

October 18, 2020  
The 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Lectionary 29, Year A  
Isaiah 45:1-7  
Emmanuel, Norwood, MA  
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## **The Anointed**

The world that they knew had changed quickly and dramatically.

About 130 years earlier, in 722 BC they had seen Assyria decimate the Northern Kingdom deporting most of its inhabitants into Assyria and then repopulating the region with those from other lands.

Their brethren who had formed 10 of the 12 tribes that God had established just before they crossed the Jordan into the promised had been assimilated into the Assyrian empire.

Their resistance had been futile.

Now, in 605 BC those in the Southern Kingdom knew Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians had conquered the Assyrians and knew that King Nebuchadnezzar had set his sight onto their land, the land of Judah, the promised land that they and their ancestors had lived on for centuries.

The Babylonians simply saw Judah as their next conquest and moved forward with their plans to do just that.

The Judeans tried to resist. They opposed becoming a vassal state by refusing to pay tributes and by revolting. But, like their northern brethren, resistance was futile.

In 587 King Nebuchadnezzar's 18<sup>th</sup> month siege ended with the destruction of the temple, the loss of the Ark of the Covenant, and the decimation of Jerusalem.

Judah was now fully under Babylonian control and its inhabitants were exiled to Babylon.

The Judeans were torn from their land and deposed to a new location where, among other things, they faced powerful cultural and religious pressures which threatened their national pride and their spiritual identity.

Everything they knew, and held dear, had been torn away from them.

Their world was in a state of turmoil and they wondered if God had abandoned them.

They lived in this state for about 70 years and then they heard the news that the Persians were coming.

The Persians under Cyrus II were a force to be reckoned with. They'd conquered the Medians, and the Lydians and now Cyrus was moving towards Babylon.

The exiles were scared and wondered what their fate would be. Would the capture of Babylon mean that they would again be taken to another foreign land? Subjected to new rules and ways of life? What would their fate be?

It is under this setting that comes with more questions than answers that we hear the prophet proclaim these words:

*Thus 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 45:10)*

Through these words we are clearly told that while Cyrus is coming, he is also God's anointed one.

Throughout the Old Testament we hear about anointings and we wonder what exactly does it mean to be anointed and what makes it so special?

The custom of being anointed with oil is one that was started by ancient shepherds whose sheep were often bothered by insects such as lice. These insects would get into the wool of the sheep and bury themselves down deep. Should they get near the sheep's head they could, and often did, end up in the sheep's

ears which resulted in killing the sheep. The shepherds needed, and wanted, to protect their sheep, their livelihood, from this threat.

They learned that pouring oil over the sheep's head would protect it by creating a slick layer making it impossible for the insect to get near the sheep's head.

It is from this ancient practice of the shepherds that anointing became a symbol of protection and, in biblical times to be anointed signified God's blessing and call in that person's life, that person was God's chosen one; one who has a close relationship with God.

Kings, priests, and some prophets were all anointed signifying God's blessing on them and God's choosing them.

In Hebrew the word meaning anointed is masiach, messiah and in Greek the word is Christos, Christ.

So here comes Cyrus, one who was not a believer in the Jewish God. One the Jewish people would have never expected to join with Aaron, Elisha, David as one who was anointed, one who was chosen by God, to be the masiach, the messiah. But that is exactly who Cyrus was.

When Cyrus arrived in Babylon he did so with little resistance.

Cyrus' policy was to foster respect and loyalty in those that he conquered and one way he did that was to be accepting of their cultural and religious traditions.

Following this policy he allowed the Jewish people to return to their homeland, he encouraged them to rebuild their temple, and he allowed them to practice their religion without fear.

400 years later the Jewish people were again living in turmoil.

This time they were occupied by the Romans.

And as with most occupied states there was no question who the dominant power was nor how tense the situation had become.

There were religious tensions between those that believed in the one God and the Romans who had numerous deities to whom they paid homage. There were cultural tensions and political tensions as well and fear of the Roman troops that were seen throughout their land.

While they remained on their own land their way of life had changed.

Like the world that the exiles had lived in the world the Jews lived in was one full of questions and of uncertainty.

It was a world in turmoil.

They needed a massiach, a messiah.

They needed a savior.

And so, Jesus was born into this world of turmoil and he, like Cyrus, was not one that the people expected to be their messiah, the chosen savior.

But, like Cyrus, Jesus was God's chosen one. Jesus was the anointed, the Christ.

A truth that is made clear in Luke's Gospel when we are told of the transfiguration and hear that "*from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!'*" (Luke 9:35)

Jesus is God's chosen one, the Messiah, the Christ and the savior who through God's grace and generosity, rescued the whole world, Jews and Gentiles, from turmoil, from the bondage of sin, freeing all to everlasting life. Jesus calls us to this freeing and joyous life in our baptisms.

When we are baptized water is poured over our heads in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. We are told that we belong to Christ in whom we have been baptized.

Then the minister marks the sign of the cross on our foreheads and says: "*child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever*" (ELW pg. 231).

At this time during our baptisms, we too are anointed. We are set apart. We are blessed. We are filled by the outpoured Spirit which lives in us, dwells in us, and empowers us as ones that are chosen by God.

Today we too are living in tumultuous times. Times full of civil unrest, economic crises, tensions between nations, deadly viruses. Times full of change and of learning new habits. Times that are riddled with anxiety, fear, questions, doubts.

In these times it can be hard for us, just as it was hard for the exiles in Babylon and the Jews living under Roman occupation, to see God's love.

Yet God's love and God's generosity is there, it has always been there, and it will always be there.

Through our baptisms in Christ, God's love flows forth into us and the Gospel lives and dwells within us.

When we are marked with the cross of Christ forever, we are anointed, and we are called forth as God's chosen to live and abide in God's grace and God's love and we are called to share that love with all of creation.

For it is a love that is undying.

It is a love that is freeing.

It is a love that is life giving.

It is a love that shines in times of change and in times of turmoil.

It is love that is ever present.

It is a love that God has freely, joyously, and generously, given to us.

Thanks be to God!

Amen