SERMON TITLE: "Salvation Springs Up"
TEXT: Isaiah 45:1-8
PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church
BY: Ryan Dueck
DATE: October 16, 2011/18th Sunday After Pentecost

We've been bouncing around all over the bible in our sermons over the past five weeks, so I thought this morning it might be good to take stock of where we've been:

- A New Day (Joshua, Psalms)
- Christian formation (Romans 14; formed for love of God and others)
- Jeff Warkentin—hope in the midst of tragedy from the book of Ezekiel
- "I want to know Christ!" (Philippians 3)
- Two ways of waiting from the Golden Calf episode in Exodus (Thanksgiving).

We've dropped down at various points across a huge span of time, from the ancient Israelites in Exodus to the early church in Philippi, and now, today, back to the Israelite exiles in Babylon.

Perhaps each week it feels like you are being dropped down in the middle of a new story, and it's not always easy to figure out what's going on. What's happened up until now? Who are the main characters? What part of the story are we at?

It can be disorienting.

Wherever we find ourselves in Scripture, one of my firm convictions is that we can find our stories in any part of God's story.

I'm going to start with a scenario familiar to parents (those who are not currently parents of young children will have to use either your memory or your imaginations!):

It's 3 am. It's the middle of a busy week, and you got to bed late. The kids took forever to settle down and you had lots of unfinished work to take care of in the evening. An early morning looms large on an ever-shrinking horizon.

And then you hear a sound from the other room. It starts as a little whimper, and before long it is a full-throated sobbing. You stumble groggily out of bed to comfort your child.

"What's wrong?" you ask, rubbing the sleep out of your eyes. "I had a bad dream," is the response.

Of course, parents will know that bad dreams come in all different kinds of shapes and sizes—monsters, bullies, spiders, you name it. In the middle of the night, in the dark, all kinds of things can seem scary!

So what do we do? Well, we rub their backs, we pray with them, we try to get them back to sleep.

There's something else we almost always do—or at least I almost always do. We recite a very specific phrase:

It's OK. Everything's going to be all right.

Have you ever stopped to think about why, exactly, we do this? What do we mean when we say these words to our kids in the middle of the night?

Well, you may be surprised to know that this little phrase—"everything will be all right" has been the subject of scholarly analysis.

Peter Berger is a sociologist and in one of his books (*A Rumor of Angels*) he talks about how a crucial part of a parent's job is that of "world-maintenance."

Kids need to believe that the world is well-ordered, stable, good and safe in order to grow and realize their potential. Unless they can trust that they are safe and that the world is predictable, their social development will be hindered.

Parents have an obligation to provide such a conception of the world.

I think we would find it problematic if a parent were to tell his frightened child "You have good reasons to be fearful and afraid! The world is a terrifying place! Your existence is fragile and tenuous, and ultimately all that you will love and hold dear will be swallowed up and negated by death."

So kids need to believe that everything will be all right. But it's one thing for a belief about the world to be *useful*. It's another for it to be *true*. Is it true that everything will be all right?

Well, when we look out at the world, it seems like the obvious answer is "no!" So many things do not, in fact, turn out all right!

For our kids, this realization came when they were around five years old and we were living in Vancouver. One of their kindergarten classmates was a little boy named Peter. Peter's family had just moved to Vancouver from China and they attended our church.

One day, Peter's dad came home from getting groceries and Peter was excited to see him and he ran across the road to meet him and was struck by a car.

Peter died shortly thereafter. It was a very tragic event in the life of this family and in the life of our church.

Our kids came to realize that Peter wasn't coming back. Everything was *not* all right.

This probably wasn't their first lesson that the world can be a sad and scary place, but it was certainly one of the more vivid ones.

As we get older, we see even more clearly that everything is *not* all right.

We know this well as we have seen the recent tragic passing of Jeff Warkentin.

There is no shortage of examples. Each of us could add our own list.

So. We have these two realities:

1. We live in a world where we need to *believe* that things will be all right in order to develop in healthy ways, where we are freed to give of ourselves, and to trust and love.
2. The world we live in gives all of us plenty of evidence that everything is *not* all right.

We see this in our passage in Isaiah this morning as well. The people of Israel are suffering in exile, first under the thumb of Assyria, then Babylon.

Exile is not fun.

Exile is when you are forced out of your home, when your nation is taken captive by foreigners, when God's promises of goodness, blessing, and prosperity seem light years away, when there is no more peace, no more justice, no more hope.

Throughout the prophetic literature, exile is consistently described as a consequence to disobedience, pride, injustice, idolatry, injustice and greed.

Exile and its causes effects—for Israel and for surrounding nations—is what most of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah are about.

Israel has failed miserably.

Israel has failed to trust in God alone.

Israel has chased after the idols of surrounding nations.

Israel has failed to act justly with respect to the vulnerable and marginalized.

And now, under the thumb of the Babylonian Empire, Israel is suffering the consequences of her failure.

Israel knows that everything is not all right.

But in chapter 40, the tone of Isaiah begins to change.

It begins with the famous lines: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for.”

Chapters 40-48 are about consolation and hope. They are about the vastness of God and his sovereignty over all of the affairs of the world. They are about the nature and character of the one true God.

Our text this morning is located right smack dab in the middle of some of the most powerful images in all the Old Testament of hope and promise.

Isaiah is looking ahead in the story. Isaiah is convinced that everything *will be* all right for God’s people.

Isaiah also sees that God’s deliverance can look strange and unexpected.

We read of a figure named Cyrus who is referred to as “the Lord’s anointed.” We’re used to hearing this language in reference to Israelite kings or to Jesus, or some other member of God’s people, but Cyrus?

Cyrus the Great was the ruler of the Persian Empire (modern Iran) who, in 538 BC, overthrew the Babylonians (who had ruled over Israel for the past fifty years).

From the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the Indus River in the east, Cyrus the Great created the largest empire the world had yet seen.

But Cyrus did not know the God of Israel (two references to this: 45:4-5). Yet God “summons him by name” and “bestows a title of honour upon him” “for the sake of Israel” (45:3-4).

What we have here is God using a foreign king to lead his children back, to bring blessing upon his chosen people.

Cyrus? An instrument of blessing? The means by which God’s sovereignty and glory are made known?

God’s rescue can look strange and unexpected!

Isaiah 45:7 says this: “I form light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things.

When I read this passage as a younger person it troubled me greatly. Some translations have this as “I create evil.” Whether this verse is translated as “disaster” or “evil,” it’s not necessarily pleasant to think about God creating or bringing about bad things.

For a young philosophy student inclined toward abstract questions about the origins of evil, this verse wasn’t easy to figure out!

But for a people in exile, I can imagine this might have been comforting. NOTHING takes place apart from God.

For Israel and for us, I think the lesson is the same.

God is in the hard times—instructing, punishing, refining, building, strengthening.

God is in the good times—restoring, renewing, giving hope, encouragement, and joy.

There is nothing that we experience—nothing in our families, nothing in our workplaces, nothing in our recreation, nothing in our church—that God is not a part of.

We may not quite know how to get our heads around the mysteries of how the sovereignty of God relates to the bad things that happen in our world, but it is surely good news to know that nothing takes God by surprise.

It is surely good news to know that God uses predictable and expected things, as well as unpredictable and unexpected things—things like a pagan ruler paving the way for weary exiles to come home—to bring blessing and hope.

It is surely good news to know that salvation can and does spring up when we least expect, when our reservoirs of hope are almost dry, when our suffering seems too large in scope, when our sin seems too overwhelming and unavoidable.

Like Israel, we are people who stumble and fall and fail and sometimes find it difficult to have hope and faith. And yet God says, “I will rescue you. I will ransom and redeem you, and lead you back into a good and safe and spacious place where salvation springs up and where righteousness flourishes.

I recently read an article by Yale theologian Miroslav Volf about the difference between optimism and hope.

Optimism is based on what the author called “cause and effect” thinking. “We draw conclusions about the future on the basis of the experience with the past and the present, guided by the belief that events can be explained as the effects of previous causes. Since “this” has happened, we conclude that “that” is likely to happen.”

We are optimistic about the economy if the government does this or that. We are optimistic about our kids’ prospects if they show evidence of studying hard and making good choices. We are optimistic about our romantic prospects if so and so calls us back or asks us out. We are optimistic about a job opportunity if the position looks like a good fit for us and we know the person doing the hiring. The list could go on.

In each case, optimism is the result of specific things in the past and the present.

What about hope? Here’s what the article says:

> Hope, unlike optimism, is independent of people’s circumstances. Hope is not based on the possibilities of the situation and on correct extrapolation about the future. Hope is grounded in the faithfulness of God and therefore on the effectiveness of God’s promise….
>
> Optimism is based on the possibilities of things *as they have come to be*; hope is based on the **possibilities of God** *irrespective of how things are*.

Hope, like salvation in this passage from Isaiah, can spring up in the valley of the shadow of death; indeed, it is there that it becomes truly manifest… Hope thrives even in situations which, for cause-and-effect thinking, can elicit only utter hopelessness.

Israel likely would never have imagined that their Babylonian captors would be overthrown, nor would they have imagined that the next foreign emperor would behave any differently than previous ones.

Nothing in the world of cause and effect would have led them to believe that God was going to use a Persian emperor to open a way home for them.

But God is bigger than cause and effect, bigger than empires and emperors. And God can bring blessing however God wants.

I think we can always use reminders of the bigness of our God. As Mennonites, we tend to spend a lot of time focusing on the teachings of Jesus, perhaps to the exclusion of speculation about questions of the nature of sovereignty and providence. And I think this is good and appropriate.

But our text this morning is a big-picture one.

The big picture is of a God for whom exile is never the last word; a God through whom and by whom salvation springs up, perhaps when we least expected, perhaps in ways in which we wouldn't have expected it, and through people we wouldn't have expected to be instruments of divine blessing.

The big picture is of a God whose character and commitment to his people guarantees that "everything will be all right."

Thanks be to God.