



“God Sent Who?”

Text: Isaiah 45:1-7

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Margaret Silf, in her book, *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World*, shares the story about three farmers whose field were adjoined. One farmer was Jewish, one Muslim, and one Christian. Each observed a Sabbath on a different day of the week: the Muslim on Friday, the Jew on Saturday, and the Christian on Sunday. One harvest season, bad weather limited the days available for work and skipping a day of harvesting for a day of rest would risk financial ruin. Nevertheless, all three farmers in turn practiced their faith and make the difficult choice to stay out of their field on their day of rest. Yet, amazingly, upon waking the day after their Sabbath, each farmer found a barn filled with harvested crops. They gave thanks and praise to God, assuming angels had been sent to gather the harvest, or some other form of a miracle from God had been wrought. In fact, it was the neighbors of differing faiths who did the work in secret.¹

Aren't we always a little surprised (and sometimes even astounded) by whom God sends to help, and all the more when they are distinctly different from us? Aren't we often simply “blown away” at who God finds a way to use in just the right way and just the right time? From time to time, God simply startles us by doing something in a way that we could never have expected or anticipated.

That's what's going on in the lesson from Isaiah that is at the heart of our worship this morning. Let me give you a little set-up to this passage.

You know that Isaiah is a book that can be divided into at least two sections (and some would argue three). The first section of the book is addressed to the people of Israel as they are warned about their waywardness and ultimately taken into exile in the land of Babylon. The second part of the book – in which we find our passage for the morning – is all about the people being set free from exile and being allowed to return to their homeland.

Now, when the people were in exile, they prayed to be set free. They claimed the promise that God would send them a Messiah – someone who would set them free from their imprisonment and enable them to return home. They longed for the day when God would raise up a person to be God’s instrument of liberation and restoration.

And that day finally came. But when that day came, it came in a way that the people could not have expected.

The king of Persia, Cyrus by name, goes to war against Babylon and defeats the Babylonian armies. King Cyrus would have likely remained in the background of history. But God brings Cyrus into the foreground. Cyrus doesn’t know God, nor does he know anything about God’s plan and purpose. And yet, Cyrus defeats Babylon, overthrows the empire, and sets the Israelites free.

And according to Isaiah, God says to King Cyrus:

I will go before you and level the mountains,
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars
of iron,
I will give you the treasures of darkness
and riches hidden in secret places,
so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel,
who call you by your name.

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.

God goes to work, accomplishing God’s own purposes, using a foreigner – a Gentile – a person who has no knowledge of God or who holds any reason to be open to what God wants to do. God uses Cyrus – an outsider – an interloper – someone without a clue about Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, or Jacob and Leah and Rachel, or a single detail about God’s promise to make of them a great and plenteous nation.

God chose who? God chose King Cyrus of Persia and through him, God worked out God’s own purpose.

Now, if you just stop and think about it for a moment, and consider the people throughout the Bible God chooses to use for God’s own purpose, you can’t miss that this is not an isolated incident. God chooses some rather unlikely people to employ in the achievement of God’s purpose.

Go back to the story of the beginning of Israel. If you were going to start a new nation, would your first choice of progenitors be a couple in their 80s and 90s? Wouldn't you think that a younger couple might be more likely to accomplish the purposes of procreation? Yet, God chose Abraham and Sarah.

Consider their grandson, Jacob. The Bible doesn't try to clean Jacob up. Jacob is a trickster, a conniver, a con artist. He lies and cheats and deceives. Yet, God takes him on in a wrestling match on a river bank, and Jacob is never the same. In fact, his name is changed to Israel – "one who strives – or struggles – with God."

Consider Moses. Here's a fellow who is rescued from certain death as an infant and raised in the royal household of Egypt. He sees an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave and kills the taskmaster. He flees to Midian and meets up with a strange fellow named Jethro, who puts Moses to work as a shepherd. Moses is tending the flock one day on the slopes of Mt. Horeb, also known as Sinai, and he sees a bush that is burning but not consumed by the flames. Moses then proceeds to speak to the bush for the better part of three chapters in the book of Exodus, only to discover that the voice speaking from the bush is God, calling him to lead the people out of Egypt after speaking to the Pharaoh, and then has the audacity to tell God that he is slow of speech. He just talked to a bush for three chapters! Yet, God makes of Moses one of Israel's greatest leaders.

Jump ahead to the time of Jesus.

God uses a teenage girl to be the mother of the Messiah. God uses fishermen, and tax collectors, and political hot heads, and some other ne'er-do-wells to be the principle company for spreading the good news of God's love. And while we're at it, let's not fail to mention that using a common laborer from a backwater town like Nazareth to be God's own messenger is rather overwhelming.

And then there's a Pharisee/lawyer whose first occupation was the persecution of Christians, and he becomes the first theologian of Christianity, whose words still instruct and inform. His name started out as Saul. It became Paul.

Next week, we'll celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. If you want to see a group of the least likely people God could ever use to reform the church, look at the likes of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and Know. Yet, here we are.

In two weeks, we'll celebrate the Feast of All Saints. You want to see some unlikely people to change the world, look no further than the great saints. They were common people through whom God accomplished uncommon feats.

Why do I hold all of that up to you? It is the simple point that God uses unlikely and improbable people to accomplish God's purposes. God uses the hesitant and cautious to change the world. God uses the dodgy and doubtful to bring the world back to the path God intended it to travel, in those days when God created the heavens and the earth.

And if that doesn't sound like us, who does it sound like?

The one phrase I have heard more than any other phrase in my three decades of ordained ministry begins with, "I could never..." "I could never be a teacher..." "I could never cook for a large group..." "I could never sing in the choir..." "I could never help at the church..."

And since wrestling with this passage from Isaiah, I now have an answer - a retort - to those who begin with "I could never..." - so you better be careful. My new retort is, "How do you know?" If God could use King Cyrus, or Abraham and Sarah, or Moses, or Peter, or James, or John, or Paul, or John Calvin, or John Know, or Joan of Arc, or Dorothy Day, or Jane Parker Huber, or Phyllis Tickle - how do you know that God can't use you? God has used some remarkably questionable people throughout history. How do you know God can't use you?

How might God want to use you? Maybe to be a little more generous in your giving next year than you were this year? Maybe to give a little more time to the matters of God's kingdom than the matters that so easily distract? Maybe to be a little more compassionate in the days to come than you have been in the days gone by?

How might God want to use you? Maybe God wants to use you to begin a reconciliation with that person from whom you are estranged. Maybe God wants to release that talent you have hidden for so long to benefit others. Maybe, just maybe, God wants you to shine some light into the darkened corners of the world. Maybe God wants you to get your hands a little dirty in doing justice and ensuring justice for others.

The point is that God can use anyone - even us! The point is that God has been using the least likely people since the beginning! And God wants to use us - all of us - to accomplish the purpose of God to build a world of love and joy and justice and acceptance.

Will we allow God to use us? Will we allow God to choose us? Will we open ourselves to God's purpose?

The answer to that question will make the most profound difference. For now and evermore. Amen.



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