

Swords into Plowshares
Isaiah 36:1-3, 13-20, 37:1-7, 2:1-5
Matthew 5:13-16

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 36:1-3, 13-20, 37:1-7, 2:1-5

In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, King Sennacherib of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. The king of Assyria sent the Rabshakeh from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem, with a great army. He stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field. And there came out to him Eliakim son of Hilkiah, who was in charge of the palace, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph, the recorder.

Then the Rabshakeh stood and called out in a loud voice in the language of Judah, 'Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria! Thus says the king: "Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you. Do not let Hezekiah make you rely on the Lord by saying, The Lord will surely deliver us; this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria." Do not listen to Hezekiah; for thus says the king of Assyria: "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 and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards. Do not let Hezekiah mislead you by saying, The Lord will save us. Has any of the gods of the nations saved their land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of these countries have saved their countries out of my hand, that the Lord should save Jerusalem out of my hand?" '

When King Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the Lord. And 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. They said to him, 'Thus says Hezekiah, This day is a day of distress, of rebuke, and of disgrace; children have come to birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth. It 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.'

When the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah, Isaiah 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. I 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." '

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

In days to come / the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains, / and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it. / Many peoples shall come and say,
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, / to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways / and that we may walk in his paths.'
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, / and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations, / and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares, / and their spears into pruning-hooks;

nation shall not lift up sword against nation, / neither shall they learn war any more.
O house of Jacob,/ come, let us walk / in the light of the Lord!

Matthew 5:13-16

[Jesus said,] ‘You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. ‘You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

One hundred years ago today, at 5:00 am on the eleventh day of November 1918, in a private rail car in the Forest of Compiègne north of Paris, an armistice was signed, formally ending the Great War, the “War to End All Wars.” The armistice took effect later that morning, at 11:00 Paris time (“the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month”).¹ A four-year war that had killed nearly twenty million people across Europe, Africa, and Asia was over.

In our Scripture reading this morning, we’ve jumped a hundred years forward in time from last week’s story. Judah is a tiny country, and Judah is in trouble. They have a national security issue. This is not, “We’re basically secure, but we’re not happy.” This is not, “We used to have a vast empire, and now our empire is a bit smaller.” This is, “The Assyrian Empire, the largest, nastiest empire the world has ever seen up to this point, is ready to make the kingdom of Judah no longer exist.”

The Assyrians have captured all the fortified towns of Judah, and only Jerusalem remains. The king of Assyria sends one of his nobles to negotiate. This noble does not speak with the king, or the representatives of the king. The noble ignores proper channels and speaks directly to the people.

¹ Some misinformed people try to insist that it was at 11:11, not 11:00. I have checked the original Armistice documents; these people are simply wrong.

Did you notice? He sounds as if he is speaking for God. “Hear the words of the great king.” “Thus says the king.”

This noble tells the people that God is not powerful enough to save them from the Assyrian army at his back. He lists nations that have already fallen, and whose gods have not saved them.

He tells the people to give up their ideal of being God’s people, living by God’s laws in the land that God gave them. He tells them to get used to the idea being conquered. He tells them to come out of the city and go home, and stay there until the Assyrians take them away to exile.

When King Hezekiah hears this, he does not respond well. He tears his clothes, covers himself in sackcloth, and sits in the Temple, mourning the end of his kingdom before it’s even over. He sends his negotiators to the prophet Isaiah, asking Isaiah to pray. He despairs.

Isaiah speaks to the king’s servants. He gives them the most frequently given command in the whole Bible, and the least often obeyed.

“Do not be afraid.”

Fear is a problem.

In moderate amounts, fear is a good thing. Fear keeps us from making many stupid mistakes, like touching hot stoves or tormenting wild animals or driving the wrong way on the highway. Some degree of healthy fear is necessary for survival.

The problem happens when fear grows in our hearts. Thomas Aquinas is often quoted as saying that “Fear is such a powerful emotion...that when we allow it to take us over, it drives

compassion right out of our hearts.”² When we are preoccupied with fear, when all we can think about is how scared we are and what we are scared of, we have no mental cycles left to think about whether our neighbor is okay, much less what’s good for them. We make poor decisions, like running away from people who are trying to help. Like hurting the people we love, or abandoning them to people who will.

This is a bad thing.

Jesus said that we are the salt of the earth, “but if salt has lost its taste, ... It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.” If we let fear kick love out of our hearts and out of our actions, then we have lost our taste.

If we are so afraid of whatever is helpful to a modern-day noble for us to be afraid of, that we don’t think about what is happening to real people, then we are salt that has lost its taste. We have ceased to be God’s people. We’re now the people of whomever is telling us to be afraid.

Jesus responds to fear. “You are the light of the world. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

If we lament evil in the world, but we are too afraid to do anything about it, even to publicly say, “This is wrong,” then we are hiding our light under a bushel. We are depriving the rest of the world of light. The result is about the same as if we didn’t even recognize evil. Then what good are we?

² It’s a paraphrase, but along the lines of what he actually said: “On like manner this applies to those also who are in great fear, for they are so intent on their own passion, that they pay no attention to the suffering of others.” – *Summa Theologica* II.II q30, a2, ad2.

Do not be afraid.

Isaiah tells the king's servants not to be afraid. He tells them not to fear the noble's words whose purpose was to intimidate them. He tells them not to fear words that have no purpose other than to inspire fear. He tells them not to fear words that seek to undermine the legitimacy of the king. He tells them not to fear words that mock and attack the integrity of their religious beliefs.

Isaiah then promises the king's servants that God will cause this noble and the Assyrian army to go away, by making sure that the noble hears a rumor, and returns home. He prophesies that the King of Assyria will die by the sword in his own land.

In the next chapter, that is exactly what happens. The noble hears that his own city is engulfed in war, so goes home to deal with his own problems. God strikes down the Assyrian army outside Jerusalem, and the king goes home with the remnant of his army. There, his sons literally kill him with swords while he worships an idol.³

The Hebrew people do leave their walled city and go home, each to their own vine and fig tree, but they don't do it as Assyrian slaves. They do it as part of the Hebrew people, the people of God.

Nice story, preacher. So what?

What does this have to do with us?

³ Isaiah 37.

Well, let's put it in context. At the beginning of Isaiah's career, he prophesied about Jerusalem and about God's people. He prophesied that God would judge between the nations, and that people would beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks, that nation would not lift up sword against nation, neither would they learn war any more.

That's the context here.

That is God's end game.

Are we there yet?

No. Isaiah himself would have laughed bitterly at that idea.

Are we headed that direction?

Yes.

That is the direction the world is going in the long term.

Either we are on God's side, working for peace, or we're on the other side, the one that, in the long run, is going to lose.

We need to remember this when we hear that we have a national security problem.

We need to remember this when we hear words whose purpose is to intimidate, to instill fear in those who hear them. Words that tell us that we have to give up our ideals of America being a safe place. Words that tell us that we have to accept 308 mass shootings so far this year in America, because everyone knows, that's just the price of being free.⁴

⁴ "Mass shooting" defined as an incident in which four or more people were shot or killed, not including the original shooters. Source: <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>.

No, we don't.

No, it isn't.

We need to remember this when we hear words whose sole purpose is to divide us, to make us fight each other rather than trying to stop evil in this world. Words that lie, words that blame genuine problems on anyone other than the people who created them. Words that create fake problems to “justify” unjust actions.

We need to remember this when we hear words that mock and attack the integrity of our religious beliefs. We have reached the point in America where, when people who have the power to create and pass legislation say they're “sending thoughts and prayers,” but they don't do anything, they are mocking prayer and people who pray. Pope Francis said, “First you pray for the hungry, then you feed them. That's how prayer works.” This works the same way. We need to hold our elected representatives to account.

If actions are not rooted in love of God and love of neighbor, then no amount of quoting the Bible out of context can justify them. That applies whether it's my actions, or yours, or this congregation's, or the actions of the United States. All quoting the Bible out of context can do is mock religious belief and try to confuse faithful people, make them fear to stand up for what is right.

We need to remember this whenever we hear words that try to define reality as “Good has already lost: get used to it.”

We especially need to remember this whenever we hear words that tell us that loving our neighbors, “just isn’t practical in the real world.”

We need to remember God’s end game, where things are going.

We need to remember Isaiah’s faithful response, the only faithful response.

“Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard.”

“Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, / to the house of the God of Jacob; / that he may teach us his ways / and that we may walk in his paths.”

“O house of Jacob, / come, let us walk / in the light of the Lord!”

AMEN