

Being Known By God

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Saint Paul's, Batesville
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 24, Year A
October 16, 2011
Isaiah 45:1-7

+In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of
the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As tempting a text as this morning's Gospel is, especially since most of you should have received your pledge cards in the mail this week, there is something about the Old Testament which I find compelling and, thus, want to focus on. Isaiah's prophecy is the climax of a fascinating period of history which I think interesting to enough to rehearse briefly, because it makes this morning's Old Testament lesson all the more surprising. So, on with a bit of a history lesson, and apologies if it seems dry to some. I for one find it to be a really enthralling story.

If you follow the daily office lectionary (either by coming to morning prayer here at St. Paul's or in your own private devotions) you've been hearing a great deal of the background of this morning's Old Testament over the past couple of weeks. To bring you up to speed, the last great king of Judah, Josiah, had done what none of his predecessors had managed- namely, large scale religious and political reform. Though Judah was a client state of Assyria, Josiah managed to tear down the altars of foreign gods and encourage the worship of Israel's god alone- a feat not even managed by Solomon himself. He used tax revenue not to underwrite the monarchy's expenses but to undertake a significant renovation of the Temple. Sadly, when Josiah died in the year 609 B.C. a whole series of bad kings followed. Josiah's son, Jehoahaz, ignored his father's reforms and was captured only three months into his reign after an ill-advised war with Egypt. Jehoahaz's brother

Jehoiakim was installed in his place by the Egyptian conquerors, but his eleven year reign was defined by his apparently constantly shifting allegiance to Egyptian and Babylonian powers who were at war with each other, and, worst of all, after facing criticism by the prophet Jeremiah, he undertook a policy of burning the prophet's writings. Finally, Jehoiakim's son, Jeconiah, only managed to rule for three months and ten days before he allowed Jerusalem to fall to the Babylonians and the best and brightest of Judah to be sent into exile throughout the Babylonian Empire on 16 March in the year 597 B.C.

Now, skip forward almost sixty years. Jerusalem had been decimated, leaving only a puppet monarchy and the poorest of the poor remaining in Judah. Educated and wealthy Jews had established communities throughout Babylon, leading to an increased nationalistic and religious fervor which the Empire had sought to quash by its program of

forced exile. This was a period in which the Jews learned how to maintain their Judaism, their connection to the God of Israel, outside the land given their forefathers and without the benefit of temple worship. For the common Jew, this meant an increased attention to *kashrut*, faithfulness in observing the laws of purity and morality found in the *Torah*. For scholars, it meant not only an increased attention to studying the Law (the beginnings of modern, Rabbinical Judaism) but also an explosion of creativity. It is not in Israel but in Babylon that much of what we call the Old Testament was finally written down.

More and more, though, the Jews realized that they could only follow the God of Israel in the manner they desired by returning to the land and rebuilding the temple. The only problem was, they had no army and a couple generations of life in exile had made repatriation seem little more than wishful thinking.

But then, something unexpected happened. The Word of the Lord came not just to the prophet but to one identified in this morning's lesson as God's "anointed". Indeed, considering that Isaiah was holed up in Babylon, we might assume that this prophecy was not even mediated through the prophet to this "anointed one" but went directly from God to him, 500 miles away from Babylon in the city of Susa.

And who was this "anointed one"? Cyrus, the pagan king of Persia. God says to Cyrus that He has "called [him] by name. I surname you," God says, "though you do not know me... I gird you, though you do not know me." God chose not one of His own chosen people, but a pagan king to bring deliverance to the Jews.

We Christians often miss this part of the story because we read Isaiah on one level when there are at least two levels on which the prophecies function. Isaiah most certainly points to Jesus

Himself as his people's redeemer, but on another level he also points to King Cyrus. It's not a matter of figuring out when the prophet speaks about one or the other; he can be understood as speaking of both in the same breath, a difficult thing for us linear-thinking modern people to get our minds around.

Anyhow, there is more in this than a history lesson with a twist at the end, because I think the twist-ending itself gives us an important lesson about who God is. We talk so much about coming to know God more fully, but we miss what is arguably more important, namely, that God knows us fully. To Cyrus, the God of Israel, if he had even heard of him, would have been a minor tribal god. He wouldn't have seen this strange religion of displaced Jews as being particularly interesting. But God knew Cyrus, just as he knows each of us: completely. Because God knew Cyrus before Cyrus

knew Him, this pagan king was made an instrument of the one true God.

The fact is we can never fully know God. We project all sorts of cultural and personal biases onto Him, and getting an even slightly clearer image of Him is a life's work. It is my strong belief that even those who reject God most vociferously (the Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens of the world) are rejecting not God Himself but some inaccurate image which we've created—some white-bearded chappie who lives in the clouds—that has less to do with who God is than it does with our own hang-ups.

That being the case, the Good News is that however skewed our image of God is, God's image of us is perfect. He knows us fully and He can employ the greater angels of our nature, made perfect in Christ Jesus, to do His Will whether we realize He's doing it or not. It is a great God who can take some pagan Persian king to be a channel of his

peace and deliverance. It is a great God who can take us, confused and sinful as we are, and build a Kingdom for which there is no end. May our ignorance of God be overshadowed by God's perfect knowledge of us, and may His perfect love find a home in the hearts who as yet do not know Him at all.

+In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.