“Transforming Swords into Plowshares”

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

Rev. Rebecca Weaver Longino

First Presbyterian Church, Luling, TX

November 16, 2014

You’re going to hear a story about a very powerful foreign king who tries to scare the king of Judah and his people.

In fact, this foreign king will try to talk them out of trusting God, and prove his own might with his path of destruction.   
The foreign king is from Assyria.

The king of Judah is Hezekiah, and he will turn to the prophet Isaiah as he considers how to respond.”

36:1 In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, King Sennacherib of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. 2 The king of Assyria sent the Rabshakeh from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem, with a great army. 13 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! 14 Thus says the king: "Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you. 15 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.' 16 Do not listen to Hezekiah; for thus says the king of Assyria: "Make your peace with me and come out to me; then everyone of you will eat from your own vine and your own fig tree and drink water from your own cistern, 17 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. 18 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? 19 Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? 20 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?' "

37:1 When King Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the Lord. 2 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. 3 They said to him, "Thus says Hezekiah, This day is a day of distress, of rebuke, and of disgrace; children have come to the birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth. 4 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." 5

When the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah, 6 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. 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.' "

2:1 The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. 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.

This is the Word of the Lord…Thanks Be to God.

Like I said, this story is a bit confusing, with a lot of weird names in it.

Basically, this story is about a large nation invading a smaller one.

Assyria has invaded Judah and the Assyrian king is now trying to convince the people of God to stop following their king, Hezekiah, and turn their trust to this more powerful king.

This Assyrian King wants the people to turn their backs on God.

A modern day example might look like Texas deciding to take over Oklahoma.

Texas is much bigger and wealthier, more resources and people.

Wanting to expand its borders, Texas might invade Oklahoma, and then threaten the citizens of that smaller state.

The leader of the Texan army might point out how much bigger and better things are in Texas.

The government can do much more for the people than the Oklahoma government can.

Using scare tactics and fancy rhetoric, the Texans might just convince the people of Oklahoma to pledge allegiance to the Lone Star State.

As you can see from this far-fetched example, this is not a fair fight.

Texas is much bigger than Oklahoma.

Same goes for this conflict between Assyria and Judah. It is not a fair fight.

Assyria tries to scare the people of Judah.

This powerful army comes in with their fancy armor and their cutting edge weaponry.

No doubt the people of Judah were impressed by this display.

So when the Assyrian King speaks up, the Israelites pay attention.

This king has got connections.

He’s promising a more comfortable life than they’ve been experiencing thus far. Perhaps they should obey him and betray their own king, King Hezekiah.

Hezekiah is distraught over this situation.

He tears is clothes and puts on a sackcloth, a funny Biblical way of saying he was grieved and worried.

He sends his servants to consult the prophet Isaiah, seeking out a word of hope and guidance.

Hezekiah fears his people will be lured away by this foreign king,

where they will likely be forced into slavery as their ancestors had centuries before.

Isaiah, a prophet close to God’s heart, offers a word of hope.

He offers an assurance that Assyria will not wipe out the people of God.

Isaiah says he will send a haunting word to the king of Assyria, which will scare him back to his land.

His army will retreat and give up the fight.

The people of Judah won’t have to raise a weapon against the wicked king, because God will intercede.

Isaiah promises these things, and God follows through.

The people of Judah are saved and free from foreign threat.

The key point is that Isaiah is able to see a different way.

A peaceable kingdom when warfare is no more.

He doesn’t tell the people of Judah to fight back against Assyria.

He doesn’t tell them to meet violence with violence.

He tells them to trust that God will take care of them.

That God’s promises are from everlasting to everlasting.

This continues the theme that we have been following throughout the Old Testament for the past few weeks.

We’ve seen God keep promises to Noah to Abraham, to the people of Israel.

Through troubling and frightening times, God has not left their side.

Whenever they have turned to God and trusted God, they’ve been rescued from their plight.

This shows that God has better track record than Assyria.

The King of Assyria makes it sound like he could offer much more than God could.

But the funny thing about Assyria is that it’s long gone.

An extinct nation that dwindled to nothing.

Apparently that Assyrian king was full of empty promises.

He wasn’t as powerful as he thought he was.

The people of Judah are much better off trusting God.

Because while Assyria has gone extinct, God is still here and always will be!

They are able to trust God because Isaiah gave them a vision of an alternate reality.

In the midst of violent times, Isaiah envisions a peaceable kingdom.

One in which God intervenes and dismisses enemies.

What does it look like to trust in God’s promise for peace?

A stunning example took place in Berlin, Germany in the 1980s.

The Cold War was raging, the Berlin Wall was dividing and the East German regime was oppressing.

Pastor Furher and his congregation at St. Nicholas Church had hope for an alternative.

A peaceable kingdom in their violence filled city.

So they began to pray.

Every Monday night they sought God in prayer, asking for peace in their nation.

It started out with just a handful of people.

Momentum built and the numbers grew.

Each Monday night they faithfully gathered and sought God’s intercession.

The odds were against them, as they lived in an atheist ruled land.

But still they prayed.

7 years later, this faithful group continued to pray as the situation reached a boiling point.

The regime started to pay attention to this group of pray-ers as their numbers grew to the thousands.

In October 1989, protesters from all over joined this group of faithful people.

Their numbers reached 70,000 people one week. 120,000 people the next and then 300,000 people the following week.

All of them praying for peace.

The East German officials were caught off guard by this demonstration of peace.

They would have fought the people had they been armed with weapons.

But they just stood by as these people were armed with prayers and candles.

The Berlin Wall came down shortly afterward.

These prayerful people played a role in ending this violent era because they trusted that God would prevail.

They sought God’s will through prayer.

They had a vision of a peaceable kingdom.

Today we still work toward the peaceable kingdom.

While it seems we have so far to go until peace rules the earth, we can’t lose sight of the vision laid out by Isaiah.

He declares that people 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.

God’s promise remains with us still – the peaceable kingdom is coming.

We just have to trust in God’s promise.

That through all suffering and anxious times, God will see us through.