

November 18, 2018
Do Not Be Afraid
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Isaiah 37:1-7

37 *When King Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the Lord. ²And he sent Eliakim, who was in charge of the palace, and Shebna the secretary, and the senior priests, covered with sackcloth, to the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz. ³They said to him, “Thus says Hezekiah, This day is a day of distress, of rebuke, and of disgrace; children have come to the birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth. ⁴It may be that the Lord your God heard the words of the Rabshakeh, whom his master the king of Assyria has sent to mock the living God, and will rebuke the words that the Lord your God has heard; therefore lift up your prayer for the remnant that is left.”*

⁵When the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah, ⁶Isaiah said to them, “Say to your master, ‘Thus says the Lord: Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have reviled me. ⁷I myself will put a spirit in him, so that he shall hear a rumor, and return to his own land; I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land.’”

At a wedding recently, a Methodist man whom I very much respect asked me if I preach about politics. “Because,” he said, “I think politics needs to stay out of church.” So I asked him, “Do you think we ought to talk about justice? Because, what do we do about the fact that politics drives most of the injustice in the world?”

“I do see the problem,” he said.

My Methodist friend is white. Like we are white. And educated. And American. And well-connected enough that, of all the people in the world today, we are least likely to feel the everyday injustices generated by the systemic, everyday politics of everyday life.

So the story of II Kings, chapter 18 – which the prophet Isaiah recounts in chapters 36 and 37 – may read to us like fiction or like some dusty old high school history book. But to people who live in Yemen today, dodging American-made, Saudi-launched missiles, it's as real as it can be. Or to inner-city, poor Americans whose neighborhoods are being erased – also called “gentrified” – there is nothing historical about it. They are the people sitting on a wall, watching and listening as their worldly fate is decided by empires and the kings and generals who run them.

Let's pray: *For ordinary people everywhere helpless to determine their own fate, we pray, O God. May we bear this privilege of ours as instruments of justice, born and wielded always with humility. Amen.*

The siege of Jerusalem that I mentioned last week, preaching from Micah, is **now** happening in the Isaiah text. King Hezekiah, whom Isaiah highly regarded as a man of God, doing his best to reform Judah and resist Assyrian aggression, has offered to pay whatever tribute King Sennacherib demands: 300 talents of silver and 30 talents of gold.

Hezekiah empties the palace treasures and pulls gold filament down from the Temple walls trying to make the ransom. The narrative account in II Kings, chapter 18 reads like a scene from *The Godfather*, with a soldier named Rabshakeh as the bag man, threatening to break Judah's legs if they don't come up with it. Apparently they didn't, because when Rabshakeh comes back, he has *a great army with him*.

Hezekiah's negotiators plead with Rabshakeh to speak only to them, and in Aramaic, so the people on the wall won't understand what's happening. *People on the wall*, citizens and civilians who always pay the greatest price in wars – military, economic, and otherwise. Such is the way of Empires, withholding life and death information from the people whose lives and deaths are most at stake. Assyria possesses every finger of the upper hand. They decide in what language and to whom they will speak. They speak the same language spoken by every army that ever held a city siege: *Surrender and we will let you live*.

Grant at Vicksburg is a perfect example. People dug tiny caves in the hill above the river and lived in them for weeks to avoid the shelling on their houses. The shelling was bad. The starvation was worse. It's written that not a dog or donkey went uneaten before Vicksburg finally surrendered. Which is why Rabshakeh tells the people on the wall that if they trust in their own leaders, all they'll have to eat and drink is their own poop and pee.

[Thus says the king](#) of Assyria to the people on the wall, *Make your peace with me and come out to me; then every one of you will eat from your own vine and your own fig tree and drink water from your own cistern, until I come to take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards*. This man can promise the stars and moon if he wants. He has an army at his back, waiting for his order to raze the city, as he razed Samaria not so long ago. As he razed all the fortified cities of Judah after that, something like 36 of them.

*Will you trust in the same God that Samaria trusted? The God that did not save Samaria? Trust any of the gods who did not save their nations from the hand of the king of Assyria? [He positively taunts them](#) with the fears already raging in their own hearts and minds. *If your God hasn't saved a single city yet, what makes you think he will save Jerusalem? But the people stayed silent and answered him not a word*, the Bible says, *for the king's command was, "Do not answer him."**

Which is very interesting to me, because it sounds like a strategy. It almost sounds to me like King Hezekiah put those people on that wall so Sennacherib's men **would** taunt them exactly like that and then they would be in a position **not** to answer him back. Except – what kind of strategy would that be? When Hezekiah's men return with the news of the negotiations – none of which was good – Hezekiah tore his clothes and covered himself

with sackcloth. That's Bible talk for *he was really disappointed and very, very worried*, preparing for his own death, the death of his country.

So he sent his men to tell the prophet Isaiah the whole story, to say too that *Rabshakeh might be right, that the Lord God may very well have heard Rabshakeh trash-talking him, and it might even be possible that God will not let Rabshakeh's words go unpunished. So, just in case, can everybody please pray!*

And the prophet sends them back to the king with the most popular words of the whole Bible, which are, *“Do not be afraid, God's got this.”* Which sounds not so crazy if the issue is your biology final the next day and maybe you didn't study as much as you should have. But this is a city under siege by an army that has razed every city in its path on its way here.

It is also a 3,000-year-old story being read by people who – while we have our problems, to be sure – have hardly lived up-close to starvation and to war. And yet, we are afraid. We may be as afraid as the people on that wall listening to voices shouting threats at one another that have everything to do with us and people less privileged than us. Powerful people making promises they've no compulsion or intention of keeping, hoping to distract us from prizes they really seek: territory; resources; power. They want nothing from us so much as our willingness to stay silent and out of the way.

Read further along and you'll discover the siege was finally broken – by some strange force of nature. A plague of some kind; [mice maybe](#). Assyrian, Egyptian, and Jewish texts all tell different stories. It killed 187,000 Assyrian soldiers camped outside Jerusalem. Survivors were forced to retreat. Which isn't to say Judah flourished. Her demise was long and drawn out. The siege ended. The occupation did not. King Sennacherib's promise of exile was kept – just not by him.

I think I mentioned that since the election I'm on a news cleanse. I'm only eating local news, nothing national or international for all of November. It's a cleanse – for my heart and brain. There's just too much sadness. Too much anger. Too much crazy. Too much tempting me to believe that we live and die by the absurd and empty promises of empires. When what I know I know I know is that, whether we live or we die, we belong to God.

I can make myself afraid of almost anything. I really can. *“If I don't exercise my joints will lock up and I'll be paralyzed and have to go to a nursing home when I'm 60.”* First of all, probably not. Second of all, I'll still be able to knit, since my fingers are super fit. And third, if I do have to go to a nursing home, God is there so there's nothing to be afraid of. *Don't be afraid* sounds absurd in a world this crazy – except to people of faith in the God who is always saying it.

Reading a little further in II Kings and in Isaiah we learn that, before the siege broke, the bag man Rabshakeh had to leave Jerusalem, forcing him to threaten Hezekiah in writing instead of in person. His letters scared Hezekiah just as much as his in-person messages. So Hezekiah hit his knees again – prayed one of those “God please wipe out my pagan enemy” prayers we've all prayed.

The prophet overheard and was compelled to offer feedback. *Given how interested you are in Assyria's behavior toward God, how about let's talk about yours*, followed by a lengthy outline of Hezekiah's arrogance and disobedience, about Judah's own encroachment on other countries – specifically Lebanon, whose cedars Israel carried off to build the palace and the temple. The prophetic feedback ends with these lines: *“Because you (talking to Hezekiah) have raged against me and your arrogance has come against me, I will put my hook in your nose, And my bit in your mouth, I will turn you back on the way by which you came.”*

Hezekiah is more concerned about what the Assyrians might do than what God might do; more anxious to pay tribute to one foreign country, than about the fact that he stole from another; more concerned to please the king of Assyria than to please God. Until now, that is, when all those chickens have come home to roost.

And that's the thing about fear. It's always an inside job. Whatever we are most afraid will get us usually isn't the thing that gets us. Long before that happens, it's fear itself that paralyzes and ruins us. For all that empirical maneuvering and strategy, in the end it was arrogance and pride that ruined Judah. Those kings believed they could engineer the providence of God to their own liking. But they never got their own hearts and minds right.

Hezekiah was maybe the best of them, and he thought religion was right worship and politics was right strategy. He thought that with right religion and right politics, he could make Judah strong enough to stand against the greatest empire the world had seen yet, never even imagining that *“be just like the empires of this world”* wasn't God's idea – ever.

Little-ness, remember. Bethlehem, not Jerusalem. A light unto the nations, not the greatest nation ever. A remnant, a persistently faithful set of people, hardly ever afraid, rarely swayed by the threats or the promises of the empires and powers of this world. Because they know who made them, who saved them, and who sustains them through the life and the death of every ordinary day.

Would you pray with me?