

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

October 22, 2023

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## God Things

Isaiah 45:1-7      21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/ Lectionary 29

Gosh, y'all. I love the first reading for this Sunday. A bit of context: this passage is from what we might call "Second Isaiah." It is the second part to the book of Isaiah, written during the Babylonian exile – perhaps by a second generation of folks in the tradition of the original prophet, Isaiah. The prophet aims to offer words of comfort, hope, and the promise of deliverance to this people living in exile.

And that deliverance is at hand. Cyrus is called, in our translation, "the Lord's anointed." That's a fine translation, don't get me wrong. But I fear that it is too soft in the English. The word used here is: Messiah. In the Hebrew Bible there are multiple messiahs, ones anointed by God to do a particular thing, to hold a particular office, etc. The idea of one final messiah comes in that time between the two testaments – after the Hebrew scriptures were composed and (obviously) before the Christian scriptures.

Ones anointed (or messiah-ed) include priests, and prophets, and kings – most notably to Saul and David. And now, Cyrus, an outsider, a Persian, a non-Jew is a messiah – one appointed by God to do the task of bringing the exiles home. And even further, God is working through Cyrus without Cyrus even knowing the God of Israel, without Cyrus knowing that he is working on behalf of that God.

What I love about this text is that this reflects the prophet's ability to take notice of the God things. God things that even the actors aren't aware of. One of the things I love about the Hebrew scriptures – in general – is the awareness and proclamation of these God moments – both big and small, both in one's personal existence and in the wider society. Just as the author of Isaiah discerned that Cyrus, an outsider, was used by God for a divine purpose, we are called to discern those "God things" in our midst.

A question that I hold is this: how do we discern those God things in and around us? What makes something a God thing? By what lens do we look at the world and see God at work around us? Because not everything is a God thing.

There are \*some\* - and I hope a very small \*some\* - that look at what is currently happening in Israel & Palestine as a God thing. They want to claim that this somehow reflects the book of Revelation and that it will usher in the second coming of Jesus. (I hope this doesn't need to be said: but that view of the suffering is horrific and should be condemned)

There are \*some\* - and again, I hope a very small some - that see various disasters around the world as punishment from God for society's acceptance of people of differing sexualities and gender identities. God must be mad at us for the societal acceptance of these so-called "sins" that they claim go against God's desires for us. Prominent voices on the religious right have claimed that LGBTQIA+ folks were to blame for earthquakes, hurricanes (like Katrina in 2005). Even for the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Following the attacks, Jerry Falwell said, "I really believe that the pagans and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularized America. I point the finger in their face and say, 'you helped this happen.'"

I cannot believe that these things are God things. These kinds of things don't match what I believe about God – the God made known in Jesus. I couldn't be here as a pastor if that's how God worked. I couldn't be a Christian. That kind of God isn't one that I can worship. We should reject these harmful theologies full stop.

As Christians, we believe that Christ reveals in his flesh and bones something about who God is and what God is like. When Luther talks about the Word of God, he ultimately is talking about Jesus – fully human and fully divine. The Bible – or the written word – serves to point to Jesus. He would call the Bible the cradle for Christ. Some parts of the Bible point us more to that God made known in Jesus than others. That is the lens by

which we read scripture – not adding Jesus to stories that he isn't in (like in the Hebrew scriptures) but wrestling with how the text does/ doesn't reflect the kinds of God things that Jesus embodied – justice, love, compassion, healing, etc.

That is the lens we hold to the world as well to discern the God things. The God things around us look like Jesus, feel like Jesus, sounds like Jesus.

Jesus shows up in the everyday, the mundane moments. At the bedside. Around the dinner table. In the synagogue. At the market. At the lakeside. At work. In each of these places, big and small, Jesus makes the love of God a bit more real, a bit more tangible. He is moved in his gut with compassion when he sees people suffering and brings healing. He encourages his disciples to rest, to connect with God in prayer.

These things can be small: Have you had one of those moments where you've gotten that phone call from your friend, just when you needed it? Or had a stranger say something kind just when you needed to hear it? And they had no idea how much it meant to you. Or how much you needed it in that moment. In those moments, we experience the tangible presence of Christ, moving in our lives and in the lives of those around us. And often those folks have no idea that they're doing that for us.

In thinking about how the OSLC and SSLC partnership, I think so often about how it was a God thing and how the Holy Spirit was and is at work around us and through us. My panicked email to the Synod office led to us meeting a mutual need. And opened up possibilities well beyond those needs – possibilities for relationship, for doing ministry together, for serving our community together.

The more difficult thing is to notice the God things when God is working through outsiders, through the ones we deem as “other,” the ones who don't know our God as we know our God.

In times like this, when the things of the world seem so dire. I find hope in the God things. I find hope in the God that refuses to abandon God's people. God refuses to let us – or any of God's beloved humanity –

go. I find hope in that God acts in mysterious ways and through sometimes the most unexpected people.

In her commentary on Isaiah, Callie Plunket-Brewton puts it this way: “If God is the creator of the world, hope can grow anywhere in the heavens or on the earth... Recent events have left many of us holding our breath when we turn to the news, anticipating the next disaster. It is terribly important to remind our fellow Christians that we are a people of hope and that God did not abandon the exiles of Judah and does not abandon us either. Our ancient faith bears witness to the power of God to redeem and restore sometimes in unexpected ways. We have received this faith and are called to live into it just as the writer of Second Isaiah called the exiles to live into it. To do so requires us to be a people always looking for the signs of God’s work in the world. It requires us to be a people of hope.”

When hope is hard to come by, I hope we will look for the God things around us – big or small – as signs of God’s presence and never-ending love. I hope that we’ll lean into our faith in the God who desires life, restoration, and redemption for us. I hope that we will look to the cross and trust that because God suffers, not even the deepest suffering in our lives or in the world can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.