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Texts: Isaiah 44: 24-25, 25-28, 45: 1-2; Matthew 2: 1-12

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People Look East

Biblical religion, at its core, is about the practice of human rights. Full stop. That is an insight given at Christmas, and reinforced year after year in the journey of the Magi.

Having just celebrated Epiphany with many of you this past Friday, a day given to honoring the journey of the three kings, I thought today would be a fitting day to do a kind of excavation around that final aspect of the Christmas story, before we put the decorations away for another year. Consider what follows, then, as an excavation of one of the deep roots of the meaning of Christmas. It's an archaeological dig, but it's also a travelog, and so I'd like you to have in mind those maps in the Indiana Jones movies that trace the movements of a plane as the hero travels across the planet. That'll be us in the plane, hopping from location to location for the next several minutes.

The first leg of our journey takes us to London. We need to go deep into the British Museum - admittedly not the first place one thinks to go for a Christmas story - in order to observe an ancient cylinder covered with Accadian cuneiform script - admittedly, again, not the kind of object associated with Christmas. Hear me out. The cylinder is less than a foot in length and is only several inches in diameter. Fashioned out of clay sometime around 539 BCE, it is known as the Cyrus Cylinder. It was discovered during a late 19th century archeological dig in the ancient city of Babylon, which was located just south of modern day Baghdad in Iraq. The text is a proclamation from Cyrus of Persia, who, in 539 BCE defeated the last king of Babylon. Babylon was one of the great centers of civilization in the ancient world, but with Cyrus's successful invasion, the center of gravity shifted farther east, to a city called Ectabana, in present day Iran. Cyrus went on to create one of the largest empires of the ancient Near East. It stretched as far east as the Himalayas, and it reached as far west as modern day Turkey. With that huge swath of territory, you can well imagine the enormous array of peoples, together with their different tribal and religious customs, that the Persian empire contained. You can imagine a veritable pantheon of differing gods, all coexisting within the same territory.

The cylinder speaks in the voice of Cyrus, and it discloses a startling message that resounded throughout Babylon, but also throughout the entirety of Cyrus's empire. Captive peoples in Babylon, the text says, were, from that time forth, free to worship their own gods. They were free to conduct their own rituals. They were free to return to the places from which they had come, and they were free to restore their own shrines and temples. It was a novel, and also a tolerant and cosmopolitan way of organizing a disparate set of peoples. Prior to that, the conquest of a people meant submission to the rites, and to the gods, of the conqueror. Cyrus's innovation was to suggest that such submission, together with the suppression of local traditions and beliefs, was no longer necessary.

It earned Cyrus the admiration of the Greek political theorist Xenophon, who thought that Cyrus was an ideal ruler. In his *Histories*, Herodotus writes favorably about Cyrus. To this day, he remains, at least for some people living in Iran, a figure of reverence. Iran has a national shrine devoted to Cyrus, located some 500 miles south of Tehran. Cities around the world, especially in Europe, have monuments or memorials to Cyrus, who continues to be lauded for his

model of tolerance. Even the UN recognized the proclamation found on the Cyrus cylinder as a forerunner to what we now think of as human rights. No doubt some of this praise is exaggerated - he was, after all, an imperial ruler, and the concept of human rights, at least as we imagine it, hadn't been developed in the ancient world. Even so, it was a decisive move in that direction. The cosmopolitan legacy that Cyrus left behind, even if it was more an ideal than a reality, has far reaching consequences. For us, here at FCCOL, they might even contain a key to our entire theology, a window into who we understand ourselves to be, and how we seek to interact with the world.

Among the beneficiaries of Cyrus's tolerant proclamation were the ancient Jews. In 597 BCE, the city of Jerusalem (we're on that plane again!) had been sacked by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. The Temple had been burned to the ground, the king had his eyes gouged out, and many of the most prominent of Jerusalem's inhabitants had been forced into captivity. They were marched some 1600 miles away, where they lived in exile in the city of Babylon. That experience of exile is the axis around which all of the Hebrew prophets revolve, but really, it's the axis around which most of the Bible revolves. That event is what spurred not only the writing of much of the Bible, but it also hastened the compilation of the book we now know as the Bible. For nearly seventy years, the religion of ancient Judaism was officially suppressed, which seemed to galvanize the religious sensibilities of the captives - it is the impeded stream that sings, as Wendell Berry reminds us. With Cyrus's conquest and proclamation, the exile ends, and the captives are allowed to return to Jerusalem. More importantly, they're allowed to begin the painstaking work of rebuilding Jerusalem, and more importantly still, to rebuild the Temple itself.

For that reason, the biblical writers get in line to praise Cyrus. He appears as a virtuous and wise figure in the book of Ezra, but it's in the book of Isaiah, parts of which were written in the aftermath of the Babylonian captivity, that we find the most startling praise of Cyrus. "He is my shepherd," God proclaims of Cyrus in chapter 44 of Isaiah. But the most arresting, the most stunning, the most jaw dropping assertion comes in the following chapter: "He is my anointed," the text reads. It's better to use the Hebrew to get the full force of the statement: "He is my *mashiach*." "He is my messiah," God says. Now, *meshiach* means anointed, and there were plenty of people who were anointed with oil as kings or leaders throughout the Hebrew Bible, meaning that, technically, there were many messiahs. But to my knowledge - and I'm not a Hebrew scholar - but so far as I can tell, only one was spoken of by God as being anointed as a state of being, independent of the physical act of anointing with oil. That was Cyrus. In fact, you have to get to the New Testament to find the only other person so named by God in the Bible: Jesus of Nazareth. But before Jesus was the Messiah, Cyrus was.

Let's allow the Bible to stun us even further. Cyrus, the Messiah of God, was not a worshiper of the Hebrew God. According to Isaiah, and to the cylinder in the British Museum, Cyrus was a worshiper of Marduk, the chief Babylonian deity, though that's probably not historically accurate. He was more likely a Zoroastrian who was willing and able to find enough truth in the Babylonian religion that he was mistaken for an adherent of Marduk. That may have been true of his encounter with the Hebrew God, Yahweh, as well - though not himself an adherent, he evidently treated the Hebrews, and their God, with reverence and respect. In verses that I didn't have us read, later in chapter 45, God says of Cyrus, his Messiah, "I call you by name, though you do not know me." In other words, it is possible to be God's Messiah without a conversion, without even knowing God, at least consciously. If that's true of the Messiah, how much more true might that be of every human being?

There's one further implication of this stunning passage. It's true that Cyrus is singled out by God because Cyrus allows the Jewish captives to rebuild the Temple. One reading of Cyrus would be that he was an instrument through which the one true God could go on toward being elevated from a mere regional deity to a universal one – Cyrus as a secret instrument toward God's expansion plan across the world. That's one possibility, but it's a narrow and parochial one. Instead, we do better to understand that the proclamation concerning the Jews was embedded within the wider proclamation, found on the cylinder, concerning everyone in Cyrus's kingdom. What played out for the Jews must also have played out for other peoples too, who were similarly freed to believe and practice as they wished. And so might God's praise of Cyrus be rooted not only in the fact that the Jewish exiles were freed to worship as they saw fit, but that everyone else was too? Might Cyrus's status as God's Messiah be rooted in Cyrus's unique cosmopolitanism, in his attitude of tolerance and respect? Even if historically Cyrus's was but a first glimmer, a first gesture toward a wider version of human rights, even if it was an idea still waiting to be articulated, to say nothing of enacted, in full, as it still is today, wouldn't that be what earned Cyrus the designation as God's Messiah?

Now, let's turn the corner toward Christmas. What are the wise men even doing in the Christmas story? What role do they serve? Perhaps they're there to show the limits of Herod's power. Or perhaps they're there to show how even other religious practices acknowledge the Christ child. Maybe. But I think there's a deeper and better explanation. The wise men come from the east, which could mean anywhere. But they're also designated as magi, which lets us know they were Zoroastrians, who would most likely be arriving from, you guessed it...Persia. They came, in other words, from the seat of Cyrus's old empire, perhaps even from Cyrus's old city, Ecbatana. And so one plausible way to read their presence in the story is as a journey intended to transfer the Messiahship from one to another, a passing of the baton from one of God's anointed to the next, from Cyrus to Jesus, from Persia to Jerusalem. With that transfer would come the implication that in Jesus that initial encompassing gesture from Cyrus was being extended. It was a signal that in Jesus, an even greater tolerance, respect and yes, extension of human rights would be found. And is that not precisely what occurred in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, as he preached good news to the poor and to the downtrodden, to the sick and to the lame? Was his ministry not an extension and expansion of human rights, as first glimpsed in Cyrus?

This story of two Messiahs has enormous implications, for politics, for the practice of religion, and for our lives here at FCCOL. Politically, it allows us to read the UN Declaration of Human Rights from 1948 as an instance of what I would call religion without religion, a practice of the core tenets of religious faith even in the absence of that name. It means that wherever the basic rights named in that document – for food and shelter, for health care, for a universal basic income and for literacy, for education and freedom of movement and religious faith – wherever such basic rights are practiced and extended, religion is happening. When trains of migrants are given shelter on the US-Mexico border religion is happening. When Ukrainians are given food and blankets on the Polish border, religion is happening. It means that, as public discourse begins to shift from the language of civil rights, which is grounded in an assumption of national belonging, and human rights, which is not, religion is taking place. Such discourse attempts to account for all of those who fall between the cracks of national belonging, the stateless, such as migrant laborers, the undocumented, or those forced to dwell in refugee camps. When such a turn is made, the legacy of Cyrus is restored, and the Messianic vocation of humanity is found once again.

Here's another implication of the Cyrus story, and its transfer to Jesus: it means that we're free to set any of our lingering religious or cultural chauvinism aside, where we assume that it is only a Christian, or Jewish, or monotheistic, or even a so-called "Western" perspective that can and should orient us. We don't need to quit being who we are, but this story of two Messiahs is an invitation to extend ourselves, theologically and culturally. As the hymn puts it so well, "People look east," which is to say, past Jerusalem, past the so-called Holy Land and its narratives, in order to discover the surprising presence of God wherever it might be disclosed. For us, that has meant opening ourselves to the other monotheistic traditions, especially Islam, but I also have been, and will keep on inviting us to get to know some of the African traditions, which are far more a part of our cultural life than most of us have realized. In fact, my hope is that a year from now, members of this community will be able to travel to West Africa, the better to learn that history and culture. You heard it here first. It would be an outgrowth of Epiphany, an outgrowth of the insights derived from Cyrus, an outgrowth of this unexpected Messianic story. Wherever the basic humanity of people has been celebrated and affirmed, God's anointing has taken place.

I've lost track of all the places our plane has landed in the last fifteen minutes – London, Iraq, Iran, Jerusalem, West Africa. But now I'd like to bring us back to Old Lyme, and to each of our lives, as we begin this new year. Because sometimes it's easier to talk about the dignity and worth of others than it is to affirm our own basic dignity and worth. For the most part, we have plenty of food, clothing and access to things like health care. But I think for many of us, from day to day and from moment to moment, it can be hard to trust that we ourselves have infinite value. It can be hard to trust that there's a purpose or meaning to our lives. It can be hard, sometimes, to trust that our lives have much consequence. Secretly, I suspect that many of us fear that, were we not here, no one would notice, at least not much. How might this story of the two Messiahs impact our day to day living?

One of the artists I admire most is a musician named Nick Cave. I don't expect that many of you will know him, but for years he fronted a punk band called The Birthday Party. If you've ever seen the Wim Wenders film *Wings of Desire*, you may remember a long scene in a club in West Berlin where a band is performing – that was Nick Cave in that scene. He was loud and bombastic in those early years, often fueled by heroin, and what seemed to be a kind of cosmic despair. He's mellowed some over the years. He cleaned himself up. And he's become an adherent of Christian faith. In 2016, the bottom fell out of his life – his adult son died in a tragic accident. It sent Cave into a period of grief that, miraculously, somehow deepened both his art and his faith. These days, he puts on live shows that should probably be described as a ministry of music, in which he bares his own soul, which seems to have a cathartic effect on his audience. They come to find healing from their own grief, and from what I can tell, many of them seem to find it.

One of the things Cave has done these past years is to answer questions that people pose to him online, posting his responses online. They're filled with poetry, theology, and encouragement. Just this past week, I read a posting from a person in the UK named Francis. Francis said: "I feel impotent, completely ineffectual and that nothing I do is of any consequence whatsoever. Not a question. Just a fact."

Cave's response was lovely. He said, "Francis, rather than feel impotent and useless, you must come to terms with the fact that as a human being you are infinitely powerful, and take responsibility for this tremendous power. Even our smallest actions have potential for great change, positively or negatively, and the way in which we all conduct ourselves within the world

means something. You are anything but impotent, you are, in fact, exquisitely and frighteningly dynamic, as are we all, and with all respect you have an obligation to stand up and take responsibility for that potential. It is your most ordinary and urgent duty. Love, Nick.”

That’s the Cyrus vocation in its most personal form. Our most ordinary and urgent duty is to come to terms with the fact that we are creatures of consequence and worth. But if that’s true of us, it’s true all the way up, down, and across the varieties of human existence. An ancient cylinder in the British Museum gestures in that direction, as does a hidden fragment within the book of Isaiah. But that meaning is reproduced in symbolic form year after year, when the three magi arrive at the manger once again: a vision of cosmic significance, in which each human life has a part to play. People look east - it’s a vision that still begs to be enacted.