

There are some parts of the book of Isaiah I know pretty well, but this passage today about the Assyrian army sending their field commander, the Rabshakeh, to intimidate the people of Jerusalem into surrendering? I know I've read it at some point, but it was like it was totally new to me. How can I forget a story that has the awesome word "Rabshakeh" in it! What are we to make of this story? Why does the Narrative Lectionary have us read it?

Imagine that you are a resident in Jerusalem that day in 701 B.C. You are part of a city of about 20,000 people, a walled city built on top of a high hill. Sometimes Jerusalem is referred to as "Mount Zion", and though it is a stretch to call this hill a mountain, it was a well fortified city. You are well aware that twenty years earlier the Assyrians had conquered Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and only 35 miles from Jerusalem. Those who weren't killed in Samaria were deported to Assyria, hundreds of miles away. Jerusalem had been spared at that time because your king, Uzziah, was willing to pay Assyria lots of money. But four years ago, Uzziah's son Hezekiah took a calculated risk that the new Assyrian king, Sennacherib, would be so busy up in Nineveh that he wouldn't notice if that annual tribute money didn't show up. Hezekiah was badly mistaken. Sennacherib had to make an example of Hezekiah or other vassal states would have started withholding tribute money. So Sennacherib is back in the area, wiping out 46 small Judean towns including the walled city of Lachish, and now is ready to bring Hezekiah and Jerusalem to its knees.

Because it is a walled city, Jerusalem will not be taken easily, even by the Assyrian army, so Sennacherib sends his Rabshakeh to dictate terms of surrender by intimidation. He offers two options – surrender now and we will deport you (but at least you will still be alive) or prepare for a long siege in which you will die either by hunger or the sword. As a resident of Jerusalem, you hear the Rabshakeh's speech. What are you feeling as he speaks? Fear? Panic? How do you hope King Hezekiah will respond?

That's an interesting scenario, but you might well be thinking, what does it have to do with you and me? Plymouth is not under attack. We are not faced with life and death options. Is there anything in this story that is somehow applicable to our lives? I think there is, and it has to do with issues of fear and trust, both of which are issues very much part of our lives every day. Amy Oden is a Professor of Church History at Oklahoma City University and much of what follows are her insights into what this story says about fear and trust. (http://www.workingpreacher.org/profile/default.aspx?uid=2-oden_amy)

Just like the Rabshakeh, there are many voices in our world eager to convince us to be afraid. Fear-mongering is an extremely profitable business. Fear can motivate people to spend money on things they don't need. Political ads sometimes use fear to motivate people to vote against a candidate. Fear of failure can cause adults to overwork and kids to have great anxiety. Fear can create bonds of unity – "us" versus "them" -- that feel really great but are actually destructive. Tyrants have known for millennia that if you want to control people, make them afraid. Look at North Korea as a current example. Fear is the strongest motivation humans know, except for....(I'll save the exception for the end.)

Once fear takes root in our minds, the work of the fear-mongers is done because we continue the work for them on our own. We now are host for the fear virus and the voices are now in our own heads. I find these voices attack me most effectively in the middle of the night and prevent me from sleeping. In the quiet, those internalized voices of fear can run rampant. Each of us has our own list of fears that nip at us. What's on your list? Fear about crime or religious fundamentalists or climate change or Ebola or money or jobs or marriage or growing older? Internalized fear steals hope from us and makes us believe that our security lies somewhere other than God.

This story has something to teach us about the basic dynamics of fear and trust. First, note that the loudest voice gets our attention. In Isaiah's story, all the people line the city wall to listen to the impressive Assyrian general pronounce threats. We, too, are riveted by voices crying, "Be afraid!" Even when we know

God is faithful, the megaphone of fear captures our attention and quickly dominates our awareness, banishing our trust in God to a distant whisper.

Second, we are formed by these loud voices. Just as Hezekiah tore his clothes and put on sackcloth, we react, too. The daily barrage of emails, Facebook, and 24-hour cable news that inundates us can be overpowering at times. Their repeated message becomes “the way things are” for us and effectively defines our reality, denying the deep, true reality of God’s life within and among us.

Third, the story shows us that in the midst of anxiety, an authoritative word from God can make a difference. Hezekiah turns to Isaiah to help him keep his eye on God, the One who made us, who knows our going out and our coming in, who keeps us and saves us. This One has the final word, truly defines reality, and steeps us in love that casts out fear.

The authoritative word Isaiah speaks from the LORD God begins: “Don’t be afraid” (Isaiah 37:6). While telling people not to be afraid does not banish all fear and it doesn’t make the danger or risk go away, it is the first step to interrupting the false narrative of intimidation. “Be not afraid” is the word of truth in the midst of lies. We must proclaim this word to one another again and again.

Because of the power of fear, many people do not have much hope for the future. But living unexamined lives of internalized fear, as Sennacherib hopes the Judeans will do, is not a Christian witness. Despair has no place in a Christian view of the future. It is not just in Isaiah we hear “Do not be afraid.” Over and over again we hear the witness of scripture – Fear not. Peace be with you. Don’t be anxious about tomorrow. Do not worry about anything, but in every circumstance give thanks. These are not Pollyannaish words that minimize the dangers and sorrows we face in this world, but words of profound insight and truth that transform lives by helping us keep our lives in proper perspective.

I said earlier that fear is the strongest motivation humans know, except for – and now I’ll fill in the blank – except for love. Love is the strongest motivation humans know. It is love that undergirds Isaiah’s vision for the future that the day is coming when all the nations will come to the mountain of the LORD and the LORD will teach them the way of love. They will not learn war anymore, but will lay down their swords and spears and turn them into implements to benefit others – plows and pruning hooks. Isaiah draws attention away from the gaze on military might and toward the reign of God. That vision of the reign of God is the core of Jesus’ message, calling us to shift our gaze from a horizon of fear to a horizon of hope based on his call to love God and serve our neighbor. I think this is why the Narrative Lectionary includes this story from Isaiah. It wants us to see that the message of Jesus is in continuity with the message of the Old Testament prophets.

Marty Haugen has a great gift for distilling a scripture text down to its core message. He does this in this next hymn where he distills the 23rd Psalm down to one remarkable sentence: “Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life.”