

Language Lessons

This morning's text comes from what is known as First Isaiah, words written by a prophet who was a contemporary of Micah's. Over the past 10 weeks we have walked through the story of God and God's people from the beginning. After their time in Egypt:

God delivers the Hebrew people, creates a covenant with them, brings them to the Promised Land, gives them prophets and kings, and establishes them as a nation. But they are a tiny nation stuck between great world powers, and frequently wonder whether other gods might be a better bet than this one.¹

Life since King Solomon's reign has been precarious, with the divided kingdom battling enemies at every turn. This morning's text places us in Judah, the southern kingdom. The northern kingdom has fallen, and from all that anyone can tell, Judah will fall next:

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.²

In this morning's text, we will hear about an Assyrian king named Sennacherib who is a bully and about a Judean king named Hezekiah who is trying his best to be faithful. Sennacherib has a smack-talking field general. Hezekiah has three devoted aides, Eliakim, Hilkiyah, and Joah. Amidst these unfamiliar names, as I read from Isaiah, let us listen for the word of God: [Isaiah 36: 1-5, 11-22; 37: 1-6a]

Prompted by a discussion in her Social Studies class years ago, our daughter Abby asked me if I lived during the Cold War and if I could remember anything about it. Vivid memories flooded back. I thought about the "Miracle on Ice," when the US Men's Hockey team defeated the Soviet team in the Olympics. I remember Tracy Caulkins, an outstanding swimmer from Nashville who put dreams on hold when the US boycotted the Olympics in Moscow. I remember snippets of President Reagan's speech in front of the Berlin Wall, insisting that Mr. Gorbachev, "Tear down this wall!"³ I also remember visiting Berlin in the summer of 1991. A friend and I walked through Checkpoint Charlie. What had been the passageway between East and West, the scary

¹ From Dr. Amy Oden's commentary on the text, found here: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2236

² Oden, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2236

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tear_down_this_wall!

juncture between fear and freedom was now a tourist destination. As I remembered these events out loud, my daughter looked at me as if I was speaking a different language.

Language plays a central role in this text. Hezekiah's aides specifically ask the blowhard field commander to speak in Aramaic, the language of educated elites not of the people on the wall. The field commander knows exactly what he is doing. He insists that his message from his king is not intended simply for the rulers, but for those waiting on the wall as well. The field commander speaks Aramaic and Hebrew, but he is most fluent in the universal language of fear. His entire message is one of fear, intimidation, and doubt. He is bent on undermining any remaining confidence the Judeans may have, to wipe away any possible faith that remains.

The field commander first speaks of deception, "Don't let Hezekiah lie to you."⁴ Hezekiah cannot save you, he insists, nor can this supposed God Hezekiah tells you to trust. Then the field commander tries to woo the people with a seductive promise of a false peace in which he promises full bellies and quenched thirst. Then he sows the seeds of doubt. What good have the other gods done in the face of Sennacherib's might?: "Which one of the gods from those countries has rescued their land from my power? Will the Lord save Jerusalem from my power?"⁵

The king's aides do not respond. They do not join the commander's game of words. They know that this is not a game. They tear their clothes and return to tell their king what they have heard. Hezekiah is genuinely afraid. He responds to the bully's taunts not with bravado but rather by seeking wisdom to discern what it is that he should do, not only for himself, but for his people. He too tears his clothes, a traditional sign of mourning. It could be said that Hezekiah is already grieving his defeat, although he has not completely given in to the bully's words of fear, because he goes to the house of the Lord. He has not given up on God, not entirely. He seeks out Isaiah and asks for God's protection of the remnant that may be left when all is said and done. And through Isaiah, God speaks a different word. We do not know if the Lord speaks to Isaiah in Hebrew or Aramaic, but God's word to Hezekiah is first and foremost: "Do **not** be afraid." Do not fall prey to the language of

⁴ Isaiah 36: 14, Common English Bible

⁵ Isaiah 36: 20, CEB

intimidation or deception. Do not be persuaded by empty promises or arrogant taunting. The language of fear is not and never has been God's mother tongue. God understands fear, and yet God does not answer fear with fear. Here and in countless other places throughout scripture, God says in no uncertain terms, "Do not be afraid."

I remember watching scenes of the Berlin Wall's fall on my tiny dorm room TV on my 21st birthday. Somewhere I still have a chunk from that wall, a reminder of one of the most inspiring events in my lifetime. When I visited Berlin in 1991, I was struck by the still-strong dividing line between those in the West who spoke fairly fluent English and those in the East who still spoke mostly German. I later learned that other languages were in the mix as well.

Christian Führer was the pastor of St. Nicholas Church in the East German town of Leipzig:

Disillusioned with the Berlin Wall, the physical fault line of the ongoing Cold War and the repressive East German regime, Pastor Führer began [organizing] Prayers for Peace every Monday evening, beginning in 1982.⁶

Not many came at first, but the meetings continued. In 1985, Pastor Führer posted a sign outside the church which read "Open to all." More than a simple sign of welcome and hospitality, these words spoke a language of courageous defiance in the face of state intimidation:

Such a gesture was loaded with symbolism as the church provided the only space in East Germany where people could talk about things that could not be discussed in public.⁷

The church would be the one place where anyone could come, where anyone could speak, without worry, without fear. The church would be the safe haven in the midst of a fear-mongering world. And the people came. Young people. Old people. People of faith. Atheists. Here people found a refuge. Here people found hope in the shadow of Moscow's field commanders, the East German government that maintained power through fear, intimidation, and oppression. The numbers swelled each week. Initially, the authorities paid little attention. Churches were frowned upon, but not viewed as any real threat. In response to the increasing numbers, that hands-off policy changed. In May of 1989, the government blocked the streets leading to the church hoping to

⁶ <http://www.godgossip.org/article/did-a-prayer-meeting-really-bring-down-the-berlin-wall>

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discourage people from attending. And still they came. In October, around the 40th anniversary of the German Democratic Republic, the Communist Leader in East Germany insisted that the church should be closed. Police beat and arrested protesters outside the church. Everything was building toward Monday, October 9:

An article appeared in a local newspaper announcing that the counter-revolution would be put down on Monday [the 9th of] October ‘with whatever means necessary.’ People involved in the meetings feared a bloodbath ‘The church was visited by doctors who told us that hospital rooms had been made available for patients with bullet wounds. So we were absolutely terrified of what might happen,’ Pastor Führer said.⁸

When 8000 worshippers poured into the streets, meeting up with as many as 70,000 others, Pastor Führer led them straight toward the police. They carried candles and chanted, “We are the people.” And “No violence.” Führer later recalled that:

The tension was palpable. But at the decisive moment the police stood aside and let the protesters march by... ‘They didn’t attack.’ [Führer said.] ‘They had nothing to attack for. East German officials would later say they were ready for anything, except for candles and prayer.’⁹

The people, many of whom had not been raised or steeped in the faith, ultimately refused to be swayed by the language of fear. The church taught them a different way, a new language, one that was unfamiliar. Amidst shouts of fear and whispers of intimidation, the church did not cower within her walls. Instead, she stepped boldly into the street and spoke the steady word of Jesus Christ, her one true head, the word of courage, hope, and faith. Just one month later, the wall came down.

I have always loved language. I became an English major largely because I am fascinated with the beauty and power of words. Greek and Hebrew were two of my favorite subjects in seminary. I loved studying French, and I have recently been trying my hand at Spanish thanks to Duolingo. There is only one language I hope to be most fluent in, however: the language of faith, courageous, compassionate faith. It is not always an easy language to learn, let alone become fluent. In this and every generation, those who preach and teach fear

⁸ <http://www.godgossip.org/article/did-a-prayer-meeting-really-bring-down-the-berlin-wall>

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insist on trying to convince us and the world around us that theirs is the international language. Whether they speak Aramaic or Hebrew, Arabic or English, French or Urdu, Swahili or German or Russian, there are many voices today that are all too fluent in the language of fear.

The language of fear is not the language of faith. Fear is not, never has been, and never will be our mother tongue. Fear is not the language heard in the songs of angels or the promises of prophets or in the parables of a carpenter from Nazareth. God—our one true King—does not speak in the language of intimidation or bullies. Those who speak for God have no business speaking the language of intimidation or fear-mongering either. Instead, in the face of field commanders in every age, we the church, the Body of Christ are called to speak a different word, a promise of love, of courage, of compassion, of peace. That is the vision to which we point. That is the holy promise we are called to imagine, along with those who came before us, including Isaiah:

In the days to come
the mountain of the Lord's house
will be the highest of the mountains.
It will be lifted above the hills;
peoples will stream to it.
Many nations will go and say,
'Come, let's go up to the Lord's mountain,
to the house of Jacob's God
so that he may teach us his ways
and we may walk in God's paths.'
Instruction will come from Zion;
the Lord's word from Jerusalem.
God will judge between the nations,
and settle disputes of mighty nations.
Then they will beat their swords into iron plows
and their spears into pruning tools.
Nation will not take up sword against nation;
they will no longer learn how to make war.
Come, house of Jacob,
let's walk by the Lord's light.¹⁰

¹⁰ Isaiah 2:1-5, CEB

In the face of those who would have us cower on the wall or hide within our walls, the Word of the Lord calls us to speak a word of courage, hope, peace, and justice. In Jesus Christ, God's Word made flesh, we are called to speak a different language. We are called to move together toward a time when fear is not be the word of the day, a time when we trade our swords for plows and our spears for garden tools, a time when we lay aside our battle cries for prayers and candles and shouts of joy on God's holy mountain. *Come, dear friends, let us walk in the light of the Lord.*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.