

2 Kings 18 and 19

Marci:

Hezekiah was 25 years old when he began to reign. He did what was right in the sight of the Lord, just as his ancestor David had done.

For he held fast to the Lord; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments the Lord commanded Moses.

The Lord was with him; wherever he went, he prospered. He rebelled against the King of Assyria and would not serve him.

In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, King Sennacherib of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them.

Sennacherib sent his officials—the Tartan, the Rabsaris, and the Rabshakeh—to Hezekiah, saying,

Randy: (toward Steve)

“Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria.

On what do you base this confidence of yours? Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? On whom do you now rely, now that you have rebelled against me?”

Marci:

Then the Rabshakeh stood and called out in a loud voice in the language of Judah,

Randy: (toward congregation)

“Hear the word of the King of Assyria!

Thus says the king: ‘Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you out of my hand.

Do not let Hezekiah make you rely on the Lord by saying, “the Lord will surely deliver us, and this city will not be given into the hand of the King of Assyria”.

Do not listen to Hezekiah; for thus says the King of Assyria: Make your peace with me and come out to me; then every one of you will eat from your own vine and your own fig tree, and drink water from your own cistern...that you may live and not die.

Do not listen to Hezekiah when he misleads you by saying, “The Lord will deliver us.” Has any of the gods of the nations ever delivered its land out of the hand of the King of Assyria? Who among all the gods of the countries have delivered their countries out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?”

Marci:

But the people were silent and answered him not a word, for the king’s command was “do not answer him.”

When King Hezekiah heard the words of the King of Assyria, he tore his clothes covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the Lord.

And he sent his officials to the prophet Isaiah, son of Amoz. They said to Isaiah, “thus says Hezekiah,

Steve:

This day is a day of distress, of rebuke, and of disgrace; It may be that the Lord your God heard all the words of the Rabshakeh, whom his master 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.”

Marci:

Isaiah said to them,

Alden:

“say to your master, “thus says the Lord.

“Do not be afraid because of the words you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have reviled me. 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.”

Marci:

Hezekiah prayed before the Lord, and said,

Steve:

“O Lord, the God of Israel, who are enthroned above the cherubim, you are God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth.

Incline your ear, O Lord, and hear;

open your eyes, O Lord, and see;

hear the words of Sennacherib which he has sent to mock the living God.

Truly O Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste the nations and their lands, and have hurled their gods into the fire, though they were no gods but the work of human hands—wood and stone—and so they were destroyed.

So now, O Lord our God, save us, I pray you, from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O Lord, are God alone.”

Marci:

Then Isaiah, son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah, saying,

Alden:

“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel; I have heard your prayer to me about King Sennacherib of Assyria.”

Marci:

The word of the Lord.

In our Year of the Bible readings, your mind has likely gone numb with the sheer number of the kings of Judah and Israel. And it doesn't help that their names are all variations of each others—Jeroboam, Jehoram, Jehu, Jehosephat!

When I first read the Kings narrative to my kids a few years ago, I remember what a relief it was to get to Hezekiah. After reading through this whole narrative of 1st and 2nd Kings, where king after king is more evil in the sight of the Lord than the king before, where Kings refuse to follow the Lord, worship false gods, lead the people in wickedness—after a while, it's a little depressing.

But then King Hezekiah shows up. Hezekiah led the people into confession. Turned them back to God. Cleared away the temples to the false gods. Re-established the practices of the people. He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord.

It was such a relief to hear about a king that did the right thing, whatever his motives. My kids even noticed. "Mom. Did you just say that this king did what was RIGHT in the eyes of the Lord?"

"Yes, I did."

"Does this mean that things are going to get better for the people then?"

"Well...."

"When they did what was wicked, they get punished. So if they do what's right, things should be good, right?"

Whose bright idea was it for me to read the Bible to my kids?

With great fear and trepidation, I read on in the story. For a short time—like 3 verses in chapter 18—things went well. God was with them and they whooped up on the Philistines and Hezekiah decided not to obey the King of Assyria.

Bold move. BIG king with the BIG name of BIG Assyria vs the 39 year old—let's call that age YOUNG, shall we—39 year old YOUNG king of LITTLE Judah.

And then Sennacherib starts talking smack about the Lord at the gates of Jerusalem. He tells the people—in Hebrew, no less, to make sure they'd understand him—that they are just plain silly to rely on their God. Didn't they see how all of the "gods" of the other towns failed to protect them as he burned their cities and carted them all off to exile. He tells them lies about their God, about their King, and about how well they will be treated if they walk away without a fight.

And Hezekiah orders the people not to respond to Sennacherib's taunts. The Assyrian rant is met with silence. They stand their ground in silence.

How deafening must that silence have been?

Picture this. You are one of the few Hebrew people who have not yet been carted off to exile. You are standing on the wall of Jerusalem, looking out over the Assyrian army. You have a stick and some rocks. They have cavalry, shields and swords. You are so non-threatening to this King that he is making jokes. He is enjoying this. You are a mouse to his cat.

During this silence, which your King has commanded, what are you thinking?

What can this kid Hezekiah do? My own vine, fig tree and cistern? Sounds pretty good to me...

I hear Babylon is nice this time of year.

Boy, how I wish I would have waited to remodel my kitchen.

Wouldn't NOW be a good time for God to do something?

Luckily for the people, standing with knocking knees on the wall of Jerusalem, Hezekiah remembered God. He tells the prophet Isaiah to lift up a prayer for the remnant that is left. Then Hezekiah prays to God, making clear that he does not share Sennacherib's comparison of the one God to all of those other false gods of wood and stone. And then, Hezekiah reminds God that the people have not forgotten the covenant. They are only a remnant of the covenant people. But, nonetheless, it is time for the Lord to act to protect the remnant.

Hezekiah doesn't ask for this for himself -- "Please God save us because I like my lifestyle here and because I'll look like a fool if you don't".

He doesn't even only ask it for the people in stunned silence on the wall. This isn't about pity or favoritism or homeland security.

Hezekiah prays for deliverance so that all the kingdoms of the earth will know that the Lord God is God alone. Hezekiah can go into the house of the Lord and pray because he KNOWS what the Rabshakeh does not know. All of those other gods were wood and stone, but the God of Israel called the people together in covenant and this God, the one God, listens to the people when they call. What does the Rabshakeh know about being in a relationship with God? Clearly, nothing.

Our passage leaves us with a bit of a cliffhanger. I hate to give anything away, but since you have your own Bibles, I guess you can find out what happens to Sennacherib on your own.

I'll tell you what doesn't happen.

Lightning does not come out of the sky, smiting Sennacherib and his Rabshakeh where they stand.

The 126 people left inside the city walls do not leave Helms Deep and demolish all of the Orks or Assyrians.



Aslan does not show up at the last minute and eat the King of Assyria.



Dumbledore does not return to save Hezekiah.



Perhaps that's what would happen if J.R.R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis or J. K. Rowling were telling the story of H. E. Zekiah.

But then this would be fiction. about a god of wood or stone.

But it isn't. This is the story of God's people in relationship with the one God. And this might be a shining moment for the people.

As we know, God's people don't have a lot of shining moments in the biblical text. Or in the texts of our lives, for that matter. We are, shall we say, people who err. We ignore God's commandments, we violate the image of God in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.

Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.

And how did God act? In this brief shining moment when the people remember their end of the covenant and pray to God, turn to God for help, what happens?

a spirit of a rumor....

My children, needless to say, were a little disappointed that after all that smack talking by the Rabshakeh, all God did to show God's awesomeness was to send a spirit of a rumor so that Sennacherib would be killed back home.

*"So their victory was that the Assyrian army left?"
"yeah, pretty much."*

While this was somewhat lost on my children, whose lives have thankfully not been besieged too much, I could understand why Judah would count this as a victory.

Haven't there been times in our lives when enemies are at our gates? You stand there, knees knocking, ready for the assault, and it doesn't come. You peek out between your fingers, only to find that they have turned around and are leaving. You have been delivered—not in a way that makes you look powerful and successful—but in a way that allows you to enjoy another day.

God listened to the cries of the people. It was time for the Lord to act. The Lord acted. But not perhaps in the way we would have scripted it. Israel was not restored to power and glory. Remnant is the operative word to describe them from this point on, but isn't being a remnant better than total extinction?

It was time for the Lord to act, and act God did, but unfortunately, it is hard to keep God to the script. The script I want to write is one where other people's wickedness is punished and our faithfulness, our one shining moment, is rewarded.

Instead, God's script is full of instances where God acts for God's people, but never in the way we could have predicted or would have requested.

And thank God for that. The one God became flesh and invited us to join him at this table, we who should never have been invited. God listened to the cries of God's people and it was time for the Lord to act. We will come to this table to celebrate the One God, whom we worship, who hears our cries, who became one of us, and who moves among the church today, setting us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor.

Amen