

Sermon Prepared by Pastor Sarah Sanderson-Doughty for St. Andrew's PDX

Assyria's King Sennacherib marched against all of Judah's fortified cities and captured them in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah. 2 Assyria's king sent his field commander from Lachish, together with a large army, to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem. He stood at the water channel of the Upper Pool, which is on the road to the field where clothes are washed. 3 Hilkiyah's son Eliakim, who was the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary, and Asaph's son Joah the recorder went out to them.

13 Then the field commander stood up and shouted in Hebrew at the top of his voice: "Listen to the message of the great king, Assyria's king. 14 The king says this: Don't let Hezekiah lie to you. He won't be able to rescue you. 15 Don't let Hezekiah persuade you to trust the Lord by saying, 'The Lord will certainly rescue us. This city won't be handed over to Assyria's king.' 16 "Don't listen to Hezekiah, because this is what Assyria's king says: Surrender to me and come out. Then each of you will eat from your own vine and fig tree and drink water from your own well 17 until I come to take you to a land just like your land. It will be a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards. 18 Don't let Hezekiah fool you by saying, 'The Lord will rescue us.' Did any of the other gods of the nations save their lands from the power of Assyria's king? 19 Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Did they rescue Samaria from my power? 20 Which one of the gods from those countries has rescued their land from my power? Will the Lord save Jerusalem from my power?"

When King Hezekiah heard this, he ripped his clothes, covered himself with mourning clothes, and went to the Lord's temple. 2 He sent Eliakim the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary, and the senior priests to the prophet Isaiah, Amoz's son. They were all wearing mourning clothes. 3 They said to him,

"Hezekiah says this: Today is a day of distress, punishment, and humiliation. It's as if children are ready to be born, but there's no strength to see it through. 4 Perhaps the Lord your God heard all the words of the field commander who was sent by his master, Assyria's king. He insulted the living God! Perhaps he will punish him for the words that the Lord your God has heard. Offer up a prayer for those few people who still survive."

When King Hezekiah's servants got to Isaiah, 6 Isaiah said to them, "Say this to your master: The Lord says this: Don't be afraid at the words you heard, which the officers of Assyria's king have used to insult me. 7 I'm about to mislead him, so when he hears a rumor, he'll go back to his own country. Then I'll have him cut down by the sword in his own land."

This is what Isaiah, Amoz's son, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

In the days to come

the mountain of the Lord's house
will be the highest of the mountains.

It will be lifted above the hills;
peoples will stream to it.

3 Many nations will go and say,
"Come, let's go up to the Lord's mountain,
to the house of Jacob's God
so that he may teach us his ways

and we may walk in God's paths."
Instruction will come from Zion;
the Lord's word from Jerusalem.
4 God will judge between the nations,
and settle disputes of mighty nations.
Then they will beat their swords into iron plows
and their spears into pruning tools.
Nation will not take up sword against nation;
they will no longer learn how to make war.

-Common English Bible

One half of one verse in our long reading from the Isaiah stuck to me this week. "It's as if there are children to be born and there's no strength to see it through." This is part of King Hezekiah's complaint to the prophet. This metaphor speaks to me as I still remember well the exhaustion of a long, slow labor just shy of 14 years ago. Despite my midwife sister's encouragement to sleep in early labor the excitement of this long-awaited first baby did not facilitate sleep. And after 24 plus hours of active labor, on the heels of 24 plus hours of early labor, by the time I was pushing I was out of steam. I was letting contractions pass because I was so utterly drained. After about 2 hours of pushing I became convinced that this pregnancy had been a cruel joke. 2 hours and no head? Clearly no baby. 6 hours later, in the wee hours of December 5, 2008, with the encouragement and help of at least four people, at long last, the miracle of Caroline Grace arrived. But I remember feeling like there was a child ready to be born but no strength to see it through, and then ceasing to believe there was even a child ready to be born. That was a particularly defeated moment. After years of trying to conceive, 9 months of preparing to birth, the moment had arrived and... it seemed it would not actually happen.

This memory puts me in touch with the defeated desperation of King Hezekiah when he sends messengers to the prophet. I wonder if you have experiences that give you access. Let's rewind to understand the experiences that produced this complaint, the field commander of Assyria has arrived in Jerusalem with an army. Assyria is the empire that wiped out the northern kingdom of Israel 20 years before. Just 20 years... Just over 20 years ago planes flew into buildings in our country and that memory is still

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fresh, is it not? The conquest of kin to the north 20 years prior, this would be a fresh memory for Judah. And in the months and weeks prior to the moment captured in our reading, Assyria's army had been pressing in on Judah, having recently destroyed Judah's second largest city, Lachish, in an attack so vicious King Sennacherib had it portrayed on a wall so to frighten all other nations. There were likely refugees from Lachish in Jerusalem. The people knew how violent Assyria could be. And so the arrival of the field commander and army in the capital city had to have everyone shaking in fear. And truthfully, they had to have been chronically anxious after decades, centuries of war... They had to have been exhausted from their fear.

The field commander chose to enter Jerusalem deploying the sword of his tongue rather than the physical sword. He spoke the language of the people in the hopes that his rhetoric would sway the masses to abandon their king and surrender to him. He went on and on disrespecting the King of Judah by using his first name and no honorifics as if he were just an ordinary man, and a disappointing, deluding, deceiving one at that. He even went so far as to disrespect the God of Israel, claiming the King of Assyria has power over all the gods and nothing can stop him. He makes it sound like exile is nothing to fear, like being ripped from your home, your homeland, and brought as war booty to a foreign land would be no big deal. Who's lying? Who's being deceptive? But these lies might have been attractive to a fearful and exhausted people. The field commander is a savvy propagandist. How much easier will it be to capture the capital city if the people put up no fight?

King Hezekiah and his advisers are fairly savvy too. They know they can't win in a war of words with this slick tongued warrior. They hold silence and turn to God by turning to the prophet. They are mourning. One might wonder why they don't turn directly to God. Well... they weren't sure that this incursion into their land wasn't punishment from God, wasn't deserved for all their unfaithfulness... they didn't know if they still had a direct line to God, but they knew that the prophet did. The king didn't know if there was any hope left for them on this day of distress, punishment, and humiliation, this day on which it seems anticipated new life will never arrive. His best hope was that the blasphemy of the field commander, the insults to God, might result in

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Assyria's defeat. Hezekiah requests prayer "for those few people who still survive." That quaking remnant of God's people huddled in Jerusalem... pray for us, the king says.

Whereas the field commander's speech went on and on, the prophet is quite concise. God's got this. God's going to mislead the field commander and send him home where he'll die. I'm not sure if the people got this message, but when, indeed, Jerusalem survived another day... perhaps some hope was restored... at least until the bigger fish of Babylon rolled in.

The narrative lectionary invited us to jump back and read from the second chapter of Isaiah after reading this narrative embedded in a book of poetry. In the second chapter we have a vision about a peaceful future in Jerusalem. What is envisioned? A change in the physical landscape is envisioned- the exaltation of the mountain in Jerusalem such that it is the highest mountain anywhere- this is hard to imagine as it is actually quite an unremarkable mountain. It was then and it is now. A change in international orientation is envisioned- all nations are pictured heading towards Jerusalem and streaming up this mountain to be closer to God. The imagery here is of a river of people flowing UP a mountain- again this vision is counterintuitive, what river flows up? A change in international relations is envisioned- when all the people encounter the word of God, God arbitrates equally between their differences, settles their conflicts, and they convert their instruments of death into instruments for life. So often when nations bring God into the equation that's when weapons are raised, its hard for us to imagine a God centered, international end to war, especially in Jerusalem of all places. But this unimaginable vision is the vision of the Prophet Isaiah's imagination. This improbable vision is the probable vision lifted up by Isaiah and dare we say this impossible vision is the possible vision lifted up by the Prophet Isaiah.

This vision is offered to an exhausted, embattled people. And it is offered to us. On this last Sunday of a church year that has involved a third shut down in the midst of a virulent COVID variant, a violent and destructive break in to our building, and the loss of several cherished and beloved members, all of this unfolding in a divided country with our newsfeeds full of images of war and devastation. The vision Isaiah gives us today reminds us of God's rule and God's peaceable intentions and helps to renew trust in God's promise. We embody that trust when we gather for worship, when we making

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offerings of food and funds and commitments to do what we can to align ourselves with the rule of the God of peace and justice, love and mercy, and bear friendship to neighbors in need. Next Sunday we'll start a new church year with an image of prams in Poland as a focal for the month. These prams were lined up at a train station in Poland waiting for mamas arriving from Ukraine to let them put down their babies and roll into a new life. They waited the arrival of vulnerable new life and were signs of hope in a desperate time. The harvest display in front of you, the candles you will light, the plates you will fill... these are also like prams in Poland, offerings of love, testimonies to trust, continued labor despite exhaustion.

New life is coming. New life will come. Let's keep lining up the prams.

Works that influenced or were cited in this sermon:

Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, Jr. "Episode 413: Swords into Plowshares" on their *BibleWorm Podcast*, <https://www.biblewormpodcast.com/e/episode-413-swords-into-plowshares-isaiah-361-3-13-20-371-7-21-4/>