**The Sound Above All Else | Isaiah 36:1-3, 13-20; 37:1-7; 2:14**

Rev. Taylor Lewis Guthrie Hartman

*First Presbyterian Church, Statesboro, GA*

November 18, 2018

For some, the very thought of Thanksgiving brings terror and anxiety. Gathered around a table, sitting in stiff chairs, sampling all the available foods out of obligation and guilt, unable to get out of an uncomfortable conversation…When you bring together people - even if those people are related, are from the same stuff and space and nurtured in the same way - tensions can run high. I remember when I was a teenager and I overheard my Aunt Sarah talking about eating a strained meal with her in-laws, when the topic would quickly mutate from benign to a low-roar bicker. She developed a quippy phrase to interrupt it all, loudly saying to the person next to her, “Pass the buttah!” I can hear her laughing after she blurted this out because she knew it was funny but also because she was sly and she knew that our own family might need to adopt this little saying in the meal that was to come.

Try to remember the last time you were in earshot from a conversation or a proclamation that didn’t sit with you well. Perhaps it was today in Sunday School or even here in worship. Perhaps it was this week in the office or when you were driving home listening to the radio or when you turned on the morning news to yet another tragic story. Perhaps it was your own family or friends who said something that made you think your eyes were going to pop out of your head and that your ears would start smoking like a cartoon character. And yet — *and maybe this is just me although I doubt it* — and yet, how hard is it to turn away and not listen? A verbal rubbernecking that sustains our attention and draws us in out of curiosity, out of doubt, out of frustration.

The same is true today for the hearers of the King Sennacherib’s words. This story requires context, especially since the names are enough to tangle us up and remove us from the narrative at hand. As Nick said, the king of Assyria - King Sennacherib - is hoping to convince Jerusalem to resign and simply give in to his power. Theologian Amy Oden reminds us: “Assyria, the superpower at the time, has destroyed everything in its path leading to Judah, including major cities, and now stands at the door of Jerusalem, threatening the same fate. Assyria already conquered Israel (Northern Kingdom), leaving Judah (Southern Kingdom) vulnerable.

When the Assyrian king wants to really terrorize the Hebrew people, he can do this with a double-punch. First, the king (through his messenger) sows seeds of doubt, both about their own leader Hezekiah, and about their God: ‘Don’t listen to Hezekiah. He can’t save you, and neither will his God.’ Second, he will remind the Hebrews of all the other nations he has laid waste on his way to Jerusalem plus all their own cities he destroyed. If their gods couldn’t save them, what evidence is left that YHWH will save the Judeans?”[[1]](#footnote-0)

Even among the faithful, it is hard not to lean in and listen to Sennacherib’s seductive propaganda. We hear of how people lined the walls of the city to listen as the Rabshakeh spoke. Hungry for *something* beyond their present, the Israelites are tempted to feast on this false sense of security. Because, really, *what would be the harm in a little vine and fig tree? If you make peace with me, I will give you everything you need.* Why not, maybe the people of Jerusalem wondered. What’s the harm? We *are* in need, are we not? The threat *is* real, *is* all around, is it not? Everything around them is falling apart; other cities are laid to waste; destruction is the daily news.

So - they listened, even if they knew they should’ve said “Pass the buttah” to it all and moved on from such glib and proud banter. Fear can do that to us, can’t it?

Fear can worm its way into our hearts and minds and our ears, allowing us to sow seeds of doubt and hesitation about what we already know to be true.

Maybe it is as bad as they say.

Maybe the world is falling apart all around us.

Maybe we should put our trust into this person, this plan, this policy.

Maybe if we go along to get along, it’ll all be ok.

Maybe if we keep our heads down…

Oden writes, “Even when we know God is faithful, the megaphone of fear captures our attention, quickly dominates our awareness, banishing our trust in God to a distant whisper.”[[2]](#footnote-1)

While the sounds of King Sennacherib filled the air, King Hezekiah turned to the only King worthy of attention. In faithfulness, Hezekiah called upon Isaiah to return him to a place of security, to remind him of the one alone whom he worshipped and served. The last line of Hezekiah’s plea haunts me in its hope, a hope that is clearly aware it is standing knee-deep in ashes. He asks of the prophet, “Lift up your prayer for the remnant that is left.” Please, Isaiah, turn us from this loud voice and let us hear a prayer that sounds louder than any noisy gong or clanging cymbal.

And - without hesitation and instead, with unfettered and unwavering hope - Isaiah says, “Say to your master, ‘Thus says the Lord: Do not be afraid.’” Cutting to the heart of the matter, Isaiah doesn’t say: “Turn away.” Or “He’s an idiot.” Or “Ye of little faith.” Or “For God’s sake, have I not already taught you?” No. Isaiah gets to the point because that’s what prophets do - they evoke an alternate way of being, a way that firmly rests in the power of God and not the powers of this world, a way that says: *Thus says the Lord, be not afraid.*

Has anyone ever told you “don’t be afraid?” It isn’t a quick fix, or at least it hasn’t been in my life. I remember how my older brother would hide behind doors in our little apartment hallway and jump out to scare me. I would be shaken up for minutes after as he giggled in delight. Even though the fear was removed, the aftershock remained. Multiply this in the context of actual fear and destruction and maybe we can get close to how these words fell upon Hezekiah’s and thus, Jerusalem’s ears and hearts. Isaiah’s words are not meant to be a bandaid but rather a deeply-healing balm to interrupt the dominant words of King Sennacherib. “Be not afraid” is the clarion call that rings above this nonsensical yet satiating fast talk Sennacherib is selling on the corner. It is the call that bears repeating again and again because the history repeats itself, does it not?

To make the point as starkly as it can, the lectionary methodically takes us from this scene back to the beginning of Isaiah, when God’s hope for the future is fulfilled. The words spoken in Isaiah 2 tell of a future when the the loudest words are of God’s teaching and just arbitration, and the sounds of destruction and war are replaced with flourishing and enough for all as swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. Isaiah is not wishfully thinking nor daydreaming but instead, he is restless with dissatisfaction at the ways of present days. Come and hold hope with me, Isaiah says, for there is still a better way. Is God not bigger and more imaginative and more powerful than things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation? Come and listen, Isaiah says. Listen and be not afraid.

The sounds of fear persist and yet…so does the sound of hope. There was a time in our history when people who had mental illnesses suffered a most cruel practice of being restrained with iron chains and shackles. In some places, such methods are still employed with cloth vests and ties, mostly in emergency departments and hospitals. “In the early 1950s, Mental Health America issued a call to asylums across the country for their discarded chains and shackles. On April 13, 1953, at the McShane Bell Foundry in Baltimore, Md., Mental Health America melted down these inhumane bindings and recast them into a sign of hope: the Mental Health Bell.” Swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks. On the bell, this inscription proclaims: *Cast from shackles which bound them, this bell shall ring out hope for the mentally ill and victory over mental illness.[[3]](#footnote-2)* Is this not our call? To stand knee-deep in the ashes of the present day and call out for hope? A sound above all else. A sound that casts out fear. A sound of love that comes from above. In the name of God, whom alone we worship and serve. Amen.

1. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2236&fbclid=IwAR0egGonNovUbSV4IcLDdDZ28NeMl0i4Ekh7iM5t-uvenrdSlkV3hP-ZVgM> Working Preacher commentary, Dr. Amy Oden. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. See above citation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/bell [↑](#footnote-ref-2)