

Lenten Midweek 3 • March 11, 2015

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Isaiah 45:1-8

“Singing with the Exiles: Breaking Down the Gates”

Have you ever been well and truly captive? Just the thought of being locked in, locked down, or locked up bothers me. Here in northern Virginia, you get a little glimpse of what captivity feels like when you're stuck in traffic, crawling or at a standstill with no option but to wait it out. And that's bad enough! But imagine being incarcerated in a cell – or even bring under house arrest without any electronics to connect you to the outside world. After a time, the walls might start to feel like they're closing in on you, even as the way out remains solidly shut. You're kept from going where you want to go. You're kept from doing what you want to do. You're trapped. When you're well and truly captive, it's hard to have hope.

Consider the people of Israel back during the Babylonian exile: what hope could they have had? The Hebrew exiles were far away from their homeland, long removed from Jerusalem and Judea. Any dreams of return were just that: dreams. No one could have believed that their captivity would end and they would ever be going home. The exiles had no way out.

Babylon was one of the most heavily fortified cities in the ancient world, surrounded by walls within walls, locked behind massive gates of bronze with all their temples and statues of Marduk, god of the Babylonians. At the time of the New Year festival, the king would customarily take Marduk's hand in this city dedicated to the god's majesty. Worshipping Marduk, They feared nothing and no one, secure behind their gates.

And then God sent Cyrus. Cyrus was a leader who was able to rally the Persian tribes in remarkable fashion, wining victory upon victory as his empire grew in influence and military power. Seizing upon the Babylonians' discontent with their current rulers, Cyrus brought his forces to bear against the great city of Babylon and its mighty gates of bronze. Once surrounded by the siege, the people there decided to open up the gates and welcome Cyrus in as their new ruler.

But why Cyrus the Persian? God decrees that this Cyrus would be His anointed one, a messiah for the people. Hearing this prophecy through Isaiah over a half-century before the rise of the Persian Empire, the Hebrew people would probably have taken offense at the notion that an outsider – a pagan who did not know the Lord – should be His chosen instrument. It's a scandal! Yet God sets aside Cyrus for this divine task of delivering His people from their captivity. In overthrowing Babylon and its false god Marduk, it's the Lord who takes the unbelieving Cyrus' hand and leads the Persian to victory.

The Lord would do all this, and He's the only one who could. At the burning bush hundreds of years earlier, the Lord told Moses that His Name is “Yahweh,” a word that means “the One who causes to be.” He is the one and only God, there is no other Creator and Restorer. Yahweh alone can overcome Babylon's gates of bronze and set His exiled people free. He brings light to the captive Hebrew nation by means of the darkness of defeat delivered the Babylonians through a Persian messiah named Cyrus.

How do you need a messiah? Where are you locked in with no way out? What's holding you captive? Guilt and shame can certainly close in around you. Relationships might have you feeling stuck. Bad and destructive habits can leave you feeling like a prisoner. Debt, disease, or depression may seem like mighty bronze gates that you will never be able to open to get free. How can there be a future when you're trapped in the wake of your past? When you're well and truly captive, it's hard to have hope.

God sent a messiah named Cyrus to free Israel from their captivity and restore their hope. But God sent **the** Messiah, descendant of the house of David and the people of the Exile, to deliver us from our sin, to deliver us from death, to restore our hope. Jesus is the ultimate Messiah, God's anointed servant who goes to battle for us. He is the one who opens the gates of our captivity – not by laying siege to the enemy's power, but by handing himself over to it. Jesus willingly took our place, captive to those who were jealous of him, those who mocked him, those who beat him, and those who killed him. But he would not remain a captive.

Jesus burst the gates of death: his grave stands open as a testament to his victory over the powers that have held us captive for so long. On the cross, God brought His power to bear against sin and death, overthrowing their power once and for all. You are not locked in with no way out!

Jesus breaks down the gates that have trapped us and held us captive, bringing God's righteousness into our world and into our lives. That's the righteousness that restores lives and relationships, restoration

that we could never even imagine happening on our own. In Jesus, the Messiah, you and I can have hope; because in him, we can have peace. As declared through Isaiah, the Lord is the one who makes peace, well-being, and wholeness: *shalom*. Jesus delivers the *shalom* that God makes for us into every aspect of our lives as his people.

This Lent, may you know God's *shalom* in Jesus, the Messiah. He has come to break down the gates. He has come to bring you out of captivity. He has come to end your exile.

Amen.