

# “One and Only One”

Isaiah 44:6-8

July 20, 2014

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

We live in terrifying times. There are frightening wars going on between Russia and Ukraine and between Israel and Hamas, both of which are killing not only military personnel but innocent civilians – men, women, and children. Our borders are being overrun, stretching our resources to the breaking point. We face huge natural disasters including forest fires burning out of control, hail storms killing the crops, droughts preventing the growth of other crops, tornadoes, and floods in our country and throughout the world. There are great financial woes – costs of goods go up while wages don't keep up. Encouragement to “Just think positive because things will get better” seems naïve.

What do we do?

We find ourselves in much of the same situation as the people of Israel did in our text. In fact, their situation was a bit worse for them. Not only had they been personally involved in a war with the world-power Babylon (rather than observe it from afar like we do), but they had lost badly. The people had been scattered – sent off into exile in Babylon while Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed.

This led to a lack of faith – even fear – among the people. They felt God had abandoned them and no longer loved them. They did not believe that God was there for them any more. He was gone – out of the picture. They feared for their future and were afraid of what might happen to them in the present.

When considering their present situation, the people of Israel felt that the gods of their adversaries had won. This led some people to be very depressed and give up on the God of their fathers. This led other people to react differently, more pragmatically. They followed their new

neighbors in the worship of their gods. In blending in to the surrounding culture, they went with what was easier, enjoyable, and offered more chance for success.

Our situation is not much different. As I said before, we live in terrifying times. For those who think the world is only going to get better and that there's no such thing as sin or evil, all they have to do is read the newspaper or watch the news. Not only are people and nations acting evilly, but creation itself has been contaminated by sin, something St. Paul calls in our epistle lesson being in "bondage to decay."

Like ancient Israel, this can lead people to a lack of faith. Maybe present day conditions have led you to wonder, "Where is God in all of this? Why doesn't He do something? Has He abandoned us?" Terrible times lead skeptics and atheists to almost rejoice and say, "See! We told you there was no God. If a loving God existed, how could He let all of this happen?" With the evidence of evil pounding us on one side and the constant criticism of skeptics, agnostics, and atheists pounding on the other side, it's easy to become fearful of the future and what will happen to us now.

We, like the ancient Israelites, also have to face the gods of our culture. Now, we need to be clear here: very few, if any, people in our culture actually bow down to idols made of wood or stone. Yet there are plenty of other kinds of idols and false gods in our world. Only they are harder to detect. Many of them are morally neutral or even good things that become gods in how we view them and use them. Luther called money the most common idol in his time and I think that still holds true for today. Possessions of various kinds follow right behind as popular modern idols. Pleasure has also become a god today: our hobbies, our sports, our electronic devices, our sexual activities, our intoxicant of choice (prescription meds, illegal drugs, alcohol) and so on. Few, if any of these things are bad. Yet they become idols for people by the time they devote to them, the priority they give them, and the "offerings" they give to support them.

The gods and idols of our age can have one of two effects on us as Christians. Some Christians get very depressed because it appears that the gods of this age are simply too strong.

They have won so we give up. We rail against the present situation while nostalgically remembering “the good old days.”

Many Christians follow ancient Israel and simply join in the worship of the false gods of this age. Peer pressure to do this is high. To join in with this culture and its priorities is easier, more enjoyable, and offers a better chance for happiness and success than remaining faithful to the Lord.

Our text today is a declaration by the Lord to His people and a challenge to idols of their timewhich is as meaningful and applicable to our age as it was to ancient Israel.

First, the Lord declares power to His people. “Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of Hosts.” This is no local, second rate deity here who is either unwilling or unable to deal with the really big problems of life. He is the King who runs everything efficiently for His people. He is the Redeemer which means in the Hebrew the Vindicator or Avenger – the one who will seek justice for His people who have been tormented by sin and evil. He is the Lord of Hosts, “the one who has the entire host of created things always under total control.” The Lord has all knowledge to rescue His people; all desire to rescue His people; and all power to rescue His people.

And rescue His people He did. The Lord defeated the enemies of Israel, freed them from the bondage of exile in a foreign country, and safely brought them back to the Promised Land. You are His people by virtue of your baptism. He has rescued you from an enemy and a danger even greater than any earthly enemy. The Lord – Jesus – has defeated sin, guilt, and condemnation by dying on the cross with your sins on His back. He rose from death and the grave to life and heaven to rescue us from the bondage of sin and death and is now leading us through our present wilderness to holiness and life in the Father’s house where He is preparing a place for each of us.

Second, the Lord promised presence to His people. He said, “I am the first and I am the last; beside me there is no god.” The Lord is not a god who comes and goes or a god added to a nation’s pantheon at some later time. The Lord is declaring that He is present at the beginning of everything.

He is present at the end of everything. He is present throughout the entire course of history. He was present at the world's creation. He will be present at its destruction. And He will be present at every point in between.

Israel's problem was that they were focusing only on the present time of suffering and pain. The Lord was looking at the big picture. For Israel, the Lord was present when they were formed as God's chosen nation. He was present during their times of obedience and faith, as well as their times of sin and unbelief. He was present during their punishment in exile in a foreign land. He would be present during their time of rescue and delivery in their own land.

We, too, have a tendency to focus only on our present plight of suffering and danger. For us, the Lord is also present from beginning to end. He was present at your baptism when you became His child. He is present during your times of obedience and faith, as well as your times of sin and unbelief. He is present with you during your suffering and pain here on earth. He will be present with you during your glory and bliss in heaven.

Third, the Lord, in a direct challenge to the so-called "gods" of the age, reminds His people of His promises. He says, "Who is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and set it before me, since I appointed an ancient people. Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen." The Lord is challenging the false gods and ridiculing them for their weakness and powerlessness. He, the Lord has, declared what was to come and then made it happen. "Which God is like me in this regard?" the Lord says. "Which idol can foretell the future and then make it come to pass?" The unspoken answer is: nobody.

The Lord had made promises to Israel. Some were not happy promises. He promised punishment and exile to them for their lack of repentance and faith. God made that promise come true. Then, even while they sat in exile, the Lord promised deliverance from exile and salvation in the Promised Land. We can now look back at those events and see that the Lord made every single promise come true.

In the midst of our terrible times, the Lord reminds us of His promises. He promised, even from the Garden of Eden, to send forth a Savior who would crush Satan, take our sins upon Himself on the cross in death, and give new life to us in the empty tomb of His resurrection. He has kept every one of those promises. Now He has promised to come again to destroy evil once and for all, cast Satan into the lake of fire for all eternity, and bring forth a new heaven and a new earth in which we will dwell in all joy and holiness for all eternity. The God of promises will keep these as well.

So, the Lord says, "Fear not, nor be afraid; have I not told you from of old and disclosed it?" Fear not the evil and terror in our world today. All has been prophesied beforehand. God is not surprised or overwhelmed by it and neither should we. He is in control with all the power of the universe at His disposal. He will conquer all and nothing shall overcome us.

Fear not the isolation and aloneness that you might experience in your walk with the Lord. Although we might leave Him by sinning against Him, He will never ever leave you and me. In repentance, He always and joyfully welcomes us back. He is with us for the long haul, not just in the temporary crises. He is the first and He is the last and He is everything in between.

Therefore, trust in the Lord. Trust NOT in the gods and idols of this age, despite the peer pressure to do so and regardless of their supposed benefits. No matter how appealing and alluring they are, the idols of this age – money, possessions, pleasure, and the like – are nothing. They themselves end in nothing and will be destroyed with this created realm before the rise of the new creation. The gods of this world, despite their temporary benefit, can give you nothing that will last.

Trust in the Lord who has promised lasting good to His people, is present to deliver that good, and has the power to make the good come to be. "And you are my witnesses!", He says. You have experienced the grace, mercy, and blessing in His kept promises. He has promised great things in the past. Despite the evil we have experienced in our age, the Lord has been present with us to do great things for us in the here and now. Regardless of the bleak outlook for the future, the Lord will

continue to be with us to do great thing for us for all eternity. No god, no idol, no man-created entity can or will do this. The Lord of hosts can and will bring this all to pass.

Power, presence, promise. This is all we need: the power of the Lord, the presence of the Lord, and the promise of the Lord. “Is there a God besides me?”, the Lord asks. “There is no Rock. I know not any.” Neither do I. The one and only God is all that we need. Amen.