

SERMON OCTOBER 22, 2017

[Isaiah 44:24-45:7; Psalm 96:1-13; I Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22]
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INTRODUCTION: Last year, about this time, Teresa and I spent some time in Wales scouting holy sites to visit on the pilgrimage to Wales and Ireland—the pilgrimage from which we, and several pilgrims from St. Augustine's, have just returned. We happened on a prehistoric stone monument called Carreg Samson, which simply means "Samson's Stone". It is located on the coast of Pembrokeshire in Wales on a high hill that slopes gently west to the Irish Sea. Carreg Samson is a 5,000-year-old dolmen--pre-Christian by 3,000 years!--which consists of 6 large standing stones, perhaps 7 feet high, across which is laid a 12-ton capstone. It is an impressive and awe-inspiring structure! No one knows for sure what this ancient dolmen means; but here is the surprising thing: as Teresa and I stood gazing on these great stones, we both sensed that Carreg Samson is sacred—that it is a holy place! We determined then to bring our pilgrims to this sacred site on this year's pilgrimage.

The morning of our visit to Carreg Samson just last month, I said to Teresa, "I want to say a prayer of thanksgiving when we are at Carreg Samson." And so I gathered the pilgrims together around this 5,000-year-old, pre-Christian, pagan monument. I had no idea what I would say; but the words just came out and I said something like this: "We thank you, Lord, that you have left no people anywhere without some knowledge of you. We thank you that the Light of your love has shined on every people, in every place, in every time. We thank you that your Light, which shined on the people who built this monument, prepared the way for the Light of Christ to come to this land. And we thank you that the Christian missionaries, who brought the Light of the Gospel to the descendants of those who assembled these stones, did not disdain the truth these ancient people had accurately perceived, but somehow took it up into the further truth about Jesus that was being revealed"--or something like that! I confess I was surprised by what I said. I had never before prayed such a prayer and yet I knew it was true. Through the pilgrimage experiences we have had, I have come to a new understanding, which is this: the sacredness we sensed at pre-Christian Carreg Samson, the holiness of the many Celtic Christian sites we visited on our pilgrimage, and the sacredness of this holy sanctuary where we are this morning—that sacredness—that holiness is one, for, at bottom, it is God's holiness. Now, I believe the story of the Persian general Cyrus found in our OT lesson this morning confirms the truth of what I prayed at Carreg Samson. And so does our Psalm and our Epistle. So, I need to say something about these Scriptures.

ISAIAH: First, this absolutely amazing passage, Isaiah 44 & 45, which comprises an “Oracle”, i.e., a revelation from God given to a prophet. This Oracle was given to an anonymous prophet whom scholars have given the name “Second Isaiah.” It was given to him in the 6th century B.C. just before Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon. According to our OT lesson, it was revealed to the prophet that Cyrus, the pagan King of Persia, would be the one to free the Israelites from captivity, restore them to their homeland in Palestine, and help them rebuild their Temple in Jerusalem.

You may already know something about this time in the history of Israel: Jerusalem had been sacked by Nebuchadnezzar, the Temple had been destroyed and its sacred vessels looted, and the Israelites had been taken captive and carried off to Babylon where they had languished in exile. Their exile raised profound and difficult questions for the faithful followers of God in Israel: Was God really in control of things? Did God care about their captivity in Babylon? Would God intervene to restore them to the land God had given them?

These questions were all the more troubling because they knew God had made an unconditional promise to their great ancestor, King David, a promise that would make their future secure. This promise is recorded in 2 Samuel 7, where God told David that David’s kingdom would be made sure forever and that his throne would be established forever. Unlike previous promises God made to Israel, which had conditions attached to them, this promise was unconditional. There would not fail some one of his descendants to sit on David’s throne forever. So what happens, then, when Israel has no King sitting on David’s throne, has no Temple in which to worship God, and finds themselves captive and in exile in Babylon? Where, now, is the God who made that unconditional promise to David and to Israel?

God’s answer to these questions according to Second Isaiah is amazing, if not provocative: Cyrus the Great, the Gentile King of Persia, will be the one who frees and restores Israel! It will not be a descendant of King David, as they might have expected, but a complete outsider and a pagan one at that! And in a clear signal that God is doing something new with God’s people, God even speaks to Cyrus using Davidic titles according to Second Isaiah: “my shepherd” [44:28] and the Lord’s “anointed” [45:1], which could also be translated the Lord’s “messiah!” This message of Second Isaiah must have been really quite amazing to the people of Israel!

What is this new thing God reveals by anointing Cyrus, a Gentile, as God's agent of salvation for Israel? This Oracle concerning Cyrus marks a profound and decisive shift in Israel's understanding of who God uses as agents to bring salvation to Israel. God will not save Israel simply by raising up a Jewish savior from David's line. Instead, God will free Israel through a Gentile, Cyrus, a pagan king, who, ironically, is given Davidic titles. And, in fact, we know that in the first year of his reign in Babylon, Cyrus issued the "Edict of Restoration", which was an order to return the Jewish community to Palestine, to help rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, and to restore the sacred vessels stolen by Nebuchadnezzar.

This Oracle also marks a new and larger understanding of who receives God's salvation. The language here is somewhat cryptic; but when God says to Cyrus, "so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel" [45:3], or "so that they may know from the rising of the sun and from the west that I am the Lord and there is no other" [45:6], what is being described is the universal revelation of God to all people, including those who are not part of the House of Israel.

To be sure, Second Isaiah does not question Israel's election or her unique place in the history of God's salvation. But, the prophet "looks forward to the time when all nations would recognize Yahweh as God. The prophet even expected Cyrus to recognize God's hand in his triumph and to acknowledge him as the true God. God intends to rule the whole earth, and foreigners are invited to accept that rule." [Bright, *History of Israel*, 338f.] Thus, the universal claims implicit in monotheism all along through Israel's history become explicit here in Second Isaiah. This Oracle marks a shift away from a narrow focus on the salvation of Israel in order to focus on the universal salvation of all peoples as represented by the Gentiles. Indeed, as we shall see, this universal salvation involves the whole earth—such is the "daring universalism of Second Isaiah" as one OT scholar has aptly put it. [Smart, *Second Isaiah*, 128]

PSALM 96: This theme of universal salvation continues in our Psalm for today where it is even more explicit and is expanded to include the salvation of nature and the whole created order. Let us look at this psalm for a moment.

Now, there are several different kinds of psalms in the book of Psalms. The largest number of Psalms, as Kathryn Rickert has so ably taught us, are Laments. But the Psalm we have before us this morning belongs to a different category called Enthronement Psalms. Enthronement Psalms were

used during the enthronement ceremonies surrounding the installation of an historical king in Israel, such as David. Some of the Enthronement Psalms, however, were used at the New Year's Festival held in the Temple to celebrate the future enthronement of God as King of the whole world. These Enthronement Psalms were recited annually to remind Israel that there is only one God and that God is God over all peoples and over the whole earth. The God who made heaven and earth and all that is within it, the God who created everything, will redeem and restore everything God has made, including saving all the peoples of the earth.

Here the psalmist sees from afar the future, final consummation when God's rule will become world-wide. That is what is meant by such statements in our psalm as "Tell it out among the nations: 'The Lord is King! He has made the world so firm that it cannot be moved.'" [96:5] Or, when the Psalmist writes, "Declare his glory among the nations—that is among the Gentiles—and his wonders among the people." [96:3] "His wonders among the people": this is a reference both to God's saving deeds on behalf of humanity and also to God's creative deeds to create the universe. This has prompted one OT scholar to declare, "The kingship of Yahweh is too stupendous a thing for man alone to herald with joy; the heavens above are called upon to be glad, and the earth to rejoice, the sea to roar in delight, the field to exult, and all the trees of the forest to shout for joy, in the presence of Yahweh [the King over all]." [96:11 & 12, Oesterley, *Psalms*, II, 424] This all sounds very Celtic to me—everything in the natural world participating in God's salvation and giving praise to God as a result. Celtic Christians, especially, would understand this close relationship between God and nature and human beings.

SO WHAT? Well, we have come a long way from Carreg Samson, where we began, haven't we? Or have we?! Do we believe what these Scriptures teach us—that God has been, and is now, at work in every place, with everyone, in every time? Do we believe God knew the people who built Carreg Samson and cared for them just like God cares for us? Do we believe that God prepares the way for salvation through the work of various leaders, even those who do not know him, or acknowledge him, in order to save all people and to restore the whole earth? Do we believe what the psalmist saw—that one day all the peoples of the world, the heavens above, the sea around us, the fields and the woods will all lift their voices in praise of God who rules over all? This may well be hard for us to believe at this moment in view of the political situation in our country and in our world. That is why we need to hear these Scriptures!

When we come to this altar, we are remembering just like Israel did when they recited their Enthronement Psalm. We remember another shepherd and another one anointed by God, who laid down his life on behalf of us all. As we come to this table this morning, let us give thanks for all those upon whom God's Light has shined, all those who have borne faithful witness to the wondrous work of God, and, especially for Jesus, God's chosen one, who is, and will be, Lord of all. Amen