

For those of you who were here last night, you have already heard the readings from the Gospel today, both the writer of Luke's beautiful story of the birth of Jesus, and the highly theological exposition that is the preamble to the Gospel according to John. Some of the ideas in that preamble may seem to be repeated in the passage from the Epistle to the Hebrews, with which I shall close today's worship.

Like last night, we read from the second of the three Hebrew writers whom I said we know as the prophet Isaiah, the second of whom who labeled the emperor Cyrus of Persia as *messiah*, when, in 539 BCE, he conquered Babylon, and freed from bondage the Jews from Judah who were in captivity there for almost fifty years.

Cyrus, clearly, was a warrior emperor, and as I commented last night, while there may have been varied expectations as to what the *messiah* would be, a liberating warrior who would free the people from Roman bondage was certainly one of the ideas among the people among whom Jesus lived and walked and taught.

But today's Hebrew Bible passage by that same writer who spoke of Cyrus, describes a different kind of figure, and, indeed, in most of what that prophet wrote we get an image of the idealized person as a *servant*, anything but a warrior, though in today's passage he is among other things like Cyrus in that he is a liberator from bondage:

How beautiful upon the mountains
Are the feet of him *who brings good news, Who proclaims peace, Who brings glad tidings of good things, Who proclaims salvation, Who says to Zion, "Your God reigns!"* ⁸ Your watchmen shall lift up *their* voices, With their voices they shall sing together; For they shall see eye to eye When the LORD brings back Zion. ⁹ *Break forth into joy, sing together, You waste places of Jerusalem! For the LORD has comforted His people, He has redeemed Jerusalem.* ¹⁰ *The LORD has made bare His holy arm In the eyes of all the nations; And all the ends of the earth shall see The salvation of our God.*

While the one of whom the prophet writes clearly has power — *The LORD has made bare His holy arm In the eyes of all the nations* — he does more than achieve a freeing of *all* captives by force. He brings "good news"; he proclaims not war, but peace! He brings glad tidings of good things, and I want to add that what goes next sort of sums up those items: *He proclaims salvation and declares that God reigns!*

While like his two other "name-sakes" (we do not know the actual names of other than the first of the Isaiah's), this second prophet Isaiah was writing in a specific historic context, and probably could not conceive what God was saying through him, those words are really the declaration God God's-self makes in the birth, and more than the birth, the *life* of him born this day in Bethlehem: *He proclaims salvation and declares that God reigns!*

He frees us from bondage as did Cyrus free the captured Jews, but not from bondage by a human enemy, but rather from the concerns of the world and of our psyches that can bind us, that can hold us down the way the Lilliputians held down Gulliver. "*Be not*

afraid” are not just the words of the angels to the shepherds outside Bethlehem, they are the words that God speaks to us through the birth of Jesus: “Be not afraid; no matter what this earth might seem to hold, in the end I will save you; I reign.”

And my special Christian hope for all of us is that by looking at the image of the birth of Christ we can see the opportunity for ourselves to be freed and not to be afraid. Will the birth of the child guarantee us against physical hunger or cold? Well, “no,” and yet accepting that child can lead us to seek to free others from that physical hunger or cold — even we as small in numbers as we are have programs that work in a small way to do so.

And when we are able to be involved face-to-face helping another, serving another — I had a wonderful such experience [on your behalf] [at Florence] this past Thursday afternoon [here, at the church] — when we are able to be involved face-to-face serving another, trust me; if you have not had the experience, while the danger of self-righteousness is real, so is the sense of humility and gratitude at being able to help, at being able to carry the one born that day to a person who needs Him, at being *His* — Jesus’s — servant.

And of course, there are many other concerns, physical, emotional, mental that bind us up and tie us in knots. Those that are wholly physical are tough, but for the others, and even to some extent for bearing with those physical problems, God through our acceptance of who that baby shall be, still loosens our fetters and lifts us up, and through the gift of that baby we can hear God saying, “Fear not; I love you; I have a place for you.”

Thank you, God, for appearing to us as a baby. Like a baby as it grows into a child, may we be filled with wonderment and merriment at what you offer to us, and, freed from our own weaknesses, may we go out into the world declaring God’s reign and God’s salvation of all of us brought about through that baby become man, Jesus the anointed, our Lord and Savior, whose birth we celebrate.

Amen