all around you in this world of wickedness, in this truth of God. Rest in knowing that none of it will change what God has done for your eternity in his kingdom. Rest in knowing that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39). For He is the One who is able to use all things for His good and saving purpose. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

(Sermon is adapted from Rev. David Stecker, *Concordia Pulpit Resources*, October 22, 2017.)