

Sermon for October 22, 2023 – The 21st Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 45:1-7 EHV

Theme: **The LORD makes peace and creates disaster.**

- 1) For the glory of his name.
- 2) For the benefit of his Church.

¹ This is what the LORD says to his anointed one, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him by stripping kings of their weapons, to open doors before him so that the gates cannot be shut. ² I myself will go before you, and I will level high mountains. I will break bronze doors into pieces, and I will cut through iron bars. ³ I will give you treasures hidden in darkness and riches concealed in secret places, so that you will acknowledge that I am the LORD, the one who calls you by name, the God of Israel. ⁴ For the sake of my servant Jacob, for the sake of Israel my chosen one, I will call you by your name. I will give you an honored name, though you do not know me. ⁵ I am the LORD, and there is no other. Except for me, there is no god. I will equip you even though you do not know me, ⁶ so that people will know from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets that there is no one except me. I am the LORD, and there is no other. ⁷ I am the one who forms light and creates darkness, the one who makes peace and creates disaster. I am the LORD, the one who does all these things.

When you consider all the things happening on this earth, the war in Ukraine, the war in Israel, and the persecution of Christians in many Islamic and communist countries, we are tempted to wonder: “Why does the LORD allow so many bad governments and terrorists in the world?”

Most of the time, the LORD does not tell us why he allows specific evils on this earth; nor does he want us to try and figure it out. Instead, he asks us to trust him, not because everything makes sense, but because of who he is and what he promises us in Jesus. Trust that He is working in all things – even the evil we face on this earth - for the good of those who love him.¹

Today, we will meditate on the LORD’s role in history – guiding and directing earthly governments for his purposes, under the theme: **The LORD makes peace and creates disaster.**
1) For the glory of his name. 2) For the benefit of his Church.

Part One: For the glory of his name.

Our sermon text from Isaiah is amazing. At first glance, it might not seem all that different from other prophecies in the Bible. Let me, therefore, explain the historical context of our text so you can understand why it is so wonderfully unique.

Isaiah spoke this prophecy almost 200 years before it came to pass – longer than Canada existed as an independent nation! He prophesied that the LORD would raise a man named Cyrus from an unknown place to rescue his people from oppression under the mighty Babylonian empire.

Now, here's the thing to note: when Isaiah made this prophecy, Assyria (unmentioned by Isaiah) was the superpower of his time, Babylon was a mere city-state, and Cyrus' Medes were utterly unknown. Therefore, Isaiah's prophecy sounded crazy to his contemporaries. It would be like me telling you that God will raise a great leader from Nauru to rescue us from captivity from the Bolivian empire. It all seemed improbable, yet everything Isaiah prophesied concerning Babylon and Cyrus came true!

Do you now understand why I call this prophecy amazing? I believe it's probably the most precise prophecy ever recorded: going so far as to name the very person who would save Israel long before he was born! Why is that important to know? Because it proves that the LORD controls not only the Church and believing nations but everything.

In other words, the LORD never reacts to history; he controls it – constantly intervening to glorify his name and save his church. Our prophecy of Isaiah proves it! How so? Because God reveals how he chose and set up secular kings – even some that would prove to be very wicked – showing that he, the LORD, is the only true God. Our Epistle lesson puts it this way: *no authority exists except by God, and the authorities that do exist have been established by God.*ⁱⁱ All of world history has been known and planned out by God from creation for the glory of his name and the salvation of his people. What a comfort that truth is for Christians!

But what about communist or Islamic governments that persecute Christians? Does God also appoint these governments? Yes, he does. But why would God allow, let alone establish, a godless government that persecutes his people? The LORD does not answer that question for us in Scripture. Instead, he asks us to trust that he is working in all things for the good of those who love him, even if we can't see or begin to perceive how. He invites us to remember that he gave up his Son to save the world and to believe that, if he gave him, he will graciously give us all the things we need along with him. Nothing can separate us from his love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord.ⁱⁱⁱ

Having said that, the LORD also gives us examples in the Bible of how he works through governments to accomplish his purposes. Genesis 15 records God telling Abraham what would happen to his descendants – the Israelites – under the Egyptians and how he would rescue his people from them.^{iv} Some 400 years later, when the time God told Abraham about had arrived, the LORD allowed a very cruel Pharaoh to come into power. Why? To chastise his people (who seemed to have started chasing after Egyptian gods^v) and to demonstrate his faithfulness to his promises and ability to save, as the LORD told Pharaoh through Moses: *for this very reason, I caused you to stand: so that I could show you my power, and that my name would be made known over the entire earth.*^{vi}

The Bible tells us that the LORD raised up the empires of Assyria and Babylon^{vii} to punish Israel for its sin. But these nations went too far in their pride and brutality, because of which the LORD punished them as well.^{viii} The LORD controls every government – working in all the chaos on this earth to chastise his wayward people, punish evil, and proclaim his name that many more might fear and turn to him in repentance. That truth is seen in what he prophetically told Cyrus in the last half of our sermon text: ⁴ *For the sake of my servant Jacob, for the sake of Israel my chosen one, I will call you by your name... I will equip you even though you do not know me,* ⁶ *so that people will know from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets that there is no one*

except me. I am the LORD, and there is no other. ⁷ I am the one who forms light and creates darkness, the one who makes peace and creates disaster. I am the LORD, the one who does all these things.

There you have it: the LORD is in control – even allowing godless rulers to come to power for his purposes. Nevertheless, we are still tempted to cry: “But how is God glorified when godless governments pass laws that hinder the spread of God’s word and oppress his people? How is God glorified through persecution and war?”

Again, God does not ask us to understand these things but to believe his promises – especially when everything seems opposite of how we think things should be. The truth is that God has often used times of persecution and conflict to purify his church – calling his people to repent when they started to fall away from him.^{ix} He has used such times to spread his Gospel. He has also used such times to reveal great evil – showing his judgement is just. There are many reasons God does what he does, reasons He doesn’t reveal to us. Instead of explaining why he does what he does, he tells us to take stock of ourselves when bad things happen, repent of our worldly lusts and sins, and cling ever more tightly to his gracious promise of forgiveness, life, and everlasting salvation in Jesus.

Part Two: For the benefit of his Church.

Up to now, our focus has been on how God works in the evil he allows. Now, we will focus on how he delivers believers from the evil he allows for the glory of his name and the benefit of his Church.

Let’s go back to the history surrounding our sermon text. When Babylon conquered and exiled Judah, all hope was lost. Why? Because that little city-state of Isaiah’s time had grown into an incredibly wealthy and powerful empire that conquered Assyria and defeated Egypt! Not only that, but Nebuchadnezzar also turned the capital city into an impenetrable fortress with super high and thick walls, bronze gates, and all sorts of technological advancements. Humanly speaking, no army would ever be able to conquer it.

But the LORD is not a human. He is God. He is in control. He saw the arrogance of the Babylonians – mocking Judah’s fall. He heard the cries of his oppressed, repentant people. Therefore, the LORD would fulfill his promise made some 200 years earlier to a formerly unknown king from a previously unknown nation:

¹ This is what the LORD says to his anointed one, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him by stripping kings of their weapons, to open doors before him so that the gates cannot be shut. ² I myself will go before you, and I will level high mountains. I will break bronze doors into pieces, and I will cut through iron bars. ³ I will give you treasures hidden in darkness and riches concealed in secret places, so that you will acknowledge that I am the LORD, the one who calls you by name, the God of Israel.

If you ever have time, look up how Cyrus defeated Babylon. It is fascinating. Because Babylon's walls and gates were considered impenetrable, Cyrus diverted the Euphrates River that flowed through the city so his soldiers could attack.

Even though the world praises Cyrus for this monumental feat of engineering, God makes it clear: he is the one who allowed it. He raised and gifted unbelieving Cyrus for that very purpose. Why? The LORD himself told Cyrus: ⁴ *For the sake of my servant Jacob, for the sake of Israel my chosen one, I will call you by your name. I will give you an honored name, though you do not know me.*

In other words, God was acting for the benefit of his Church, just as he always has in the past and always will in the future. What comfort there is in knowing this truth! No matter how chaotic our world seems, whatever trials come our way, and whatever suffering we endure, the LORD works in all of it for our benefit. He hears our prayers and will rescue us – often in ways we could have never imagined. He loves us so much that he even causes the rise and fall of nations for our deliverance. He does all this for Jesus' sake.^x

The story of Cyrus is impressive. The fact that Isaiah prophesied about him by name some 200 years before his birth is even more impressive. But what's most impressive is what Cyrus's history represents. Cyrus is a picture of Jesus. We, like Judah, were captive to our Babylon of sin. Our sins seemed so great that it seemed impossible for anyone to save us from them. The walls of guilt were too high and too thick. But the LORD chose his servant, Jesus, to save us. God caused him to stand and gave him the power to free us captives.^{xi} Jesus did this by suffering in our place, dying on the cross, and rising from the dead. Because of this, God exalted Jesus and gave him authority over every nation.^{xii} He gave him the power to direct history so that we would come to know his salvation, believe in him, and become his people. Because of Jesus, we are free. We belong to God. Our sins no longer separate us from him. Everlasting life with the LORD in paradise is our future – guaranteed by Christ.

Yes, Jesus is the LORD, our God. He works in all history - blessing us with everlasting peace and prosperity, even if he allows us to suffer for a time. He makes peace and creates disaster so people might repent of their sins and turn to him for salvation. In everything he does, he works for the glory of his name and the benefit of his church. This is why we never need to fear pandemics, wars, terror, evil governments, and other disasters. God is in control and uses all these things for our everlasting good. Let us praise the LORD, the only true God, who lovingly makes peace and creates disaster for our everlasting benefit and the glory of his name. Amen

ⁱ Cf, Romans 8:28

ⁱⁱ Romans 13:1 EHV

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Romans 8:28, 32, 35-39

^{iv} Cf. Genesis 15:13-16

^v Cf. Joshua 24:14

^{vi} Exodus 9:15-16 EHV

^{vii} Cf. Jeremiah 25:8-9

^{viii} Cf. Jeremiah 50:10-11, 18

^{ix} Cf. Luke 13:2-3

^x Cf. John 3:16

^{xi} Cf Isaiah 61:1

^{xii} Cf. Philippians 2:5-11