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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Isaiah 45:1-7, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, Matthew 22:15-22
Loving the Pagan

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let me begin this sermon with a verse from our First Lesson, from Isaiah Chapter 45. As I read it aloud, let's pause and wonder at the fact that Cyrus is Persian. He is not an Israelite, not a worshiper of the true God, but a pagan, as the Bible judges these things:

¹Thus 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: (Isaiah 45:1, NRSV)

The Bible dislikes idols, but seems to like idol-worshippers. I guess the Bible figures that it's not their fault that they happen to worship a pretender to godhead, rather than the true God. The Bible doesn't hold it against them, but rather wants to save them.

THE BIBLE DISLIKES IDOLS

That the Bible dislikes idols is pretty easy to see simply by taking a look at this morning's readings. In our First Lesson, for example, the Lord addresses Cyrus and tells him that he, the Lord, the God of Israel, is the true God and that the other gods simply do not exist. This means that Cyrus is worshiping an illusion:

⁵I am the LORD, *and there is no other*; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me, ⁶so 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.

Likewise, from this morning's Psalm, let me lift up a verse or two from it, for it too discounts other gods:

⁴For great is the Lord and greatly | to be praised;*
he is more to be feared | than all gods.

⁵As for all the gods of the nations, they | are but idols;*
but it is the Lord who | made the heavens. (Psalm 96:4-5, LBW)

Then, from our Epistle Lesson, we read St. Paul's praise of the Thessalonians - including the fundamental praise that they have turned away from idols:

⁹For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God... (1 Thessalonians 1:9, NRSV)

And then, in our Gospel Lesson, we have the famous distinction Jesus makes between Caesar and God:

²⁰And Jesus said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?"

²¹They said, "Caesar's." Then he said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:20-21, RSV)

The Roman emperors were often hailed as gods, but Jesus knows the true God, and Tiberius Caesar isn't him!

These readings are just the tip of the iceberg of the Bible's rejection of the idols. We could also bring to mind the gentle mocking of the idols by Isaiah,

¹⁹The craftsman casts an idol, a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts silver chains for it. ²⁰Someone too poor to afford a sacrifice chooses a piece of wood that will not rot; he then seeks out a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not totter. (Isaiah 40:19-20, NJB)

And then, there is the bitter mocking by Elijah of the 450 prophets of Baal who cannot succeed in getting their god to light the fire around the altar:

²⁶And they [the prophets of Baal] took the bullock which was given them, and they dressed it, and called on the name of Baal from morning even until noon, saying, O Baal, hear us. But there was no voice, nor any that answered. And they leaped upon the altar which was made.

²⁷And it came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said, Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked. (1 Kings 18:26-27, KJV)

So, that's one part of my theme: the Bible dislikes idols.

BUT THE BIBLE SYMPATHIZES WITH IDOL- WORSHIPERS.

But the other half is pretty interesting, in my opinion: Though the Bible dislikes idols, it tends to like idol-worshippers. That is the great theme of one of our

recent Bible stories: the story of Jonah. Though it made Jonah so mad he was fit to be tied, the Lord was willing to forgive foreign Nineveh and not destroy that town. Listen to the very final words of the book, and notice how tender they are toward those pagans:

⁹And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death.

¹⁰Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night:

¹¹And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle? (Jonah 4:9-11, KJV)

CYRUS

Now, in this morning's First Lesson, we see this theme of the Lord's goodwill toward the pagan illustrated in a particular human life: I mean, Cyrus the Great, the leader of the great Persian Empire. His reign stretched for thirty years, 559 BC – 530 BC, and was the largest empire the world had yet known. He ruled over every known civilized land. Even Alexander the Great was not so great as Cyrus, for though Alexander conquered everyone in sight, he did not build an empire in the same way Cyrus did. Cyrus ruled in such a way that he sought to benefit the people he conquered and ended up beloved of them. So it was between him and Israel: Cyrus defeated the Babylonians and freed the Israelites to go home from their longtime captivity:

Cyrus the Great respected the customs and religions of the lands he conquered. It is said that in universal history, the role of the Achaemenid empire founded by Cyrus lies in its very successful model for centralized administration and establishing a government working to the advantage and profit of its subjects. In fact, the administration of the empire through satraps and the vital principle of forming a government at Pasargadae were the works of Cyrus. Aside from his own nation, Persia (modern Iran), Cyrus the Great also left a lasting legacy on the Jewish religion through his Edict of Restoration, where because of his policies in Babylonia, he is referred to by the people of the Jewish faith, as “the anointed of the Lord” or a “Messiah.”¹

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyrus_the_Great

Like many great leaders from ancient times, the history of Cyrus contains both historically reliable information and legends. The story of his early childhood is probably legendary, but charming:

Herodotus's story of Cyrus's early life belongs to a genre of legends in which abandoned children of noble birth, such as Oedipus and Romulus and Remus, return to claim their royal positions. Similar to other culture's heroes and founders of great empires, folk traditions abound regarding his family background. According to Herodotus, he was the grandson of the Median king Astyages and was brought up by humble herding folk. In another version, he was presented as the son of a poor family that worked in the Median court. These folk stories are, however, contradicted by Cyrus's own testimony, according to which he was preceded as king of Persia by his father, grandfather and great-grandfather.

After the birth of Cyrus the Great, Astyages had a dream that his Magi interpreted as a sign that his grandson would eventually overthrow him. He then ordered his steward Harpagus to kill the infant. Harpagus, morally unable to kill a newborn, summoned the Mardian Mitradates (which the historian Nicolaus of Damascus calls Atradates), a royal bandit herdsman from the mountainous region bordering the Saspire, and ordered him to leave the baby to die in the mountains. Luckily, the herdsman and his wife (whom Herodotus calls Cyno in Greek, and Spaca-o in Median) took pity and raised the child as their own, passing off their recently stillborn infant as the murdered Cyrus...

Herodotus claims that when Cyrus the Great was ten years old, it was obvious that Cyrus was not a herdsman's son, stating that his behavior was too noble. Astyages interviewed the boy and noticed that they resembled each other. Astyages ordered Harpagus to explain what he had done with the baby...Astyages was more lenient with Cyrus and allowed him to return to his biological parents, Cambyses and Mandane. While Herodotus's description may be a legend, it does give insight into the figures surrounding Cyrus the Great's early life.²

I like this story for the simple reason that Cyrus was a real person and therefore had some kind of a childhood. Why not that of a child raised by simple herdsman? It suffices for this important idea: whatever kind of childhood Cyrus had, he reached manhood because the God of Israel preserved him. Indeed, every breath Cyrus took was due to the providential care of our God. In general, our God,

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyrus_the_Great

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, loves humanity, ever one of them, and wants all to come to him.

STATE DEPARTMENT

In our United States government, it seems to me that the State Department is charged with seeking out goodness in otherwise strange and distant people. It is the office of our government that disciplines itself to search for help and goodness in unlikely people.

And in a way, I think it is right for Christians that we should be little State Departments in our own life. I know little about international affairs, but, like you, I know something of day-to-day personal affairs, and I know that it comes our way to be dealing with all sorts of folks in this world, including some we consider pagan and strange.

Could we discipline ourselves to incline toward those who are unlike us? Could we develop the instinct to rush toward those who are different, as if to say, Aha, now life is becoming interesting!

I do not know that such a thing would be natural for many of us. And yet it seems to be natural for our God. For never was there a gulf so wide as that between God above and mankind below, yet Jesus hastened off to be with us, and commanded that his Church should go out to the very ends of the earth trying to draw people to him.

Pity, then, the pagan. Look with hope toward the heathen. Sympathize with the strange one. Commiserate with the uncommon. Expect good from the odd: All such goodwill echoes the divine pity by which our God loved us even when we were unlovely, and in loving us, gives us a chance to flourish in this world.

You might answer that your heart is already heavy with worry simply for the people you love. And I understand that. But again, I point out that the divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, could have spent all eternity simply enjoying the company of one another, yet they did not. Rather, they created you and me and all there is. They let their love expand beyond themselves all the way to creatures who could only be the most strange of pagans to them. Yet Jesus dashed off to save us, and we seem to have come to mean the world to our God.

Cyrus the Great was a pagan in the eyes of Israel. Ye this pagan is the one who conquered the Babylonians and set the Israelites free from their long bondage. This pagan turned out to be the benefactor of God's people.

There are adventures awaiting us in the stranger. We must be reasonable in approaching the stranger, for we have stewardship responsibilities of our own, but let the set of our soul be one of goodwill toward that stranger. After all, that stranger might be Cyrus for us. He or she might be the stranger the Lord has prepared to be a blessing for us, for the Church, and for the glory of Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.