

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24)

RESTORED

Isaiah 45:1-7

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Analysis by Ronald C. Neustadt

4Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him – and the gates shall not be closed: 2I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, 3I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. 4For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me.

5I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me, 6so 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. 7I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things.

DIAGNOSIS: Exiled

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Living*

Unrighteous Lives: Injustice and Superficial Religion

By the time we get to the part of Isaiah that is our First Reading, we hear of God's restoration project for Judah. But we dare not gloss over the seriousness or ignore the depth of Judah's problem, lest we miss the goodness of God's activity on their behalf. There's a reason the nation of Judah had been defeated. There's a reason their leaders had been killed or carried off into exile in Babylon. There's a reason their temple had been destroyed and their monarchy ended.

According to the prophetic writer (Isaiah), Judah's problem expressed itself in two obvious ways: lots of "religion" (festivals and sacrifices and prayers—see chapter one), and lots of injustice (the rich "grinding the face of the poor"—see Chapter 3, for example). One doesn't need to look hard to find examples of both among us, too—even among us Lutherans.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Choosing an "Other" God*

Isaiah knows that Judah's problem goes even deeper. From where does all that injustice come? Whence all that superficial religion? Where else, but from having gone after "other" gods (45:6). Jerusalem is no longer "the faithful city" (1:21), but has turned to relying on military preparedness (22:8ff.) and has adopted pagan fertility practices (1:29) in addition to its Temple worship. "In God We Trust," they said; but, in truth, they trusted in their military strength and they loved the prosperity that they enjoyed at the expense of others more than they loved God who required righteousness.

"Strength" and "prosperity"—those were their "other" gods. Sound familiar?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Day of the Lord* Worst of all, when "strength" and "prosperity" are our gods,

it's not as if our biggest problem is just that we have to sacrifice a lot to satisfy these gods. Our biggest problem is that the god who is God will hold us accountable for having rebelled / chosen "other" gods in God's place. Isaiah calls this time of accountability "the Day of the Lord." That day came for Judah when Babylonia destroyed everything—every god—on which they had relied.

Not only could their strength and prosperity not help them; it was all taken away. And so were they. Why should it be any different for us?

PROGNOSIS: Restored

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Day of Salvation*

In order that people "from the rising of the sun and from the west" may know that "there is no other" God (45:6), the LORD chose to bring the people of Judah back from exile and even to shower them with the wealth of the nations (45:14). To accomplish this, God "anointed" Cyrus. The God who alone is God is not only righteous and requiring of righteousness; the LORD is also merciful. And "Israel is saved by the LORD..." (45:17).

The same God who restored Judah has provided a day of salvation for us, too. This time, though, salvation involves more than restoration of land and wealth. It involves the forgiveness of sins – specifically, forgiveness for the myriad ways we have practiced unrighteousness and gone after "other" gods. In Jesus, God has provided an anointed one who delivers us, not from some foreign power who has defeated us militarily, but from the righteousness of God, who is rightly infuriated at our unrighteousness – our injustice and superficial worship. This Anointed One delivered us by taking responsibility for our unrighteousness, i.e. by offering us forgiveness. In exchange he got what God says the unrighteous and unjust get.

And the God who is not only righteous and just, but also merciful, approved of this messiah's mercy—and raised him from the dead.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Trusting the "One and Only" God*

It is that word of the Lord that ends up turning us around. When God is able to get through to us what great mercy God desires to show us, that's when we begin to trust in this God who alone is God, and give up relying on the gods of might and prosperity. Instead of believing that our salvation lies in having more power and more money, we come to see that our salvation lies in the God who, though righteous, is also merciful.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Living Righteously*

And what does that trust in the one and only God who is both righteous and merciful look like in our lives? How else than in our living righteous and merciful lives ourselves! When we don't believe that our salvation lies in having wealth, we don't need to gain wealth at the expense of others. When we don't believe that our salvation lies in being more powerful than everyone else, we don't need to ally ourselves with oppression. And when we trust in the merciful forgiveness of the LORD, we even find ourselves willing and able to offer forgiveness to others.