

Reflection on the Scripture: Isaiah 45:1-7

[[The video of the reflection.](#)]

Recently I called my insurance company about a referral, and the person I spoke with said, “Hmm, I can’t see any problem from our end. Let me call your primary care doctor’s office and see what the problem was.” I was totally unprepared for that. I spent the entire time on hold wondering what parallel universe I had stumbled into where the insurance company representative was genuinely helpful.

When today’s passage in Isaiah was written, the Israelites were in exile in Babylon. They had challenged the King of Babylon, sure that God was on their side and would never let them be defeated in battle, and there they were, defeated in battle. They were living in exile in Babylon, modern day Iraq, and they were waiting for a savior. Because God had promised a savior, an anointed one, a messiah, who would come and rescue the nation of Israel. They were totally ready for that.

What they were not ready for was that the anointed one, the Messiah, would be the King of Persia, the King of modern day Iran. Everyone knew who the King of Persia was, because Cyrus was a Big Deal. He conquered the Babylonians and had an empire that stretched from India to the Mediterranean. Cyrus had a cylinder made that read, “I am Cyrus, king of the world, great king, legitimate king, king of Babylon.”¹ That is not a man trying to hid his light under a bushel. Cyrus was the top dog and he knew it and he wanted to make sure everyone knew he knew it.

Cyrus goes along with his army, ready to kick in doors of bronze and break through bars of iron (Isaiah 45:2), and God is there ahead of him, leveling mountains (Isaiah 45:2). Cyrus is the richest man in the world, and God is giving him treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places (Isaiah 45:3). For the Israelites held captive in Babylon, having the Messiah, the anointed one, be a gentile was unthinkable. God, who formed light and create darkness (Isaiah 45:7), is making life easier for Cyrus, a gentile who didn’t even know God’s name (Isaiah 45:5).

There’s no doubt what God’s intention is: for the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen (Isaiah 45:4). God’s doing this for God’s chosen people, Israel. And indeed, it is Cyrus who releases the captives in Babylon to return home. As the great king, legitimate king, king of the world, Cyrus preferred to rule an

¹ James K. Mead, “Commentary on the First Reading: Isaiah 45:1-7”, Working Preacher “Lectionary Commentaries for October 19, 2008, Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost”, https://www.workingpreacher.org/wp_print_all.aspx?lectionary_calendar_id=47&print_type=comm&is_spacious=0 (accessed 18 June 2020).

empire where the conquered people didn't hate him with every fiber of their being. It may seem like sensible politics when you think about it. But for the Israelites, it taught them something about God they never knew before.

They had lost to Babylon, they had seen Jerusalem fall and the Temple destroyed and the valuables carted off and the people sent into exile. In the thinking of the day, that meant the God of Israel was less powerful than the god of Babylon, so you might as well start worshipping the god of Babylon. But they had thought about that, about all that the God of Israel had done for them, and they had kept worshipping the God of Israel. Maybe they didn't have a Temple anymore, maybe they were in Babylon, not the Promised Land. But they had been in worse places before, and the God of Israel had saved them. And there was the promise of the Messiah.

So in the scheme of things, I think they were calling the Help Desk and they would not have been surprised if the Help Desk was actually helpful. Unlike me who was shocked it was helpful. What confused them so thoroughly that God needed to explain it to them was exactly how powerful God was.

God didn't need to send a Messiah to kick down Babylon's doors. God could work through the great king, the legitimate king, the king of the world. God was so powerful, God could work through someone who didn't even know God existed, didn't know God's name. Sure, the Israelites knew God was all powerful. God had created light and darkness, weal and woe (Isaiah 45:7). But to be able to work through the king of the world, to work through someone who wasn't a Jew, well, that was a powerful God.

That is the question of stewardship. Are you ready to work with a God so powerful that God will work through anyone, even the most powerful, on behalf of God's servants, on behalf of God's chosen? Are you ready to work with a God so powerful that God will send help from people you would never expect, from the last people on earth you would think God will work through?

I know you're saying "yes" and I know you. You're a thoughtful group of people, so you're saying "yes" with a bit of a gulp, because you know that working with whomever God sends might be more of a challenge than you're ready for. But it's stewardship season, so let's just go there. Are you ready to work with a God so powerful that God will send help to God's servants, to God's chosen, through you? Because if God is powerful enough to free the captives through the great king, the legitimate king, the king of the world, God is powerful enough to work through you. God is powerful enough to go before you and level mountains. God is powerful enough to break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, and give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in

secret places (Isaiah 45:2-3). The question is are you willing to accept God's help and steward the gifts you've been given as God expects you to do.

It's not a small thing. It's a huge challenge. But the power you need to accept it, to take it on, isn't yours. It's God's. That's question of stewardship. Are you ready to follow a God that powerful? Are you ready to accept that kind of help from the Holy Help Desk?