

Isaiah 45:1-7

The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

October 18, 2020

Some of you may be familiar with the game "Six degrees of Kevin Bacon." The idea is connect the actor Kevin Bacon with any other actor you happen to name: for example, Carrie Fisher was in *The Man With One Red Shoe* with Tom Hanks, who was in *Apollo 13* with Kevin Bacon.

Today we're going to play "Six degrees of King Cyrus of Persia." Cyrus is connected not only with the Israelite captives in Babylon, but also with Nathan and Lauren, our confirmands.

When nations went to war, in the theology of the Ancient Near East, their gods went with them. The fates of nations were linked to the wills and struggles of their gods. If a nation was defeated, then their God either allowed it or was likewise defeated by the rival nation's god. At the end of the seventh century BC, the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and carried its leading citizens into exile. According to 2 Kings, God allowed this as punishment for the nation's sin, but in the long years of their captivity, the people wondered what had become of their god, their protector. Did they still dare to hope for the Messiah - the righteous king, chosen by God, who would continue the line of King David, sit upon his throne, and return Israel to its promised glory?

Hope. Uncertainty. A search for promised glory.

Bill, Tracy and I as well as your congregational reps spent the last two days in our Pacific Mountain Region virtual Annual General Meeting. The theme was "Leading Beyond the Wilderness." The wilderness and the exile are both metaphors for alienation from previous certainties, and a hope for renewal whose shape we can't yet see. With our theme speaker, a famed leadership theorist, we talked about the challenges, promise, and discomfort of this wilderness time - this exile from the days when churches and their accompanying Sunday Schools were full.

But God is always up to something.

After half a century Israelite exile in Babylon, a new force appeared on the scene. The Persian king Darius tore through the land; none could stand before him, not even the mighty Babylonian empire.

The writer of the Book of Isaiah has a surprising claim. He or she pulls back the curtain to show God speaking to Cyrus. Israel gets to eavesdrop as God does a shocking thing: Cyrus doesn't know or worship God, but God commissions Cyrus as his Messiah. Where previously the line of David was expected to produce God's next chosen saviour, that promise is now dead. God is now acting through a foreigner. Where previously God led the armies of Israel, now God is leading the armies of Persia. The old certainties, the old patterns have gone out the window.

But there is good news: God is still acting behind the scenes for his chosen people. This foreign conqueror's terrible power operates with God's knowledge and

blessing. When Cyrus throws open the gates of their Babylonian prison and invites them to go home to the land of their parents, to Israel, they can accept this offer knowing that it is God's plan.

We were eavesdroppers today. We were listening in as Nathan and Lauren responded to God's invitation. Unlike Cyrus, Nathan and Lauren know God. *Like* Cyrus, they do not know the future into which God will invite them. They do not know the challenges and opportunities they will encounter. But if God, in her shocking divine freedom, can anoint a foreign conqueror as her Messiah, her partnership with Nathan and Lauren will blow your minds.

The people of Israel were called to embrace what God was up to in Cyrus, to get on board, to depart from Exile into Wilderness. God is up to something in Lauren. God is up to something in Nathan. Let's pay attention. Let's embrace it, and them. It is our calling.

Amen.

Sources:

Hays, Christopher B. "Commentary on Isaiah 45:1-7." *Working Preacher*. October 18, 2020. Luther Seminary. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4614.