

Radical Ripples

This morning's text comes from what is known as First Isaiah, words written by a prophet who was a contemporary of Micah's. Over the past 10 weeks we have walked through the story of God and God's people from the beginning. After their time in Egypt, God delivers the Hebrew people, creates a covenant with them, brings them to the Promised Land, gives them prophets and kings, and establishes them as a nation. But they are a tiny nation stuck between great world powers, and frequently wonder whether other gods might be a better bet than this one.¹

Life since King Solomon's reign has been precarious, with the divided kingdom battling enemies at every turn. This morning's text places us in Judah, the southern kingdom. The northern kingdom has fallen, and from all that anyone can tell, Judah will fall next. Assyria, the superpower at the time, has destroyed everything in its path leading to Judah, including other major cities, and has now arrived in Jerusalem, threatening the same fate.²

In this morning's text, we will meet many unfamiliar names and titles, words that sound more like the high dollar answers on Jeopardy than anything that could possibly have meaning in the life of faith. We will hear about kings named Sennacherib and Hezekiah. We learn that Sennacherib has a servant known as the Rabshakeh, the cup bearer, or chief steward. Even in the midst of these exotic names and unfamiliar titles, as I read from Isaiah, let us listen for the word of God: [Isaiah 36: 1-3, 13-20; 37: 1-7]

Earlier this year, an artist friend posted that she was working on a new challenge. She confessed that she was struggling with the state of the world and that she wanted to look for joy as a daily discipline, a holy practice of sorts, but she needed help. She invited friends to name three colors that give us joy, then she created paintings with those colors. The resulting paintings are abstracts but the bursts of color and the sometimes odd combinations are joy on canvas. It's hard to explain, but through Sarah's artwork, joy is easy—or easier—to see, even in the thick of despair and division. And sometimes we all need help seeing.

¹ From Dr. Amy Oden's commentary on the text, found here: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2236

² Oden, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2236

I have a chart that I share with the folks who gather for bible study each week (there are some available today, too). The chart gives a visual of which kings in the southern and northern kingdoms line up with which prophets. It also helpfully tells us which kings were good and which kings were bad. Hezekiah—the king of Judah—falls into the select group of kings who are labeled “good.” He is not perfect by any stretch, but he tries to do what is right. And in our text for this morning he is faced with one of the toughest decisions of his reign. Assyria has swallowed up the northern kingdom and is in Judah striving to swallow them up as well. Hezekiah sends his emissaries to meet with emissaries from Assyria, including the Rabshakeh, the chief steward of King Sennacherib. The Rabshakeh has a talent for taunting and speaking words full of fear and intimidation. We can almost see his swagger as we listen to his speech. He begins by invoking his king’s power, “Thus says the great king...” Isaiah’s first hearers—as well as some of us—expect something different when we hear, “Thus says...” We expect the phrase to end with “the Lord.” The Rabshakeh invokes a different authority and values this authority’s word above all others. He goes on to mock and belittle the Judeans, snidely offering to spot them 2000 horses—if they can come up with riders for them. He casts doubt on Hezekiah’s leadership and raises doubts about whether their God is up to the challenge of protecting them. The leaders from Judah respond by politely asking that the Assyrians speak in Aramaic—the accepted language of diplomacy—rather than Hebrew, because they are negotiating in a public space with citizens eavesdropping, and they know how quickly fear and doubt can spread. The Rabshakeh continues his verbal assault offering the people full bellies and a peaceful life, “in a land like [their] own.” He paints a vivid picture with his scathing words and tempts them to swap their homeland, the Promised Land itself for a quick and easy surrender.

I wouldn’t blame the leaders or the people for considering taking the Assyrians up on their offer. Ancient carved stone friezes show stark images of the Assyrians’ siege of Lachish, the second most powerful and prosperous city in Judah, one that Sennacherib’s troops have recently conquered and demolished. One of the panels shows countless prisoners surrounded by countless soldiers.³ The scene in Jerusalem likely looks the same. The citizens are easily outnumbered and overmatched by the Assyrians. There is no clear battle line; they

³ <https://www.ancient-origins.net/history-important-events/siege-lachish-history-both-victors-and-defeated-004554>

are surrounded; the enemy is everywhere. The enemy and imminent defeat are all they can see. To their credit, Hezekiah's men do not accept the Assyrians' bargain. They say nothing and return to their king.

The text does not tell us how the conversation back at the palace went, just that the Judean emissaries return to Hezekiah with their clothes torn in mourning and dismay. I've been there, at least in a metaphorical way. I'm guessing you have, too. Those moments when there are no words, when defeat lurks around every corner, and dead ends are everywhere. When you can see no way forward, it is tempting and even easy to start to buy into a false gospel, to want to trust the confident one, the seemingly stronger leader, even if that swaggering strongman is the enemy with no real hope to offer. We may begin to think it's worth letting go of what we once held to be true and dear in order to be certain of a full belly and a place to call home. And yet, Hezekiah does not take the deal. He grieves and laments the fate that seems to lie in store for him and his people, but he does not let the Rabshakeh's word be the last word. Instead he heads straight to the Temple and sends his emissaries to Isaiah the prophet to ask for guidance from God. Somehow even though all seems lost, Hezekiah has seen something in Isaiah or through Isaiah. And indeed, through Isaiah, the Lord upends the words of Assyria. "Thus says the Lord," Isaiah tells them, "Do not be afraid." Isaiah is able to help Hezekiah and the citizens of Jerusalem see hope because of what he has seen. [Read Isaiah 2:1-4]

Isaiah *saw* this word from God. He did not hear it; he saw it, which enables and empowers him to help Hezekiah see a way forward as well. Faced with troops and bluster and power from Sennacherib's vast army, Hezekiah risks losing sight of what God promises, what God intends for the people of God. Hezekiah cannot see this hope on his own; he needs Isaiah's help to see what God promises, to remember what God intends. And what God intends for Jerusalem is that it not be a besieged city but a place of goodness, justice, and peace, not just for the people of Judah but for the nations of the world. And God promises a time when weapons of war will become obsolete, when plows and pruning hooks will be in high demand to feed and nourish a joyful and justice-filled nation at peace.

A while back, my artist friend Sarah invited people to subscribe to her blog and in exchange she held a drawing. The winner would receive five postcards with miniature three-color joy paintings. I happened to win, and I have kept the postcards tucked away waiting for frames and a place to display them. I pulled them out this

week and am now determined to keep them out, because they are exquisite and lovely, but more importantly they remind me what joy and hope look like. We need reminders of joy and hope. The world does, too.

When I told Sarah that I would be mentioning her work in this sermon, she responded with what reads like a beautiful sermon in its own right in which she says:

This series has taught me that creating joy is a radical act that can heal and bring purpose. Every act of joy generated ripples beyond our scope and into our neighborhood, our communities, our nation, and the world.⁴

We gather here each week and hear God's word read and proclaimed. And yet in you, this word goes beyond simply hearing, because you take it and make art with it. You show me what truth and hope and joy look like, too. You create ripples in your own radical acts. Yes, you, dear CPC friends, are more radical than you know. Anti-Semitism, racism, and division are on the rise. Hate crimes are an everyday occurrence. Hatred itself seems to be streaming over the walls and lurking around every turn. It would be easy to believe the loud, false gospel that tells us to fear the other, to look out for ourselves, to trade our hopes for the comfort of a quick fix and an easy out. It is tempting to trust the voices that yell the loudest, the ones who cast doubt on our following a Savior who eats with the untouchables, seeks out the ones who go astray, and offers up his life without a fight to save ours. And yet, through you I see a different word, a word that points to a greater promise, a word that speaks to the vision God holds for the world and for us. As of Thursday, thirty of you were signed up to visit the synagogue, to worship, learn, and show solidarity with a community that is outside our own. Wednesday night one of you told me of the overwhelming amount of donations you hauled to Downtown Daily Bread, gifts freely offered to people without homes and too often without hope. You show up for each other with meals, prayer shawls, cards, and hugs. You show up for strangers through volunteering with Family Promise and Meals on Wheels. You read things that challenge you and listen to speakers who call on you to question and even shake the things you once believed because you trust a different word, and the God who speaks that word. And in this way, you stand bravely in the midst of a fearful and fear-filled world and paint a picture of God's vision, creating radical ripples of truth, hope, justice, and love in God's name. Thanks be to God! Amen.

⁴ Sarah C.B. Guthrie, <http://www.artistgu3.com/>