

March 11, 2015  
Isaiah 45:1-8

Midweek Lent 3  
Breaking Down the Gates

*Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*“This is what the Lord says to His messiah, to Cyrus, ... ‘I will go before you and break down the gates of bronze.’” (Isaiah 45:1-2)*

It was the afternoon of August 5, 2010 when the 121 year-old San Jose copper-gold mine in Chile, South America, caved in. Thirty-three men were trapped underneath 2,300 feet of solid rock.

Seventeen days after the accede, a note written in bold red letters appeared taped to a drill bit when it was pulled to the surface after penetrating an area believed to be acceptable to the trapped workers. It read simply, “*Estamos bien en el refugio, los 33.*” In English, “*We are fine in the shelter, the 33 of us.*” But they were in survival mode. They ate two spoonfuls of tuna, a sip of milk, and a morsel of peaches—every other day. They heard the voice that said, “You are locked in with no way out.”

The Chilean miners knew, Oh God they knew. But once the people at the top found out that the men were alive, they spared no effort to rescue them. Soon the skill, the knowledge, and efforts from around the world were in Chile: three international drillings rig teams, NASA, and more than a dozen multi-national corporations. After sixty-nine days trapped underground, all thirty-three men were brought safely to the surface on October 13, 2010.

We know; O God, we know. Sure, we’ve been stuck in traffic, stuck in winter (until this last week), stuck in snow. At Miriam’s baptism weekend, our families and us were literally stuck in snow on a snowmobile trail. You know that’s just on the surface. Deep down, we all know what it’s like to be stuck in the past; stuck in relationships; stuck in diseased and dying body; stuck in debt; stuck in a dead-end job.

Israel knows; O God, they know. Babylon said, “You are locked in with no way out.”

In the sixth-century BC, God’s people were surrounded by bronze gates! Oh, sure, there were ziggurats and canals, and God’s people were never far away from detestable statues of the Babylonian god Marduk. But it was the gates and especially the now world-renowned Ishtar Gate that locked them in with no way out.

The gates were the brain-child of Nabopolassar—the founder of the Babylonian empire—and his own son Nebuchadnezzar. Herodotus and Xenophon—ancient Greek historians—write that in the late seventh and early sixth century BC, hundreds and hundreds of bronze gates were erected in and around Babylon, making it the world’s most fortified city. Israel was locked in with absolutely no way out.

*“I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness...He will set my exiles free.”*

In 539 BC, Cyrus had to go up against Babylon and her gates. The city began bracing for an all-out battle. Inhabitants stocked their shelves with food and water to prepare for the long siege. The military got armed up, revved up, psyched up, and pumped up.

But when Cyrus surrounded the city, its citizens—rather than fight to the last man and attempt a “Custer’s Last Stand”—opened up the gates. Cyrus walked in and took the city with a singular ease.

God’s Rescue is greater than we imagine and more than we deserve.

That’s what Isaiah says throughout his book. When we are stuck in guilt, God promises, “Though your skins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.” When we feel buried in gloom and doom, He reminds us, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.” When dryness and deadness stand in the way, the Lord turns “the desert into pools of water, and the parched ground into springs.” When we are surrounded by obstacles, “Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low, the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.” When blindness and captivity and bondage stand in the way, God’s Servant comes to “open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison, and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”

We were stuck, no place to Go, not going forwards and going backwards. The night was dark, a dark winter night with no moon out and it was cold. What appears to be two exits was only one. My father-in-law driving the car in front led the way out of the restaurant down the exit, I followed in afterwards, to lo and behold become quite stuck. We weren’t going anywhere. Our two kids, with Miriam only being a month old or so, our niece, the four grandparents and the two of us-stuck and not going anywhere. It seemed like there was no way out of the snow/

You know, O God, you know. You know what it is like for the enemy to lock the gate to your future and throw away the key. You know what it feels like to be possessed by your past, mired by your malaise, and trapped by your transgressions and sins.

Paul knows, o God, Paul knows. “I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.” There is so much more I want to say, but “I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.” “I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.” That’s us—locked in habits we cannot beat and bound in a bondage we cannot break.

But Jesus is God’s ultimate gate breaker, even more so than Cyrus.

You see opening day (being mere weeks away) oh wait, wrong opening day. Opening day was at His Baptism where one witness writes, “As He was praying, heaven was

opened.” Spirit-empowered, this Messiah ministers in Palestine to open eyes and ears and mouths and hearts; He even opens graves.

But the grandest opening was yet to come; after the betrayal, beating, bruising and burning of the sun, Revelation 1:18 makes His victory crystal clear. “I was dead, and behold I am alive forevermore! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”

You are not locked in with no way out!

Jesus breaks down gates of guilt and shame, hurt and pain. He breaks down gates that trap and torture and torment us. And the gates of hell will never prevail against the shed blood, the baptismal power, or the mission of the Church of Jesus Christ! God’s Rescue: Greater than we imagine, more than we could ever deserve. “If the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.” In Jesus Name. Amen.

*Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior, our Lenten King. Amen.*