

Trust Amid Anxiety

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

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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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. ²The king of Assyria sent the Rabshakeh from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem, with a great army. He stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field. ³And there came out to him Eliakim son of Hilkiah, who was in charge of the palace, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph, the recorder. ¹³Then 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!" ¹⁴Thus says the king: 'Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you. ¹⁵Do 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.' ¹⁶Do 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, ¹⁷until 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. ¹⁸Do 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? ¹⁹Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? ²⁰Who 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. ²And 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. ³They 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. ⁴It 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." ⁵When the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah, ⁶Isaiah 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. ⁷I 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.'"

I once sat with a young woman who was anxious about the state of the world. Of course someone could worry about any number of things in this world, but this young woman was especially anxious about wars in various parts of the world. During and after college she had lived in several different countries where violence raged across the landscape. While living in those countries she had befriended numerous people who lived week to week with the stress of guns and bombs, wounds and deaths. Now back in the States, she worried for her friends in those countries who couldn't board a jet like she could and in just a few hours escape to place of relative safety. Throughout the day she found herself thinking about her friends in those far-off lands. Across the screen of her mind flitted images of their beautiful faces, yes, but also images of rifle bullets embedded

in house walls, of blood stains on the street, of holes in the dirt where a grenade had blown up.

What deepened this woman's anxiety was her commitment to follow Jesus in discipleship. Because she took her commitment to Jesus so seriously, she fretted about what she could do to counteract violence and build peace. She was firmly dedicated to Christ's way of peace, but obsessed over what difference she, a single person, could possibly make in the face of so much war. Mixed in with this was an ongoing discernment about her vocation. What was God calling her to do and be in the world, and how would that call aid peace-building in the world? She knew about the training possibilities for peace at various educational institutions, but wasn't sure God was nudging her in that direction. Yet her desire for service was strong. As a sensitive, compassionate, and idealistic person, she felt the weight of the world on her shoulders. But the anxiety over all this threatened to immobilize her.¹

In our biblical texts for today, which come from three different chapters in Isaiah, the people living in Jerusalem are immobilized by the anxieties of war. Encamped around them on all sides of the city is the mighty Assyrian army. Now Assyria was a highly militarized society. At the bottom of the social scale, all able-bodied men were required to fight in the Assyrian army at least once in their lives. At the top of the social scale, the highest officials in the government were all army officers. Even the king who ruled over the vast Assyrian empire was expected to personally lead his armies into battle. In a sense, you could say that many of the resources in Assyrian society were organized expressly for the purpose of feeding the Assyrian war machine. The Assyrian king Shalmaneser III once bragged that he led an army of 120,000 soldiers into battle. If that number is accurate, it would have been a massive army by the standards of the time, requiring enormous logistical efforts to arm, clothe, feed, and maneuver such a large group of people. The Assyrians were extraordinarily successful in war, and other nations soon learned that if an Assyrian army was headed their way, then they were in deep trouble.

¹ For the sake of confidentiality, this "woman" is a composite portrait of several people.

In this particular story, part of that mighty Assyrian army surrounds Jerusalem. Inside the city are trapped the Jewish king, Hezekiah, and his fellow Jews. Everyone knows that the Jewish army, such as it was, is tiny and essentially powerless against such a vast Assyrian force. The Jews inside the city know this and the Assyrians outside the city know it. Everyone knows what the outcome of this siege will be.

With the Jews trapped in Jerusalem like little birds in a cage, the leader of the Assyrian army decides to engage in a psychological warfare. The leader of this particular army is not the current Assyrian king, Sennacherib, because he's off somewhere else fighting another enemy. The man leading this part of the Assyrian army is the Rabshakeh (rab shuh keh), who is the second-in-command. The Rabshakeh taunts the Jews in at least three ways. First, he belittles King Hezekiah's leadership (36:4-6, 14-16). Second, he makes fun of Jerusalem's military capacity (36:8). Third, he mocks Yahweh, the god of the Jews (36:18-20).

This third point is critically important to the story: the Assyrians openly heap scorn on Yahweh, the god of the Jews. Why is this important? Because the Bible testifies again and again that God does not tolerate kings who openly thumb their noses at God. The Egyptian Pharaoh thumbed his nose at God in Exodus 8-12, and God soon humiliated him. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar thumbed his nose at God in Daniel 4, and God humbled him in such a way that Nebuchadnezzar willingly acknowledged the superiority of God. The Roman puppet king Herod thought of himself as a divine being in Acts 12, and God sent an angel to strike him down with worms. You can call these stories a bit fanciful if you want, but the theological point still stands true: God does not take kindly to rulers who brazenly belittle God's power.

Like other rulers before him and after him, the Rabshakeh taunted what he supposed to be a little god, limited only to power over the Jews. You see, the Rabshakeh and other Assyrians had had plenty of experience with other gods. Every time that mighty Assyrian military machine vanquished an enemy, they took statues of their defeated enemies' gods back with them to Assyria. In other words, statues of enemy gods became war trophies back in the Assyrian home world. By capturing foreign gods, the Assyrians

publicly demonstrated—and flaunted—their military superiority. After a while they began to think of themselves as invincible, as masters and rulers of the known world. So here in Isaiah, the Rabshakeh brags that he's going to do the very same thing he and other Assyrians have been doing for a long time: he is going to defeat these weakling Jews and their weakling god. Yahweh, this puny god from a puny nation, is powerless against us, the mighty, invincible Assyrians. We are masters of the world and we are going to crush you! Kiss your land, and your city, and your nation, and your worthless god goodbye! We will own you!

What the Rabshakeh does not know—yet—is that this god, Yahweh, is not like any other god the Assyrians have met. This God is not limited to the land of Judah. This God is not limited to Jews. This God is not bound to any place or people or time. This God has no equal in heaven or earth. This God cannot be compared to any other god. And more to the present point, this God does not take kindly to rulers who smear the divine reputation.

Enter now the prophet Isaiah. Into this tense and troubled situation Isaiah offers calm, soothing words. Here, at least, Isaiah is the very picture of a non-anxious presence for high-anxiety Jews. He displays the quintessential cool head. “Thus says Yahweh,” Isaiah announces, “do not be afraid” (37:6). Do not be afraid of the psychological wool the Rabshakeh is trying to pull over your eyes. Do not be afraid of those Assyrians surrounding the city. Do not be afraid that you will be defeated and die. Do not be afraid, because Yahweh will “put a spirit” into the Assyrian king, and a surprise will happen. The Assyrian king will hear a rumor of political unrest back home in Assyria, and he will break off this siege, march back to Assyria with his army, and there in his own land he will be stabbed to death (37:7). In God's own way and in God's own time, this Assyrian kind will discover the limits of human power and might.

One more thing. Back in Isaiah 2, the prophet of the cool head announced that the days are coming when peoples of the earth shall subordinate themselves to Yahweh, the god of heaven and earth:

2:1 The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. ²In 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. ³Many 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. ⁴He 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.

So, the days are coming when God shall peacefully arbitrate disputes among the nations. Days are coming when God will influence nations to refashion their military equipment into agricultural equipment. A new era is at hand when nations will no longer shoot at each other, and even military colleges will become extinct. That is the true trajectory of human affairs.

So do not be anxious about the state of the world! Do not tie yourself into knots fretting over the ultimate fate of the world. For in all of heaven and earth, the God we worship has no equal. In ways we cannot always see, in movements we cannot always perceive, God is shaping the world toward a future of peace. You and I can join with God in this vast and important project, knowing that God will eventually birth it into existence. This is God's project more than our project. We do not have to be anxious about our part because God's part is so clear. We can trust that God will make it so. Thanks be to God!