

Isaiah 2:1-4; 36:1-3, 13-20; 37:1-7

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Last week, we talked about Micah, an 8th century prophet in rural Judah, when Hezekiah was king. It was a bad time to live in rural villages, and even some fortified cities in Judah, as Assyrian King Sennacherib and his army were sweeping through the countryside, overtaking one village or city after another. Jerusalem, though, would prove to be the stopper for King Sennacherib.

King Hezekiah was in Jerusalem which was heavily fortified. When the Assyrians realized taking the city would not be easy, King Sennacherib sent an emissary to talk with Hezekiah. Outside of Jerusalem, while some of the residents of Jerusalem listened in, the emissary met with an imperial delegation sent by King Hezekiah. King Sennacherib's emissary, rather than speaking in Aramaic, the diplomatic language of Assyria, spoke to King Hezekiah's imperial delegation in what the text refers to as "the language of Judah." In other words, he spoke in the language of the people, so they could understand what he was saying, and this is what he said:

*<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LehcJeNbfBw>

(first 1 minute, 2 seconds)

Well, that's not exactly what he said. But, you get the idea. His words, like the child catcher in Chitty, Chitty, Bang, Bang, were meant to deceive. Who knows...maybe it was the world's first example of "fake news."

Essentially, the Assyrian emissary said, "Don't let the king lead you to believe he can protect you. Even his alliance with Egypt won't save you. Don't let him convince you that your God will save you either. Your God makes promises and doesn't keep them, just like the gods of all of your

neighbors. You would be better off siding with us, pledging your allegiance to the king of Assyria. He promises you a life of peace and prosperity. Why wouldn't you choose to eat from your own vine and fig tree and drink water from your own cistern? You could do all of that, until the day that we move you to another country, just like this one, where there also will be plenty to eat and drink." (my paraphrase, based on Isaiah 36:14-20)

The purpose of the emissary's very public conversation with the imperial delegation was not only to convey a message to the king, but to the people. Perhaps the people would rebel against King Hezekiah, or at the very least, maybe they would just scatter, knowing that a long siege would be ugly. When King Hezekiah heard what the emissary said, within earshot of his people, he was distraught. He tore his clothes and put on sackcloth, both signs of mourning. Hezekiah went to the temple and sent his representatives, covered in sackcloth, to see Isaiah. They told him Sennacherib's emissary attempted to undermine the people's confidence in God, lying to them, mocking God for all to hear.

This is what Isaiah said to them:

*"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. ⁷ 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."

We have the luxury of hearing this story thousands of years removed from its original context. Most of us hear this story never having lived in the midst of war. We have not experienced the real possibility of being under siege. We have never been faced with an enemy literally knocking at our doors, demanding our loyalty, threatening our entire world. This particular enemy is craftier than most.

*This enemy pretends to want good things for the people, “Come here little children...I have candy,” enticing the anxious people with lies that highlight a serious short-coming we have seen in God’s people over and over again...they (we) have a short attention span.

In the face of what was probably crippling fear, Isaiah spoke hope to the people, telling them that God would intervene on behalf of Hezekiah and Jerusalem, and the Assyrian king will return to his country and fall by the sword in his own land, suggesting what we know all too well: “You live by the sword, you die by the sword.” Jerusalem was safe for that moment.

*So much violence. So much fear. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could talk about this story as if war was a thing of the past? Wouldn’t it be great if fearing other people was so far removed from our world today that this story seemed irrelevant?

According to a February 15, 2018, story in *USA Today*, there are “More than 357 million children living in war and conflict zones, an increase of roughly 75% from the early 1990s...Around half of those affected — 165 million children — live in "high-intensity" conflicts.”

[\(https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/02/15/number-children-living-war-zones-surprise-you/340317002/\)](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/02/15/number-children-living-war-zones-surprise-you/340317002/)

Closer to home, I was born in 1966. According to the *Washington Post*, the United States has been fighting wars 50% of my life. And for our young people, born since 9/11, this country has been involved in armed conflict 100% of their lives.

[\(https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/08/22/here-s-how-much-of-your-life-the-u-s-has-been-at-war/?utm_term=.8d904a6695ac\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/08/22/here-s-how-much-of-your-life-the-u-s-has-been-at-war/?utm_term=.8d904a6695ac)

So much violence. So much fear. The effects of war on children in the United States are markedly different from the consequences of war for children who wake up to the sounds of missiles and gunfire and the sight of their homes, and their neighbor's homes in ruins. We should not pretend, though, that a nation constantly involved in armed conflict, even if it's not on our own soil, does not affect our children. It contributes to a culture of fear. We teach our children that guns and bombs will keep us safe. When in reality, we know that isn't true. It is peace that will keep us safe. Diplomacy, compassion, and treating our global neighbors as if their children are as important as our children will go a long way toward security. Killing other human beings is not a solution to the world's problems.

There is another way. Isaiah casts a vision for that in chapter 2.

*² 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.

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

In a world where war is a daily reality for God's people, these words hold up an alternative view. It is a world at peace. It is a world where farming tools are far more useful than the tools of war. God is understood, not as a great and mighty warrior fighting on the people's behalf, but as the skilled teacher, educating the people on the ways of peace, a God who will settle disputes, who will make "the best deals" among the nations.

Looking at these texts from the book of Isaiah together, causes me to wonder whether the vision of the world presented in chapter 2 may be behind Isaiah's words to the fearful king. "Do not be afraid because of all those words you have heard."

And maybe, that call to not be afraid is important for us today. Maybe God is saying to us:

"Do not be afraid of the ones coming to the border you created seeking asylum. There is enough for all of you."

"Do not be afraid of the ones who practice a different faith tradition or no faith tradition. I reveal myself to your brothers and sisters in so many ways."

"Do not be afraid of the ones who do not conform to your heteronormative ideas or gender binary assumptions. You were all created in my image."

"Do not be afraid of your neighbors who are people of color. Embrace my love of diversity."

Through each other, God is teaching us to seek peace and justice. Through our relationships, God is teaching us how to live together, how to share resources, and how to find non-violent solutions in order to settle disputes. Our security is not in being the strongest, the most well-armed, or the most feared. Our security is in our ability to see the worth of all people, our ability to think critically and creatively, and our willingness to do something different. Because the truth is, we have

been a world at war for a very, very long time. It's time to be free. It's to proclaim, "We ain't gonna study war no more."

Holy One,
Give up they say...
So much destruction
So much to lose
So much terror

You can't save us, they say...
It's too late for us
It's too hard for you
It's a done deal

Do not fear, you say...
For one day we will learn
Your ways and your paths
And war will be no more. Amen.