

“An Unlikely Missionary”
Isaiah 45:1-25
February 24, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

Cyrus is the unlikely missionary referred to in the title of this sermon. He is an unlikely missionary because he is the king of Israel’s enemies, the Persians. In order to understand this, we need to grasp the historical background of this passage. Isaiah is writing here about the Babylonian exile of Judah, a 70-year period of time from about 586 BC to 516 BC when the rulers and many of the citizens of Judah had been removed from their land and taken to Babylon. More specifically, he is talking about how they will be allowed to return to their land at the end of this period of exile. It would be a miraculous event engineered by Cyrus, king of Persia.

Persia was the third in a series of superpowers of this era. The first was Assyria, which was the dominant power during Isaiah’s actual lifetime. But he prophesied about a second and third superpower that would arise after his death. The second was Babylon, who under King Nebuchadnezzar took Judah captive. But during their captivity, a third power arose in the form of Persia. Cyrus would become God’s instrument for the return of Judah to their land. The book of Ezra fills in some of this information in a quote from Cyrus. **“Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah”** (Ezra 1:2). This happened around 516 BC, two-hundred years after Isaiah lived, which explains why many insist that there is more than one author of this book, the Isaiah who wrote about the Assyrian threat, and a second and possibly third Isaiah who addressed the enemies of Babylon and Persia. But it is part of the greatness of our God that he can speak through his prophet Isaiah with great clarity, even giving the name of this king, though he would arise almost two-hundred years after Isaiah died.

The opening verses say three amazing things about Cyrus. First, he is called God’s anointed. Anointing was something done for Israel’s kings, prophets and priests, never for a Gentile. Second, this king was a pagan and an unbeliever. Twice in our passage (v. 4-5), Isaiah says of him that he did not know God. Third, this pagan king would not only be God’s instrument for bringing Israel out of exile and back to their land, but he would also be a mighty missionary, spreading the glory of God to the Gentile world. He was equipped of God, so **“that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other”** (v. 6). There are four implications stemming from God’s anointing of the pagan king Cyrus to be his missionary. Let’s look at them now.

I. We Welcome Pluralism.

I need to define what I mean by pluralism. As you can tell from these first two points, there are two senses of this word, one to be welcomed and the other to be renounced. One meaning of pluralism, the one to be embraced, is simply that there are a variety of belief systems within a culture, rather than one dominant system. In such a pluralist culture, there is not an attempt to coerce everyone into the same beliefs. Quite obviously, our American culture is pluralist in this definition of the word. So was the world Isaiah was addressing here. The Babylonian exile was a time when God's people would be living in a land where others would have a completely different belief system. Israel believed in one God who reigned over the entire earth, while the Babylonians and Persians believed in many different gods.

As Christians, we are to welcome this kind of pluralism and not to fear it. Why? Because our God is such a great God that he can accomplish his purposes even through unbelievers. Christians don't need the favoritism of the State because our God can work through unbelievers to accomplish his purposes. He did with Cyrus, and he is able to do so again. We should not want the State to give advantages to the Christian church. History has shown time and time again that when the State gives an advantage to Christians, two bad things happen. First, many unbelievers start coming to church only because of these advantages rather than because of a work of God in their hearts. That's a bad thing for the cause of the gospel. It's called nominalism—people who are Christian in name only, but without the essence of what it is to follow Christ. They lack a heart that has been transformed by the gospel to love God and to love others. The second bad thing that happens when the State favors Christianity is that the future of the church gets tied to a particular regime, and when that regime changes, the next leaders attempt to stamp out Christianity because it was tied to the regime it is against.

This means that if a Mormon church or an Islamic society bought land next door to us to erect a place of worship, we should not seek by appeal to the State and its laws to deny such an effort. If someone were to attempt to deny Muslims their right to do so, we should come to their aid. What we want, and what we should pray for as Christians, is simply a level playing field. We don't need the favoritism of the State because of the greatness of our God. As we pray for Christians in places where Christianity is persecuted, we should pray not that Islam would be outlawed, but simply that Christianity would be allowed. The God who can use the pagan king Cyrus is truly a great God, and his truth will win out in the end.

II. We Renounce Pluralism.

There is another meaning of the word *pluralism* that this passage calls us to renounce. Very often, what is meant by pluralism today is a type of relativism

that says that no religion or belief system is allowed to claim that it is superior to another. How many times have you heard people say, “All religions are basically the same” or “All religions lead to God”? That is a pluralism that we must renounce for the same reason we welcomed the previous kind of pluralism. God is a great God, superior to all the other gods. His truth will reign supreme. Its triumph is assured, as Isaiah states without apology in verse 6 – **“that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other.”** Five more times in this chapter God lays claim to being the source of exclusive truth. The Gentiles will say to Jews, **“Surely God is in you, and there is no other, no god besides him”** (v. 14). After claiming to be the creator of all things, God says, **“I am the Lord, and there is no other”** (v. 18). And then, speaking of his ability to name Cyrus as the future Persian king two-hundred years before the event, he says again, **“And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me”** (v. 21). Finally, in verse 22, he invites the whole earth to **“Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.”**

It needs to be pointed out that the claim that no religion should make a claim to exclusive religious truth is itself a claim for exclusive truth. It too attempts to persuade others to believe similarly, being just as eager to make converts as any other religion. The pluralist wants everyone to agree that there is no superior truth. But he believes that his truth that no religion possesses superior truth is superior, and he wants others to embrace it. You simply cannot escape a claim for exclusive truth. The Bible makes such a claim for itself.

The Bible insists on this because everything is at stake in where you land regarding this truth issue. Verses 16-17 put it very clearly. **“All of them are put to shame and confounded; the makers of idols go in confusion together. But Israel is saved by the Lord with everlasting salvation; you shall not be put to shame or confounded to all eternity.”** So we renounce this kind of pluralism not just because God is great and his truth is superior, but also because those who embrace other truths will, according to verse 16, be **“put to shame and confounded.”** That doesn’t simply mean that those who believe what is false will have to endure the discomfort of being shown to be wrong. It means that they will be shown to have based their lives on that which is false, with tragic consequences. It is the shame of placing one’s trust in something that proves unable to deliver. I remember reading years ago of a hurricane party held in an apartment in the path of the approaching Hurricane Camille. The apartment was destroyed, and those inside lost their lives. We renounce pluralism because our decisions about truth and falsehood are matters of eternal consequence.

Let me give an illustration. One of the strong idols of our culture is the idol of individual freedom, an idol that says that I have the right to pursue what I think is best for my own happiness and fulfillment. Others, even those in authority, have no right to tell me what to do. As anyone who’s been in a classroom recently will know, respect for the authority of the teacher has become a real problem.

Isaiah says that those who worship this idol or any other will be put to shame and confounded. Just this week, someone was pulling out of our driveway when they were struck by a teenager riding his unlicensed motorcycle on the street. The teenager was injured and had to be taken to the hospital for emergency surgery. I'm glad to say that he is recovering and should be fine. Of course, accidents happen all the time, and the policemen who came didn't assign fault either way. But the reason I bring this up in this context is that the teenager was being followed by his grandfather who had told him not to ride his motorcycle. God had placed an authority in this young man's life that he had chosen to ignore. To put it in the categories of Isaiah, he was worshipping a false god of individual freedom and he was put to shame and confounded.

III. We Embrace Optimism.

We live in an era when the past is ignored and the future is regarded with great pessimism. The only thing left is to live for the present and just seek the maximum happiness you can for now. Such an approach to life cannot work, and it results in a strong cynicism. As Christians, we are to be filled with hope for the future. Not only has God been gracious to us in forgiving us for our sins and bringing us into a relationship with him, but he has also declared that the day is coming when there will be no more pluralism. On that day, people will know, **“from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides”** the Lord (v. 6). The day is coming when **“To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance”** (v. 23). The day is coming when the prayer of verse 8 will be answered. **“Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit; let the earth cause them both to sprout; I the Lord have created it.”** It is a day when we will be more fully human than ever before, loving God with all our hearts and loving our neighbor as ourselves. That's what it means to be a human being, and it will happen.

Let me remind you who it is that has said these things. It is the God who is able to call a pagan king his anointed. It is the God who is able to put this prophetic word about Cyrus, even giving his name, in the mouth of the prophet Isaiah almost 200 years before it happened. It is a God who is able to use even his enemies to accomplish his purposes. How was verse 6 fulfilled? It says that because of Cyrus the whole world will know who the true God is. How was that fulfilled? It was fulfilled in the fact that this king issued a decree that allowed the Jews to return to their land. Because of that return, more than five hundred years later, a Jewish family lived there who gave birth to a boy the angels told them to name Jesus. He was the true anointed of the Lord, the Messiah. And through him, blessing would come not just to Jews, but even to Gentiles like you and me.

Let me make an application of this point about our need for optimism. We are to invest ourselves in God's kingdom instead of our own. Suppose it's the year

1975 and you have \$10,000 to invest in one company. You like this typewriter company whose stock has done very well. Everyone you know uses this particular typewriter, and you like their stock. Then a friend of yours gives you an opportunity to get in on the ground floor of a company you have never heard of, started by a man named Bill Gates. You decide to go with Mr. Gates. When you tell your friends what you've done, they laugh at you and say you've been a fool. It's twenty years later, 1995, and your friends aren't laughing any longer. In light of the promises of this passage, an investment in God's kingdom is the wisest thing you can do. There is a future in it. But the investment required here is not that of just giving a few dollars. It requires everything, the complete reorientation of our lives around God's kingdom. That brings us to our next point.

IV. We Surrender to Our Sovereign God.

There are two surrenders spoken of in this passage. First, God's people are called to surrender to God's way of doing things. They don't like being in exile, and they don't like the fact that God has used the pagan King Cyrus to accomplish his work. To complain against God, though, he likens to the clay questioning the potter about what he's done. **"Does the clay say to him who forms it, 'What are you making?' or 'Your work has no handles'?"** (v. 9). We are as different from God as a lifeless lump of clay is from the potter. So God calls us to surrender ourselves to his greater wisdom. Such a surrender is the only path to true joy and freedom in our lives. It's like that toy from my childhood called Chinese handcuffs. It was a tube of wrapped paper into which you would insert your fingers. As you pulled apart in an attempt to remove the fingers, the paper would tighten its grip. The way out was to stop pulling. Israel's way out was to stop pulling and to surrender to God while in exile in this foreign land. Your way, too, is to stop pulling and to surrender to God's ways in your life.

The Gentiles, too, are called to surrender. **"Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God and there is no other"** (v. 22). This word to the idolatrous Gentiles is very different than what we might expect. We would expect to hear a word warning the Gentiles to prepare for destruction. They have made themselves God's enemies by treating God's people cruelly, and now God shows up. But instead of a call to prepare for their own destruction, he calls them to lay down their arms and surrender. It is a sweet surrender, full of mercy. When God's enemies surrender, he makes them his friends.

CONCLUSION:

As we gather for the Lord's Supper, it is the meal for all God's former enemies who have surrendered themselves to him. Our mighty God uses his enemies to accomplish his will, transforms them to his friends, and protects his friends against all their enemies. Let's surrender anew as we eat, thanking God for his abundant provision for us in Jesus.