

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"Swords into Plowshares"

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

Opening Hymn: A mighty fortress is our God 315

Closing Hymn: Lead on, O King eternal 742

Children's Hymn: Each step of the way

Choruses: Sing, sing, sing, 10,000 reason (bless the Lord), Forever

Choir: Cornerstone by Russell Mauldin

Rev. Steve Filyk

October 21

In our 1984 Presbyterian statement of Christian belief, *Living Faith*,
We affirm the sovereignty of God.

"The living God is Lord,
Creator of all, Sustainer and Ruler of the universe.

In the seasons and the harvests,
in the rise and fall of nations,
God's goodness and judgment are present.

All events in this world
are under the sovereign care of the eternal God."ⁱ

This is a Biblical, well-crafted, profession of faith.
Most of us would have no problem
Standing up and reciting it together
during a Sunday morning service.

But how easily would it roll off your tongue
after reading the paper on Monday morning?

I get the Globe & Mail on weekdays.
Let me remind you of some of the news stories
In the first section this past Friday:

- An 'alleged' sexual assault in a Toronto private school.
- More news about the killing and dismemberment of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.
- Canada's reaction to China's mass detention of Muslims, ethnic Uyghurs.
- Search for missing Californians in wake of ongoing fires.

After this brief recap how does our statement of faith feel:

'All events in this world
are under the sovereign care of the eternal God.'

Maybe it won't roll off your tongue so easily...
May it will get caught in your throat...

There are times that most of us wonder
About God's sovereign rule.
People have questioned it throughout the ages.

I have no doubt that King Hezekiah
of today's Old Testament lesson
Had some hesitations and concerns of his own.

Some of you have heard of Hezekiah.
Some of you are familiar with that water channel
Carved beneath the city of David that famously bears his name.

Hezekiah became the 13th king of Judah when he was only 25.
Seven years later he witnessed the destruction
Of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrian Empire.

The prowling empire now lead by Sennacherib
 Was soon in his own land
 attacking outlying cities
 before laying siege to the capital, Jerusalem.

“The Assyrians recorded that Sennacherib lifted his siege of Jerusalem
 after Hezekiah paid Sennacherib tribute.

The Bible records that Hezekiah paid him three hundred talents of silver
 and thirty of gold as tribute,
 even sending the doors of the Temple
 to produce the promised amount,

but, even after the payment was made,
 Sennacherib renewed his assault.”ⁱⁱ

Which catches us up to today’s story.
 The enemy remains at the gates.

It is a dire situation.
 We are told that Sennacherib had conquered
 ‘all the fortified cities of Judah’.

He had trampled through King Hezekiah’s own backyard
 Defeating everyone who stood up to him
 And exiling the peoples he conquered.

The army, we are told, had just come up from Lachish
 The second most important of the Judeans cities.

“Archaeologists have discovered massive carved portrayals
 (what are known as “reliefs”)
 of this siege against Lachish
 in the Assyrian palace at Nineveh.

The long, detailed depictions show masses of Assyrian soldiers attacking,
 defeating and then leading away captive
 the Jews from this city.

The portrayal also shows the city gate being besieged,
 and massive siege towers being pushed up a ramp
 in order to attack the city.”ⁱⁱⁱ

“One relief shows three men impaled in plain sight of the city wall.”^{iv}

We are sometimes distraught by the new we read in the papers.
 Well this was what was going in Hezekiah’s backyard.

Today’s reading tells us that Sennacherib sends one of his officers
 To meet with Hezekiah,
 presumably to negotiate some sort of peace.

The reality is that he’s there for propaganda purposes.
 He’s speaks aloud in Hebrew,
 The language Hezekiah’s people:

“Hear the words of the great king,
 The king of Assyria...” he begins.^v

As one commentator has mentioned, this messenger
Is too respectful to invoke his own king's name.
And yet he routinely refers to Hezekiah directly
Whom he gives no title at all.^{vi}

Even more condescending is his use of the divine name,
the personal name of God:
The LORD all letters capitalised
That you see in your Bibles.

That officer speaks directly to the people of Judah
warning them about relying on the Lord.
He argues that his master, Sennacherib, has defeated
All the Judean neighbors and their neighbors' gods
One after another.

He tells them his master offers them peace.
And will provide them a better land
Than what they have been given:
"a land of bread and vineyards."^{vii}

The officer's message is simple.
Resistance is futile.
You'll be better off with the Assyrians.

As you can imagine King Hezekiah
Is shaken up by this experience.
His kingdom has been overrun
And he's been cornered in his citadel.
And now this Assyrian
is appealing directly to Hezekiah's own people.

Hezekiah's probably worrying about a coup;
 That his head will soon be removed from his shoulders
 And thrown over Jerusalem's wall.

So what does Hezekiah do?

Hezekiah responds to this challenge by tearing his clothes
 covering himself with sackcloth
 And going into the Lord's house to pray.

He also sends word to the prophet Isaiah,
 And asks for Isaiah to pray for the remnant holding up
 In Jerusalem.

But if the Assyrian officer's proud message
 Is 'the king says...'

The word of the prophet
 Is 'the Lord says...'. .

When Isaiah is given that call to prayer from King Hezekiah
 he responds with these words from Hezekiah's God.

"This is what the Lord says:
 Do not be afraid of what you have heard—
 those words with which the underlings of the king of Assyria
 have blasphemed me.

Listen! When he hears a certain report,
 I will make him want to return to his own country,
 and there I will have him cut down with the sword.'"^{viii}

If we had read on today
 You'd hear about a disaster
 That befell the Assyrian army.

How an "angel of the Lord went out
 and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand
 in the Assyrian camp...

[How] Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew.
 [returning] to Nineveh and [staying] there."

This departure is corroborated
 By other historical sources.^{ix}

The Bible also describes how one day (actually twenty years later)
 Sennacherib is assassinated by his sons,
 While worshipping in the temple of his god.^x

Quite the story.
 It teaches us that "The living God is [indeed] Lord,
 Creator of all, Sustainer and Ruler of the universe...

[that] in the rise and fall of nations,
 God's goodness and judgment are present.

[that] All events in this world
 are under the sovereign care of the eternal God."^{xi}

But while God spared Jerusalem at that moment,
 Today's lesson also reminds us that God's aims
 Are bigger than any momentary peace in one city.

The prophet tells us also
That “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.”

We’ve encountered this ‘word of the Lord’
That has gone out from Jerusalem.
We’ve encountered this ‘word’ in Jesus.

And we’ve caught a vision of this peaceable kingdom
That God is intent in bringing to earth.

We see it in Jesus, who when he was opposed,
Did not raise a sword
Or call up an army,

But instead bore all the violence/abuse/sin that was thrown at him
Extinguishing it in his own body.

A body that would die,
But that God would raise from the grave.

We see this peaceable kingdom in Jesus.

And we catch a glimpse of this peaceable kingdom
in Jesus' church.

We catch a glimpse of this peaceable kingdom
When like Hezekiah, Jesus' people turn to God for help,
And wait for God's intervention,
Rather than seeking to wrest power from other's hands.

Many of us remember the Cold War.
Many of us also remember the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The story is usually framed in terms of politics and economics:
How the communist system just didn't work.

But there is another story.

Others have noted the end began
"with peaceful prayer vigils
in the St. Nikolai Church in Leipzig.

In 1983, as a response to the rising nuclear threat
from proposed Soviet [and American missiles],
pastor Christian Führer opened the doors of St. Nikolai church
for prayer.

Since 1980 the pastor had been holding a ten-day study session
every November on the theme of peace making.

But the step of opening the church every Monday
for anyone and everyone to pray for peace
marked a new level of engagement.

At every meeting the Beatitudes were read together in unison:

"Blessed are the peacemakers ..."

These prayer meetings were held at 5 p.m.
every Monday from 1983 on.

In 1989 the numbers of people coming to these ...

'Prayers for Peace' greatly increased...

A Reformed church in Leipzig also started a prayer vigil,
as well as churches in East Berlin and Dresden...

These peaceful gatherings formed the core
around which the peaceful protest demonstrations grew...

Soon, large and peaceful demonstrations
were being held every week.

These protests led to the Oct. 18th resignation of Erich Honecker,
quickly followed by the opening of the Berlin Wall on Nov. 9th.^{xii}

Now mind you
this didn't all happen without opposition.

People were arrested.

The government was adamant
that the protest needed to be stopped.
Many expected a bloodbath.

And yet this patient resistance could not be opposed.

As one top communist official noted:

"We had planned everything,
We were prepared for everything.
But not for candles and prayers."^{xiii}

Could it be that in a world filled with much darkness,
God is still powerfully active?

Could it be that in a world full of fear and violence,
We are called to be God's hopeful people,
Trusting and praying and working for a kingdom
That is yet to be fully revealed.

Hezekiah's kingdom was almost lost.
All his surrounding cities had been conquered.
Thousands of his people had been deported.

And yet the Lord was still present
God was still working out God's purposes
Among God's people.

Maybe we can affirm that statement of faith
Even after reading the morning paper.

And maybe we can hum that hymn:

"This is my father's world
Oh, let me never forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong
God is the ruler yet."^{xiv}

ⁱ *Living Faith* "God, Creator and Ruler 2.1.1" The Presbyterian Church in Canada

ⁱⁱ "Hezekiah" *Wikipedia*. See 2 Kings 18 also...

ⁱⁱⁱ Christopher Eames "Uncovering the Bible's Buried Cities: Lachish" November 30, 2016 <https://watchjerusalem.co.il/31-uncovering-the-bibles-buried-cities-lachish>

^{iv} Philip Stern "Assyrian March Against Judah" September 5, 2006 <http://www.historynet.com/assyrian-march-against-judah.htm>

^v Isaiah 36:13 NIV

^{vi} See Gary W. Light *Isaiah: Interpretation Bible Studies* 47

^{vii} Isaiah 36:17 NIV

^{viii} Isaiah 37:7 NIV

^{ix} Wikipedia notes that Greek historian Herodotus (c. 484 BC – c. 425 BC) wrote of the invasion and acknowledges many Assyrian deaths, which he claims were the result of a plague of mice and that the Jewish historian Josephus followed the writings of Herodotus.

^x Isaiah 37:36-37 NIV

^{xi} *Living Faith* "God, Creator and Ruler 2.1.1" The Presbyterian Church in Canada

^{xii} Ian Ritchie "Fall of Berlin Wall a Blessing of Faith" <https://web.archive.org/web/20060519083931/http://www3.sympatico.ca/ian.ritchie/Berlin.Wall.htm> This story is corroborated by Peter Crutchley "Did a prayer meeting really bring down the Berlin Wall and end the Cold War?" October 9, 2015 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/0/24661333>

^{xiii} Jeff Fountain "Not by might" <http://www.ywam.eu/weeklyword/not-by-might/>

^{xiv} C. Barny Robertson & Maltbie Babcock "This is my Father's world"