

Sermon – Bethlehem Lutheran, Kalispell MT  
 Mark Gravrock  
 19 October 2014  
 Pentecost 19  
 Isaiah 45.1-7 (Matt 22.15-22)

D F#m C D C D C Am  
 After the wind, after the storm, after the tempest, calm and release.  
 D F#m C D C D C D  
 God of the wind, God of the storm, God of my tempest, my peace.  
 C Am C Em D C D  
 Christ in the wind, Christ in the waves, fragile boat on the deep,  
 C Am C Em D C A  
 Wind all a- howl, there Jesus lies on the cushion fast a- sleep.  
 D F#m C D C D C Am  
 God in the wind, God in the storm, God in the tempest, God in the sea,  
 D F#m C D C D C D  
 Chaos with peace, calm disar- ray, steady me, ori-ent me.

God of my light, God of my day, God of my darkness, God of my gloom,  
 Bright summer sky, winter repose, cradling dark of the womb.  
 Jesus my blue, golden and green, Christ my fog and my grey,  
 Crimsom and orange setting in fire, midnight color drained away.  
 Jesus my light, Jesus my dark, gracious confounder of my small flame,  
 Nurture my dark, nurture my light with ev'ry hue of your name.<sup>1</sup>

Grace and peace . . .

Isaiah 45, verse 7:

**I form light and create darkness,  
 I make weal and create woe;  
 I the LORD do all these things.**

Who is this God?

In one account, St Francis emerges from a cave

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<sup>1</sup> ©Mark Gravrock 2004

after three days of solitude.  
 Brother Leo has been waiting outside for him.  
 Finally Francis emerges.  
 He looks radiant and delirious.  
*Well, Brother Leo, -- he says – are you ready?  
 Have you donned your warlike armor?  
 People have enumerated many terms of praise for the Lord up to now,  
 but I shall enumerate still more.  
 Listen to what I shall call Him:  
 the Bottomless Abyss, the Insatiable,  
 the Merciless, the Indefatigable, the Unsatisfied,  
 He who never once has said to poor unfortunate humankind, ‘Enough.’ . . .  
 So, Brother Leo, let’s go down and see what He wants. . . .  
 We’re dealing with God and from Him there is no escape.<sup>2</sup>*

Isaiah 45, verse 7:

**I form light and create darkness,  
 I make weal and create woe;  
 I the LORD do all these things.**

Do we really have a clue Who we’re dealing with  
 when we gather here for worship?

Do we really have a clue?

**I form light and create darkness --**

That part’s astounding enough, but the next line!:

**I make weal and create woe --**

We don’t even dare translate what that line actually says:

*I make weal: “Weal” is shalom, wholeness, peace.*

*I create woe: “Woe” is evil, calamity, disaster.*

And our God is responsible for all of it!

**I the LORD do all these things.**

Do we really want to go there?

Sometimes we try to comfort ourselves with this kind of language.

Tragedy strikes.

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<sup>2</sup> From Nikos Katzantzakis’s *St Francis*, quoted in Alan Jones, *Soul Making* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 111.

Disaster hits.

Death comes.

And sometimes we take refuge in the thought that this is God's will.

God has a purpose for this.

There's a reason.

But even as we say it, or think it,

we're careful not to look too closely at it.

We don't really want to see what kind of God we're invoking:

A God who points his finger,  
and this airplane goes down.

A God who beckons with his hand  
and a tornado wipes out this town.

We don't want to think about that kind of God.

Is that the God we serve?

**I form light and create darkness,  
I make wholeness and create woe;  
I the LORD do all these things.**

If we do think about it a little bit,

most of us want to back the thought off a step:

*No, we say, God doesn't cause these tragedies.*

*God doesn't cause evil.*

*But God permits it. God allows it.*

And I suppose that has to be true,  
since tragedy and evil exist.

On some level, God must allow it,  
unless God has no control at all.

Or, if we're not comfortable with the language of *permitting* or *allowing*,  
we'll back it off another step:

*At the very least, we say, God seems to have designed a world  
where evil and wrong, tragedy and disaster are possibilities.*

We console ourselves with the thought that, at least, we are not puppets:

God has allowed all creatures some measure of free will.

But was this the only way for God to design a world?

On some level, isn't God still on the hook? Still responsible?

We see the same thing back in the Garden of Eden:

God walks in the garden in the cool of the evening:

*Adam, where are you?*

*I hid myself, Lord, because I was naked.*

*Who told you you were naked?*

*Have you eaten from the tree that I told you not to eat from?*

*The woman you gave to be with me –*

Do you hear the blame game beginning already?

He blames the woman, and he blames God:

*The woman you gave me,*

*she gave me some of the fruit, and I ate.*

She says,

*The snake deceived me, and I ate.*

The snake – well, the snake doesn't get a chance to pass the buck.

But where did the snake come from?

*Now the serpent was more shrewd*

*than any other animal that God had made.*

Oh – God made the snake!

And, apparently, God made the snake crafty.

So, God, why did you design such a world

where it's possible for a snake to dupe the people?

Why did you design such a world

where people are capable of turning against you?

Why did you mark off one tree, and say "Don't eat from it"?

What did you think we were going to do?

And God makes no attempt whatsoever to get himself off the hook for making such a world.

**I form light and create darkness,**

**I make wholeness and create woe;**

**I the LORD do all these things.**

This is not a very comforting verse of scripture.

When we are facing tragedy and loss,

this might be the worst of all verses to ponder!

Fact is, God speaks these words in the midst of some very good news!

Let me put you there on the scene:

You and your people are exiles.  
A long time ago, your country was conquered,  
your city destroyed,  
the life you knew was obliterated.  
You were marched a long ways away,  
and you have been captives in a foreign land for a very long time.  
Most of you have given up any hope of ever seeing an end to this.  
Most of you have given up on your God:  
Your God apparently lost the war,  
and if God even exists,  
you've heard nothing from God for a very long time.  
All you see around you is the Real World – the world of Babylon,  
Babylon's power, Babylon's armies,  
Babylon's wealth, Babylon's gods,  
Babylon's glitz and glamour.

But now, at long last, there's one of those crazy prophets,  
claiming to have a message from your long-lost God:  
*My people, listen to me:  
Babylon didn't win.  
I gave you over to Babylon!  
It was the only way to break you from your addiction.  
I handed you over.  
And now – you've done your time.  
It's time to bring you home.  
Yes, Babylon looks strong and invincible,  
but Babylon is nothing.  
I am bringing you a savior, a deliverer, a messiah – my anointed one.  
He will come and break Babylon's hold.  
He will set you free, and lead you back home.  
And it's happening very soon.  
Who is this deliverer, this savior? Who is this messiah?  
You've been watching him on the nightly news:  
You've been watching him gain power, off to the east, in Persia.  
His name is Cyrus, and he is my servant, my anointed.  
Cyrus himself has no clue that I'm using him.  
He thinks he's doing all this by himself.*

*He doesn't even know me.*

*He serves a different god, a different religion.*

*But in fact, I am the one who is bringing him!*

*There is no other god.*

*There is no other power.*

*I'm it!*

**I form light and create darkness,**

**I make wholeness and create woe;**

**I the LORD do all these things.**

Cyrus doesn't know the Lord, Yahweh, God of Israel.

Cyrus is a Zoroastrian, a fervent believer in the new Persian religion:

His religion is a religion of two gods,

two equal principles – locked in eternal combat:

good and evil,

light and darkness.

*No, says our God, there are not two gods.*

*There are not two eternal, equal powers.*

*There is only me.*

**I form light and create darkness,**

*When it comes right down to it,*

*there are no other powers for you to worry about.*

*Babylon is nothing.*

*Persia is nothing.*

*Cyrus himself is nothing.*

*Whatever you face, finally, is nothing.*

*Even satan is nothing.*

*There is only me.*

Do you find that comforting?

Neither did the Jews in their captivity.

In fact, they were offended:

*What? You're giving us an unclean foreigner for our hero?*

*The Messiah is an unclean Persian?*

And God says,

*Wait a minute!*

*Who's in charge here?*

*Are you going to question me about what I'm doing for you?*

*Does the pot say to the potter,*

*'You forgot to make handles!'*?

*Does the child being born say to its mother,*

*'Are you sure you know what you're doing?'*?

*I made you. And I made Cyrus.*

*And I will rescue you, the way I choose to rescue you!*<sup>3</sup>

**I form light and create darkness,**

**I make wholeness and create woe;**

**I the LORD do all these things.**

Before we go any further, let's be clear:

We're not gonna figure this one out.

So many of our intellectual and faith-struggles swirl around these sorts of issues:

- Why is there evil?
- Why do we suffer?
- Where is the justice?
- Why is there deliverance or healing *here*, but not *there*?
- Is there a reason for what we go through?

God is not giving us the answers.

And if we use Isaiah 45.7 as our answer,

we may end up more terrified and scandalized than ever!

For that matter, most of the Bible gives us a different message:

Is God responsible for everything? For all light and all darkness?

- The God of the Bible suffers with his people when we suffer.<sup>4</sup>
- The God of the Bible longs to gather us –  
like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings – but we refuse.<sup>5</sup>
- The God of the Bible becomes one of us, becomes helpless,  
and tastes our death with us.<sup>6</sup>
- The God of the Bible is near to the brokenhearted,  
and walks with us through the valley of the shadow.

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<sup>3</sup> Isa 45.9-13

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 3.7

<sup>5</sup> Luke 13.34

<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 2.14-15

This verse from Isaiah is not going to solve our intellectual struggles and doubts.  
If anything, it's going to make them worse!

But that's not what this is about.

This is not about our figuring God out.

This is not about our understanding how the world works.

What this is about is survival --

survival and knowing Who finally holds us.

Step into today's gospel reading for a moment:

What is real – as far as we can see?

What is real is Rome:

Rome holds us.

Rome controls us.

Rome oppresses us and crushes us,  
and nothing we do will get us free.

Jesus' opponents are trying to lay a trap for Jesus,  
because he undercuts what little control they think they have.

*Let's get him hooked in a dilemma over taxes to Caesar:*

*No matter what he answers,  
he'll either be in hot water with Rome  
or the people will turn away from him.*

But Jesus is not hooked into our small world:

*Oh, would you show me a coin?*

*Thank you.*

*So, whose image is this on the coin? And whose inscription?*

*Oh, it's Caesar's?*

*Hmm – interesting that you have one of Caesar's coins on you.*

*You must be part of Caesar's system then, yes?*

*Well, if this coin belongs to Caesar,*

*then I suppose you'd better give it back.*

*And, by the way, maybe it's time to think about*

*giving God what belongs to God –*

*which would be, what?*

*Everything you have, everything you are,*

*all your allegiance, all your energy, your whole life?*

Do you hear what Jesus is saying?

Rome is nothing.

Caesar is nothing.

Your party struggles are nothing.

ISIS is nothing.

Ebola is nothing.

The economy is nothing.

Your interpersonal trials are nothing.

Your health issues are nothing.

Your politics are nothing.

Your death – your death is nothing.

Give Caesar the pittance that belongs to him.

All your other commitments and responsibilities – give them what they deserve.

But give God – give God what?

**I form light and create darkness,**

**I make wholeness and create woe;**

**I the LORD do all these things.**

Today's word is not the gentle, comforting word that we prefer,

the gentle comforting word that I prefer –

though the gentle, comforting word is also God's truth.

Today's word is the colder, harsher comfort –

the colder comfort of galaxies and quasars, black holes and interstellar space,

the colder comfort of the aeons of creation,

of the endless layers of the Grand Canyon,

of tectonic plates and mountain-building,

of dinosaurs and sabre-tooth tigers,

of wolves and grizzlies,

of viruses and cancer cells.

*Well, Brother Leo, -- says Francis – are you ready?*

*Have you donned your warlike armor?*

*Listen to what I shall call God:*

*the Bottomless Abyss, the Insatiable,*

*So, Brother Leo, let's go down and see what He wants. . . .*

*We're dealing with God and from Him there is no escape.*

Finally, says our God, there is no other power.  
Finally, you are in my hands – for all eternity.

**I form light and create darkness,  
I make wholeness and create woe;  
I the LORD do all these things.**

And that, finally is very good news,  
though maybe we won't recognize it as good news  
until this Lord of the Universe becomes helpless as a newborn baby  
lying in a manger –  
God with us.

Amen