

Sermon

The Trap

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Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church
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The Book of Isaiah is one of the books of the Bible that was written over generations of time likely. Scholars separate it into three parts and accredit it to three different authors. Today's passage, as was mentioned, comes from the second half (chapters 40-66) and addresses the nation of Israel after exile. While the immediate lesson is today's passage, the passage builds on the later part of the prior chapter in which Cyrus is first mentioned.

*Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer,
who formed you in the womb:
I am the LORD, who made all things,
who alone stretched out the heavens,
who by myself spread out the earth;
who frustrates the omens of liars,
and makes fools of diviners;
who turns back the wise,
and makes their knowledge foolish;
who confirms the word of his servant,
and fulfils the prediction of his messengers;
who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be inhabited',
and of the cities of Judah, 'They shall be rebuilt,*

Inspired by www.workingpreacher.org commentary on Matthew 22:15-22 by Yung Suk Kim and commentary Isaiah 45:1-7 by Dale Coulter. Explanation of Cyrus taken from www.biblestudytools.com.

*and I will raise up their ruins’;
who says to the deep, ‘Be dry—
I will dry up your rivers’;
who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd,
and he shall carry out all my purpose’;
and who says of Jerusalem, ‘It shall be rebuilt’,
and of the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid.’*

What is central in these passages is that God has a plan for creation, but it unfolds in surprising ways that remind humanity of its dependency upon the creator and its ignorance of this infinite and eternal God.

Let me read again our passage from 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:
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, 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.
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. I am the LORD, and there is no other;
besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me,
so that they may know, from the rising of the sun
and from the west, that there is no one besides me;*

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*I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness,
I make weal and create woe; I the LORD do all these things.*

The words in these passages seem to jump off the page. But it is important to understand who Cyrus is in the Bible. Cyrus was the King of Persia from 559-530 BC.

Cyrus was not a follower of the God of the Bible, but instead, he was a pagan king used by God to help His people. Just as God had used pagan kings from the Chaldeans, Assyrians, and Babylonians to chasten his people when they refused to repent of their idolatries, now God used a pagan king to help them return to their promised land and begin to rebuild.

Cyrus was the leader of the Empire that overtook the Babylonians. There were four powerful kings with rule over the Jews during their captivity of which Cyrus is the 4th. The first three kings chose to assimilate the cultures they conquered into their customs, their culture, and their ways of life, but Cyrus, instead, as leader of the Medo-Persians, chose to allow various cultural and religious groups to return to and maintain their own identities. Keep this in mind as we discuss the Gospel today.

The Jews of Old Testament times lauded Cyrus as “the Great” because it was under his rule that they were allowed to return to their homeland and rebuild the holy city of Jerusalem.* (www.biblestudytools.com)

Our Gospel reading presents Jesus with a question that is actually “a trap”. If you have ever raised a teenager, you are quite familiar with these types of questions. The Pharisees come and send their disciples to Jesus along with the Herodians to slyly confront and debilitate Jesus with a “divide and rule” tactic, which is an imperial strategy by which emperors cement power divisively. In fact, the coalition between the Pharisees and the Herodians is highly unexpected because one is critical of Rome and the other aligns with the Roman Empire because they are a political party supporting the Herodian dynasty, a puppet of the Roman Empire. But their common interest binds them together, which is to impair Jesus’ authority and crush his “kingdom of God” movement by asking him a politically-driven question, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” They know it will be difficult for Jesus to answer either way. A simple “yes” contradicts his teachings rendering loyalty to God only. A “no” will make him an anti-imperial radical revolutionary. They expected Jesus to say “if you give everything to God, there is nothing you can spare to give to Caesar, or vice versa”

Then Jesus asks for a coin to answer the question (or not answer). Why? Why does he want the coin? This coin, just like this \$20 represents the people’s blood, sweat and tears...their hard work that they give to earn their pay. Jesus knows that the people work hard for this little bit of money and that they struggle...Do you feel this way? Are you in that moment of struggle with money, finances, or just trying to figure out what of yourself to give to one entity- be it a job, your family, friends, and then what to give to God. Jesus answers this way, “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesars and to God the things that are God’s”.

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And here in lies our dilemma, definitely mine, day in and day out. Each day, Monday – Friday, I owe an allegiance to ECMC. Then in the evenings and weekends, to my family, and dividing that – to my church, to my God. Everyday I am left wondering what it means to live in an imperial world – where we must meet our obligations, pay our taxes, that God is supposed to rule. How can we know which or what belongs to God and which belongs to Caesar or in our case, to the United States Government?

As I said earlier, Cyrus was not a follower of the God of the Bible, but instead, he was a pagan king used by God to help God's people. God is using you in the same way and God is using us to help you. I know our burdens can be very heavy at times, it is not easy to make it in this world right now...all people are struggling in one way or another – be it financial, emotional, spiritual. But within that struggle, and at the end of the day, it all belongs to God...

*I am the LORD, and there is no other;
besides me there is no god.
I arm you, though you do not know me,
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.
I form light and create darkness,
I make weal and create woe;
I the LORD do all these things.*

And Jesus let's us know that the choice of how we align – what we do is not black and white, not right or wrong. Ultimately theological or ethical stances must be determined individually by each person. We each learn, study, read and have our own experiences and we each have to make our own determination of what belongs to God and what belongs to “the empire”. Which means, different people will think and feel differently – you may think and feel differently throughout your life based on information and on experiences.

What we truly need is conscientious engagement in the world based on what we believe is true. Engagement with all people – not just those who think like us, not to have an all or nothing approach but to love people, including enemies, and live in hope that we can and will move the mountain of change, live toward and in peace, within ourselves and in the world. We must pursue the way of God progressively- as we learn, as we evolve in our understanding and the hard part – and here's the hard part – we have to pursue to the way of God radically.

While scripture's affirmation of a divine plan for life stems from its depiction of God as the creator of all, there is also a sense in which God and God's plan unfolds in surprising and unpredictable ways. God does not follow the predictable social and political customs of life. God is wild and uncultivated – God does not conform to human expectations. God declared Cyrus his shepherd – someone who does not even start with a clear belief. But Cyrus does have is a wonderful countenance of creating a society respectful of customs and traditions and allows Israel to be rebuilt – a true gift on his part. Others before him wanted to blend out traditions and cultures to establish only one new culture. But the wildness of

God is never outside of God's holiness – his covenant with us. This reminds us to relax our own expectations of what we think God should do and allow our lives to evolve and morph into something, well wild. Amen