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

My sermon text comes from our First Lesson, from Isaiah Chapter 45. The LORD is speaking, and he says this:

I form light and create darkness,
I make weal and create woe;
I the LORD do all these things. (Isaiah 45:7, NRSV)

Let me tell you something about this God who forms light and darkness, weal and woe: this God — our holy God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — cares deeply about the little ones of this world and wants them to be loved and cared for. And if they are not, then get ready for some darkness and woe!

In the Mount Vernon public school system, there are seven hundred homeless children. I know about this because one of the angels on earth who helps watch over these children gave a presentation at Wartburg, where my wife, Carol, is Director of Spiritual Care, and Carol told me about it.

The criteria for what it means to be a homeless child are pretty clear. It does not necessarily mean that the children live on the street. Often they live with grandparents or aunts and uncles. But they do not have mother or father to take care of them. And sometimes, they do live on the street. The lady who serves as advocate for these children talked about the graduation ceremony for high school children — how the homeless graduates often do not have the $40 dollars to rent the graduation gowns and so would be excluded from the graduation ceremony. Imagine the difficulties a homeless teenager has to deal with in order to graduate from high school. Sometimes they sleep in cars or at the homes of friends. They face so many uncertainties and have so little encouragement in life. So, the thought that they would be excluded from high school graduation was unacceptable to the lady who advocates for them. She got on the phone and asked for help from three people. They all said Yes, God bless them, and so the kids were able to take part in the graduation ceremony.

I said that there are seven hundred homeless children in the Mount Vernon public school system. But that number is expected to creep upwards because of the hurricane that devastated Puerto Rico. Children will be coming

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1 Dr. Lillian F. Reynolds, District Homeless Student Liaison, Mount Vernon City School District.
to Mount Vernon with next to nothing. They will not have the birth
certificates needed to register in the public schools and they do not have the
money or know how to obtain such certificates. So this lady who advocates
for them will pull her resources and find a way for them to go to school.

But imagine a society where there is no such compassion and no such
people passionate about taking care of the little ones of earth. Such a society
had best watch out because the Maker of heaven and earth looks on and cares
deeply. Even ancient Israel herself had best watch out if her strong oppress
her weak. If there is injustice in the land, even Israel might end up in
Babylonian Captivity!

When the Lord says that he is the maker of light and darkness, weal and
woe, well, these are the words of a God who does not hesitate to accept
responsibility. Sometimes when people pray, they seem to formulate polite
prayers, as if they do not want to ask the Lord to do anything too difficult.
They seem to imagine that should protect the Lord for strenuous requests,
perhaps, because they think the Lord cannot handle hard prayers. Let there
be no such polite prayers for us. We believe in a God who creates both light
and darkness, weal and woe, and therefore let us ask him for light and
happiness, rather than darkness and sorrow.

The Lord speaks of two things here, weal and woe. We know what woe is:
It is misery. It is a state of things worth lamenting, so that the suffering person
can cry, “Woe is me!” So that is woe. But what is weal? Well, when I have a
good old word to define, I go to my good old Noah Webster’s dictionary of
1828. There we read that “weal” is:

A state which is prosperous, or at least not unfortunate,
not declining; prosperity; happiness.²

So “weal” is a good thing. It is a good state of affairs. In our text, the Lord, the
Maker of heaven and earth, declares that he is responsible for both weal and
woe. So my theory is, let us pray for weal and not for woe.

This divine declaration about weal and woe really is an extraordinary
thing. In this 45th Chapter of Isaiah, our God pulls no punches. He contends
flat out with the competing gods of that ancient world, indeed, of every world,
including our own. So let me linger with our Lord’s saying about weal and
woe. Let me linger with this saying and uplift it and tried to give us some
encouragement by way of this saying.

Three things come to my mind about this text: First, the God who claims
that he is the creator of both light and darkness, weal and woe, is a BIG God.
Let us think nothing small-minded about the God of Israel and about the God

² American Dictionary of the English Language, Noah Webster 1828.
of the church. Israel might have been a tiny country tossed around among powerful neighboring countries, but Israel did not have a tiny God. And the church might be a small society in our modern world, but the God of the church is not small. Indeed, he does all these things – both light and darkness, weal and woe.

Second, this big God who creates both light and darkness, weal and woe, wants our help in bringing light and happiness to this world. There is too much darkness and woe. The Lord does not want it, and nor do we. Let us then fight on the side of the light and peace and justice in this world.

And third, this big God who creates both weal and woe creates much more weal in the end than woe. That is the promise of the gospel. Was there ever so much grief in this world as when the angels looked down upon Jesus dying on the cross? Was there ever more cause for woe than the death of this good man? But Easter morning sanctifies Good Friday. The resurrection of Jesus means that weal shall triumph over woe. The God who creates both weal and woe is well able to accept the good work that you and I offer him and use it to build his kingdom – an everlasting world in which there is no more woe, and no more death, no more sorrow, no more tears, but only joy.

So, let me develop these three points some more. The first point is that the God who accepts responsibility for both weal and woe is a BIG God! Let us begin by contrasting the kind of the God we find in Isaiah with the more ordinary way of thinking of things in the ancient world.

In the ancient world in which Isaiah preached, the normal way of thinking about gods is that the proof of the god depends on the well-being of the nation. If the nation is doing well, then her god is true. So what of poor Judah in Babylonian captivity? The leading citizens of the land had been whisked off into captivity in that strange land. They had to stand there and gaze on at the triumphant religious processions for the god of Babylon. His name was Marduk. The priests and people of Babylon worshiped and celebrated Marduk because they believed that Marduk had brought them victory, and that Marduk was stronger than the gods of the lands Babylon had conquered. In the ordinary way of thinking, the God of Israel had been disproved by Judah’s defeat. And maybe some of the Jews in Babylonian captivity did switch their allegiance from the LORD to Marduk.

But not Isaiah! The God of Isaiah is a BIG god. He is bigger than Marduk, bigger than Babylon, bigger than Israel. Indeed Israel’s God is the Maker of all things. That is what Israel believed about her God. The God who had rescued her from slavery in Egypt is the God with whom the whole world has to do,

because the God of Israel is the true God, and beside him there is no other God. That is the bold claim we read in this morning's text:

5I am the LORD, and there is no other; besides me there is no god.

This big God cares about peace on earth. This big God cares about the weak ones of earth. He cares about the little ones. He does not want homeless children to be excluded from the school system and homeless teenagers to be excluded from the graduation ceremony. This big God hopes for and demands justice on earth. And when Israel is unjust, so that the strong ones oppress and rip off the weak, then Israel's God brings woe to Israel, and she finds herself in Babylonian captivity. But when Israel has been punished and longs to return to the LORD, then the LORD makes a way forward for that return. And Babylon had best watch out!

This was no game for Isaiah. He really believed that the God of Israel reigns. He really believed that the LORD has his good purposes, always, and so he searched for light in the midst of darkness. He searched for weal in the midst of woe. He literally searched his world for signs of God's providence, and he found it in Cyrus. Cyrus was the king of Persia. He was unlike other kings in those days. Especially he was unlike the kings of Babylon. The kings of Babylon had destroyed Israel. The kings of Babylon had destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. The kings of Babylon had deported the leading citizens of Israel into captivity in Babylon. But Cyrus was a different kind of king. He seemed to believe that the welfare of his land, Persia, was compatible with the welfare of conquered lands and peoples. Therefore, in Isaiah's reckoning, the God of Israel chooses and uses Cyrus to advance the welfare of Israel. And so we have the great words of this morning's text in which the Lord addresses Cyrus:

For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me. (Isaiah 45:4, NRSV)

King Cyrus does not know the LORD, the God of Israel, but the LORD knows him and is willing to the use him to increase peace and justice on earth. And none of the Persian dualism that Cyrus might have believed in. According to that dualism, reality is the result of equal and competing gods – one producing weal and one woe in an eternal weariness. No, the LORD creates both weal and woe, with weal being his final goal.

The lesson for us is this: look for the signs of our God's work in our life and in our land. The Lord will indeed accomplish his purposes. His kingdom shall
indeed come. Be on the lookout for signs of good cheer. Search for reasons for optimism. Do not think that things are always going downhill. Do not imagine that there will be relentless decline in the church and in the world. The Lord is not done. The Lord still lives. The Lord is still turning things around toward the good, indeed to toward his everlasting kingdom.

So that is my first point. The work and the will of our God shall prevail, in spite of all appearances otherwise. The work and the will of our God shall succeed, for he is a BIG God!

My second point is simply that our God desires and demand that we lend him a hand. That is what Isaiah did. He studied his world, concluded that king Cyrus would be a benefit for Israel, and pointed his people toward Cyrus, thereby giving them some hope.

In Martin Luther’s famous explanation of the second petition of the Lord’s prayer, Luther makes that petition to be of personal importance for each of us. The second petition goes this way, “thy kingdom come.” Luther makes this personal by asking that the kingdom should come to us, to each of us here and now:

May your kingdom come.
What is this? Answer:
In fact, God’s kingdom comes on its own without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come to us.
How does this come about? Answer:
Whenever our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that through his grace we believe his Holy Word and live godly lives here in time and hereafter in eternity. (Kolb/Wengert)

Likewise, our God is the creator of both light and darkness, weal and woe. He, the triune God, is the Maker of all these things. And yet our God enlists our help. Actually, that is too weak a way to put it. It is not simply that our God wants our help. It is more the case that if we are not fighting for the good, and if we ourselves are among the unjust ones on earth, then we make ourselves into the very problem, the very woe, that the Lord is working to overcome. Our God, then, is a big God who will indeed bring his kingdom. But he wants us to be on his side as he does this. He requires of its that be on his side and not that of sin, death, and the devil.

I conclude with my third point, which is this: our God is the Maker of both weal and woe, but he makes much more weal. There is much woe on earth, no doubt about that. Some of it is the result of human sinfulness. Some of it simply comes from the laws of nature at work, and we will understand that better by and by, in heaven. One way or another, we live in a sad world. But this sad world is going to give way to God’s glorious kingdom in which there will be everlasting peace and life.
There is a Bible passage that we have been making much of in our recent Monday evening Bible study class. It is a passage about the fullness of time, the destiny of human history. The verses come from the first chapter of Ephesians and they go this way:

9For he [the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ] has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ 10as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Ephesians 1:9-10, RSV)

It is a glorious vision of our destiny: that all things in heaven and on earth should be united in Jesus Christ. Then there shall be joy on earth, and the woes we presently know shall cease.

When my mother died, long ago now, my friend and teacher Robert W. Jenson sent me a note. It went this way:

The ways of Providence are justified only by the resurrection, but by that they are indeed!

This is what I mean when I say that God creates much more weal than he creates woe. In fact the ways of God are justified by the resurrection of Jesus, and one day we shall see it! Persevere in goodness till then, and one day darkness shall give way to light, woe to weal, and every tear shall be wiped away by our Savior Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever, Amen.