

Sermons from St. Thomas

## Babylon and Persia

*Fifth Sunday in Lent, 13 March 2016: Isaiah 43:16-21, Psalm 126, Philippians 3:4b-14, John 12:1-8.*

Throughout Lent, I have tried remind us to pray for the world. We have a rich habit of praying for our friends, and that is a beautiful thing, but God calls us to see all the world as our friends. So on Wednesdays and at Saints and Sinners and wherever we have gathered to pray in small groups, I've asked people to name aloud concerns for our world.

Every single time, someone has mentioned the Presidential election this fall. The division it reveals among us, the tone of our discourse, the role of the media, the behavior of the crowds – all of this merits our prayer and our action.

As you know, under IRS codes, churches are not allowed to support or oppose any particular candidate. But we may and should encourage people to vote. We may and should provide education about issues in a non-partisan way. We may and should talk about values. Our faith does have something to say to and about our politics. We are called bring our baptismal covenant to the ballot box and let it influence our choices.

So in any election year, we need to do more than pray for our election process. We need to think and act on the basis of our prayers.

Throughout Lent, I've been focusing on our Old Testament lessons. Today our lesson from Isaiah speaks to us about the kind of nation we hope to be.

It is not obvious, but three nations are part of this lesson from Isaiah – Judah, Babylon, and Persia. Judah was the remnant of Israel, the descendants of Abraham. They became slaves in Egypt and were set free by God. In the lesson we read last week, they moved into their own land, driving out other nations who lived there. The law God gave them was supposed to set them up as an alternative society, a nation where the poor were cared for, everyone rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> day, and they all lived in peace. Instead, they decided to become like other nations. They established a monarchy, raised up a big army to go after their neighbors, enslaved people on massive building projects, and ignored the needs of the poor. The prophets warned them this

would create instability and it did. After Solomon, the nation split in two and became a shadow of its former self. The Assyrians easily wiped out the northern kingdom of Israel, leaving only two weak tribes in the south in Judah. That's all that was left.

Babylon was a mighty empire who came to power after Assyria. Babylon governed like Assyria did, seeking power and land, gobbling up everything in their path for their own ends. They ruled by force and fear. They quickly captured the two tribes in Judah. They imprisoned their captives and sent them all away to exile in Babylon, leaving only the very weak behind. The first part of Isaiah, chapters 1-39, comes from that miserable time in history – the Exile.

Babylon was the nation of horse and chariot, army and warrior, that was quenched like a wick. Persia came to power after Babylon. The Persians had a very different vision for the world. Cyrus, King of Persia, had no interest in holding a bunch of people captive. He realized happy subjects were easier to manage. What was good for his subjects was good for him, so he let the people of Judah and other captives go back home and live on their own land. Cyrus is remembered still today for creating a centralized government that worked to the advantage and profit of its subjects. The second part of Isaiah, beginning in chapter 40, comes from that time in history when the Persians were making plans to allow the exiles to return home. The prophet Isaiah likely thought the Persians and Cyrus were what God had in mind when The Lord said "I am about to do a new thing."

We see in Babylon and Persia two very different ways of being an empire or nation, two different ways of using political power. The rule of Babylon was good only for Babylon and those in power there. They conquered and dominated others to build up themselves. The rule of Persia, and Cyrus in particular, was good for everyone. Cyrus ruled for the common good.

It is interesting to note that the prophets viewed both Babylon and Persia as agents of God. Babylon, they believed, was God's punishment on Israel's past misdeeds. And Persia, they believed, was God's hope for a new future. Now you may not think God raises up evil empires to punish a wayward people. I'm not sure I believe it either, but the prophets clearly did. They trusted to their core that God was at work in the political winds of their time. While they hoped Israel would someday be free to rule itself, they hoped that rule would look more like Persia than Babylon.

In a way, it may have been easier for them to assume God was at work because the people of Judah did not vote. They did not choose between Babylon or Persia. These empires simply rose up around them and everyone had to live with the consequences. Ordinary people had very little power in that system, so it may have been easier to assume an invisible hand of God was at work.

But we do choose. We have the strange and wonderful gift of representative democracy. As Winston Churchill said, “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others.” For good or ill, we elect the people who govern us. We have a precious say in establishing a vision for our nation and world. So we must choose whether to rule in ways that build up ourselves or rule in ways that bless the world. When we vote we decide whether we want to live in Babylon or Persia.

Our nation, the United States, has always hoped to be like Persia. Thomas Jefferson is said to have studied and admired Cyrus. In our best moments we have used our tremendous strength and resources to bless others. And in return we have been blessed. Our history of welcoming people from all over the world has brought so many gifts to us. The freedom we cherish to speak and debate together has helped us make better decisions. We are a strong and powerful nation, but we have never thought we should use that strength only for our own ends. We have always sought to bless the world. We strive to be like Persia. That is who we are.

The way of Babylon is the way of the chariot and horse described in Isaiah, the way of an empire that conquers just for the sake of conquering, building up itself while harming others. The prophet said they would lie down, unable to rise, extinguished, quenched like a wick, because that way of life does not work. Throughout history, every Babylonian type empire has eventually fallen and taken its people down with it.

The way of Persia makes a way in the wilderness and brings rivers to the desert to give drink to God’s children. The way of Persia brings life and hope. The way of Persia endures. The prophets would tell us today to beware of Babylon and vote for Persia.

It is not an easy thing to discern. Most candidates are a mixture of both. Many from both parties have helped us be like Persia. Many from both parties have led us away from that goal. But our founding vision holds. *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.* Cyrus and the prophets would have agreed.

Sadly, the idealism we see in the prophets and in our founders is often replaced today with cynicism. We see the money and political machines at work around us. It is hard to trust the system, hard to believe our vote or involvement matters. If we vote thoughtlessly, if we go to the ballot box on a whim or unprepared, if we don’t study the issues and think about what they mean, our vote may not accomplish what we hope. But if we vote thoughtfully, if we think about the issues and about our goals, our

vote becomes an expression of values we live out in other ways. Our vote becomes the hope we live out in how we care for others and where we give our money and time and how we treat the people around us. Our vote becomes one of many things we do to bless the world. That has power.

Our call as biblical people is to vote for Persia wherever we can, support the candidates and causes we believe will help nation and state and city and county be the blessing we are intended to be. Then live out that vote and be a blessing ourselves.

The Word of the Lord speaks still today: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?

May we be part of the new thing God is always doing. Amen.

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