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The Revised Common Lectionary YEAR A
Alternative readings:
Psalm 99
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Matthew 22:15-22

Thus 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:

I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron,

I 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.

For 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.

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.

ENTERING THE STORY

Distinct from the earlier Isaiah of Chapter 5 which we considered two weeks earlier in Proper 22 and who lived in the 8th century BCE, this Second Isaiah comes from the time of exile in Babylonia in the 6th century. This text is from 530 BCE more or less at the cusp of the return of the Jews to Jerusalem. Isaiah speaks about who will liberate, save, deliver the people and lead them home.

EXPLORING THE STORY

1. What do you know about the exile of the Jews in Babylonia? What might it have been like? What is exile? What might it have been for them? Exiled from what? To what? Who is speaking? Who is being addressed?

What do you know about Cyrus? What about the Persians and Babylonians?

What is the Lord saying to Cyrus? What is he to do? Become? The Lord calls Cyrus what?

The word translated here from the Hebrew word for "messiah" is anointed. Remember that in the Hebrew tradition anointing was done to kings, priests and prophets. Though it designated a call and some sense of being set apart, it never signified divinity. This was also true into New Testament times. The later Greek texts of the gospels translate the Hebrew "messiah" or anointed as "Christ." One might thus speak of King David as a Hebrew messiah or Jewish Christ just as some people do when they refer to Jesus as being a son of messiah David. Cyrus the Persian is the only non-Jew in scripture referred to as anointed, messiah, or Christ. Why might God choose one such as Cyrus to lead the Hebrew people home? Why Cyrus rather than to raise up another Moses or David from within the Jewish people?

How do you suppose those in exile in Babylonia felt about being liberated, delivered, and even saved by a messiah, anointed one, or Christ?

If the disturbing aspect of such a novel choice is difficult to grasp, turn to the story in Luke 10:30-35 and read about the man left to die in a ditch who is rescued by one of the hated Samaritans after the priest and Levite have passed him by. The dissonance may feel similar. Wonder how the world tilts for both parable listener and liberated Jew heading home from Babylon.

What are we learning here about Cyrus? About the Lord God?

2. What do you know about exile in our world? Who are the exiles and where are they exiled to? What kinds of exiles are there? How might one be in exile in one's own country or church or family?

How might one be exiled from or even within oneself? Where or what is the "Babylon" that holds people captive? Alienated, estranged and separated from people, places and things that matter; stuck far from the "home" where one is meant to be with others and even self? Who might be the Cyrus in our world today? Who might be the one called, named, armed to set us free?

3. Who might be the Cyrus in your world, down the street, in your office or sitting on the last pew? Whom might be the one you call "evil," whom God means to bring you safely home? Who may be the outsider, enemy, or the marginal other who is the last person in the world you would think God would ever arm to set you free?

4. What do you know of that part of yourself that you keep at arm's length or deny or would ignore, discount, and am embarrassed by that is the one destined to break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron that hold you captive?

What is your Babylon? Who is your Cyrus? What is the cost and the promise of following him or her home?

BETWEEN THE LINES

- The Lord gives treasures of darkness and riches in order for Cyrus to recognize who is calling him. How might you be able to recognize when the Lord calls you? How might you understand in a new way the things and events speaking to people like us? Can you see what might be called the treasures that are laid out? How might you see things and events in your life in such a new way?

- Imagine what it might be like to be Cyrus—chosen by one you do not know (who yet knows you) to serve a purpose that is not your own! Do you suppose the people of Israel saw Cyrus as God's deliverer? If not, what might have blocked their vision? If so, what must it have been like to be delivered by a foreigner, stranger, one who did not know their God? Looking back over your life, do you see instances in which you were delivered by a foreigner, a stranger, a completely unexpected source? Might God have been acting through that unexpected one? How does it look to you now? How did it look to you then?

- Make a list of some of the ways in which people are in exile today: held hostage by the awful fears of terrorism, angry about being robbed by those who were once respected as leading the corporate world, irked by continued threats of a baseball strike driven once again by greed, dismayed by a church shamed by abuse, grieving over pensions and college funds and hopes for the future evaporating on Wall Street. Who is Cyrus the enemy hidden in all that darkness? What about the terrifying possibility that those hated and distrusted the most might be our savior if we are ever to be liberated and led home?

- Make a list of other words for light and dark, weal and woe. Consider giving expression of these words in art or collage. Put your additional words and creative expressions in front of you and ponder what kind of God creates such opposites. How do you know the pull and tension of living in these opposites in your life? What deeper knowing of yourself might be gained from consciously living in the tension of the opposites rather than removing any ambiguity and living instead in a black and white world? What is happening in this exploration to your image of God? What new questions are arising?

EXPLORING FURTHER

From *Isaiah* by Walter Brueggemann

These verses exhibit Yahweh addressing Cyrus, summoning him to do the geopolitical work intended by Yahweh in behalf of Israel. Such a mode of address is a "royal decree" wherein God addresses a king in order to authorize, empower, legitimate, and instruct. Scholars suggest that the closest biblical parallel is Psalm 2, wherein Yahweh addresses David as king, a psalm incidentally used often in the New Testament for God's authorization of Jesus as "king" (messiah) and "Son" (Matt. 3:17, 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 3:22, 9:25). The first words of verse 1 are among the most remarkable in the Bible, first because Cyrus, the coming leader of the coming superpower, is named by Yahweh, and second, because the name Cyrus is linked to the Jewish title "Messiah." The NRSV translation "anointed" is a rendering of the noun "anointed one," that is, "Messiah," which translated into Greek is "Christ." That is, in Old Testament parlance, this Gentile is "the Christ," the royal designee to enact the salvific intention of Yahweh. What a mouthful! Some scholars believe, moreover, that in this utterance Cyrus the Persian received and takes over the claims of the Davidic dynasty, so that he is now the bearer of Davidic promises. The breathtaking affirmation is that Israel will be saved by a non-Jew. Isaiah in exile thinks very large about God's future in the world and is not contained by Israel's conventional categories of faith and hope. Rescue by such an agent is scarcely acceptable in the community of exiles (see w. 9-11). When this affirmation is pushed into the New Testament, moreover, the church is confronted by the same scandal when it is confessed that God's work is done by Jesus. On the one hand, Jesus is an uncredentialed nobody who comes from a no-place (Nazareth; see John 1:46). On the other hand, it is not only Jesus of Nazareth but it is "him crucified," the staggering affirmation that God's power is enacted in Friday weakness. The early church (and the subsequent church) faced the same scandal as did the exiles, only more completely so in the claim that Jesus is "the Word enfleshed."

Beyond Cyrus and Jesus, moreover, we may observe that the same gospel reality continues to operate wherever God's purposes for the future are carried by "unacceptable" human agents: so Marx and Freud may be prophets in their time and place, and all sorts of conventionally unacceptable people—like minorities, women, the poor, homosexuals—may turn out to be bearers of God's possibilities in the world. In our text it is clear that God's future for Israel is not to be enacted in the way the Jews either expected or preferred.

"Blessed Are You" a prayer by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Blessed be you, harsh matter, barren soil, stubborn rock:
you who yield only to force, you who cause us to work if we
would eat.
Blessed be you, perilous matter, violent sea, untamable passion:
you, who, unless we fetter you, will devour us.
Blessed be you, mighty matter, irresistible march of evolution,
reality ever new-born; you who, by constantly sharing
our mental categories, force us to go ever further and further
in our pursuit of the truth.
Blessed be you, universal matter, immeasurable time,
boundless ether, triple abyss of stars and atoms and generations:
you who by overflowing and dissolving our narrow standards
or measurements reveal to us the dimensions of God.
Blessed be you, impenetrable matter: you who, interposed
between our minds and the world of essences, cause us to languish
with the desire to pierce through the seamless veil of phenomena.

Blessed be you, mortal matter: you who one day will undergo
the process of dissolution within us and will thereby take us
forcibly into the very heart of that which exists.

You who batter us and then dress our wounds,
you who resist and yield to us,
you who wreck and build,
you who shackle and liberate,
the sap of our souls,
the hand of God,
the flesh of Christ:
it is you, matter, that I bless.

[***Ed. Note:*** Pierre Teilhard de Chardin SJ (1881–1955) was a French philosopher and Jesuit priest who was also a paleontologist and geologist. He participated in the discovery of the Peking Man (homoerectus fossils) in 1923-27 in China. He conceived the idea of the "Omega Point" and believed the universe was constantly evolving. He also developed Vladimir Vernadsky's concept of noosphere (the sphere of reason). He received a monitum (an errant clergy warning) from the Church but was posthumously praised by Pope Benedict XVI and his teachings were cited by Pope Francis in his 2015 encyclical, "Laudato si'".]

From *The World Below* by Sue Miller

I was talking about my deepening sense of my grandmother's life, in particular everything that I had come to understand about tuberculosis and the shame and fascination of the san [sanitorium], and what a revelation that was to me. "That's what the task of the historian must be—is it? To explain how life felt as it went by. Not just what happened, but how differently it signified: what happened."

"Yes, that's apt," he said. "I've often thought of it as like anthropology. Like explaining the rules of another culture, another country. Which it seems to me the past is, in some sense."[...] "I'm sure there are countless other things that would be as revelatory if you knew of them. If you were looking for them. They'd change the ground under the story."[...]Let's use my wife as an example. She was a believer. Religious. And that was always present in her life in a way I sometimes lost track of, since I'm not. Or at least not in the way she was. For her it was, I would say, the central invisible fact of her life. And yet you could write her life's story without including it if you didn't know specifically about it. It was simply underneath everything else. As it may well have been for your grandmother. Probably was, in point of fact."

"Do you think so?"

"I can't know, really. But she was a churchgoer till the last. I remember that. We used to see her there every Sunday in the summers we were up before she died, in one or another of her hats. Many hats." He smiled at me. "You will remember them" [...] "Now maybe she went for the sociability, or just because she'd always gone. But maybe, just maybe, she was a believer. A true believer. And then, if that was so, it would raise other questions. You'd have to know, for instance, what kind of a believer. Did she see each moment of her life as given by God: here, a test to rise to, there, a moment of grace? Or did she just assume him as a' beneficent presence? Somehow, maybe even casually, in charge of everything."

"I see," I said. "Yeah. Well, all that would make a difference, wouldn't it?"

"It would. But it's not something she's likely to have written about explicitly."

"No," I said. "No, I don't think I've come across it. Explicitly." [...] Now, because he was silent, I looked at him. He was watching me, frowning.

"What?" I asked.

"Oh, sorry. I was just wondering, I suppose. What you would say the central fact of your life is. The one that I can't see."

"Maybe you see it all," I said.

He laughed and shook his head.

"No, really. I'm a thoroughly modern woman, after all. Maybe what you see" — I raised my arms — "is exactly what you get."

As he set his mug down, he said, "Now that is something I very much doubt."



Hand of God (1123) Fresco detail from the vault of the apse of Saint Climent de Taull. Located in the Museu Nacional d'Art Catalunya in Barcelona, Spain
(Source: Commons.Wikimedia.org)