

## **Lectionary 29 A 2017**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

October 22, 2017

[Isaiah 45:1-7](#)

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

Dear Friends:

I was opposed to the United States' war in Iraq, the second Gulf War, the invasion which we launched in 2003. For the handful of Americans who actually opposed the war— I think there were about nineteen of us— there were three simple and compelling reasons for our opposition.

- (1) First, Iraq was not involved in the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. Neither directly nor indirectly.
- (2) Second, we were already in a war inside the nation that did launch the terrorist attacks. Afghanistan. Which we had previously invaded in 2001, in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks. By starting a war in Iraq, we would weaken our armed forces in Afghanistan.
- (3) And third, whatever harm we managed to do to Saddam Hussein and to Iraq would give power to Iraq's ancient foe, Iran; and would allow Iran to become the dominant military and political force in the Middle East. We would be doing Iran a huge favor.

Our first reading this morning specifically identifies the conflict between Iran and Iraq. The names have changed. The religion has changed. Yet our first reading today identifies the specific moment when the Iraq-Iran conflict began. 539 BC.

It's that specific. There's so much in the Bible that we can't verify. The Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel. The Tower of Babel, Noah, Abraham. The Battle of Jericho, the Exodus, the giving of the Ten Commandments. We have no historical proof of any of these things. We have no independent testimony, no corroboration, no historical proof. But today's first reading— Isaiah chapter 45— is a highly specific reference to the year 539 BC. A widely documented moment in world history. When Persia conquered Babylon. When Iran first conquered Iraq.

The Babylonian empire conquered the Jews and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. That was a famous event in history. A very defining moment for the Jews. Babylon became legendary. It became a myth and a metaphor. The Christian book of Revelation critiqued the Roman Empire by using the metaphor of Babylon. So it is because of the Christian book of Revelation that the name Babylon has become a symbol for sin and decadence. So people might refer to Las Vegas as Babylon.

The choice of the author of Revelation to use Babylon as a metaphor for Rome was apt. Especially since Rome did exactly what Babylon did six hundred years earlier. Like Babylon, Rome destroyed the Jewish nation, and tore down the Temple in Jerusalem. An event you can see depicted in the Arch of Titus in the city of Rome.

Our [first reading](#) this morning ends with these words:

*I form light and create darkness,  
I make weal and create woe.*

What an old-fashioned word that is. *Weal*, from which we get the word “wealth.” Weal and woe, prosperity and disaster. *I the Lord do all these things.* In the theology of the Old Testament, the Jews and Jerusalem were conquered by Babylon because God wanted to punish them. Babylon was the instrument by which God made the “woe,” the affliction, the punishment.

Fifty years later, God decided to make weal, to give his people a second chance. The beloved words of Advent: *In the wilderness, prepare a highway.* That means get ready to go home again. When Ezra’s entourage made the journey home, the 900 mile journey from Babylon back to the ruins of Jerusalem, it took four months.

*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term,  
that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand  
double for all her sins.*

*A voice cries out:*

*‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.*

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has written that in order to understand Judaism, you have to understand exile. This lavish Advent promise of Isaiah, that God will make a highway home, for the four month journey back to Jerusalem— this is the promise in Isaiah 40 that comes true in today’s reading, [Isaiah 45](#). When Babylon is defeated by Persia. And the Persian king, Cyrus, decrees that for the Jews, the exile is over. That they can return, rebuild, and recreate their city and their temple. Our English translation shows how God calls Cyrus his “anointed” one. That is a term that the Bible reserves for a descendant of King David. The Hebrew word is Messiah. The Greek word is Christ. God is perhaps being playful or sardonic or ironic when he uses that normally highly specialized word to describe the Persian king who will bring deliverance and freedom to the Jewish people.

In any event, our first reading today is Isaiah’s way of saying “He’s got the whole world in his hands.” Is it true? Do you believe it?

Consider how much of my sermon today is just trying to explain all of these ancient empires. You have to understand Babylon and Persia from the sixth century before Christ if you want to

understand the first reading today. To understand the Bible from cover to cover, you have to know the Egyptian Empire, the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, the Persian Empire, the Macedonian and Seleucid Empires, and the Roman Empire. By my reckoning that is seven mostly defunct empires that you have to know about to get from Genesis to Revelation.

Two of those empires, by the way, occupied Afghanistan. As would the British Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And the Soviet Empire in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Consider all of the empires that have come and gone. Consider how hard it is to understand them in order to understand the Bible. And then consider that Isaiah's words— our first reading— will be read aloud in worship by over one billion Christians today.

*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.*

Amen.