

“Folly”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 36:1-3, 13-20; 37:1-7; Isaiah 2:1-4
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Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost

“We are the Borg. Lower your shields and surrender your ships. We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Your culture will adapt to service us. Resistance is futile.”¹

If you’re not a fan of Star Trek, perhaps you know this one, from [no spoilers!] one of the Harry Potter films:

"I know that many of you will want to fight. Some of you may even think that to fight is wise. But this is a folly. Give me Harry Potter. Do this and none shall be harmed. Give me Harry Potter, and I shall leave Hogwarts untouched. Give me Harry Potter, and you will be rewarded. You have one hour.”²

I bet this congregation could come up with all sorts of other examples of this kind of pronouncement: You have no chance. It’s over. Give up now and make it easier for yourselves. Anyone who tells you that you can prevail is a liar. Resistance is futile. Fighting on is folly.

We can add to our list of baddies King Sennacherib of Assyria, and his lackey, the Rabshekah. This general has some heated words for Jerusalem: “Thus says the king...” He tells the people that any promises from their king, Hezekiah, are fake news. If Hezekiah tries to tell them to rely on their God, they need to fear, and fear a whole lot, because Assyria cannot be stopped.

Don’t you see how ridiculous it is to bring God into the equation when lives are on the line? Don’t you see how all your faithfulness means so little in the face of the empire about to consume you? Put your god away and go along with the empire — it’s what’s best for you and your family.

Hezekiah begins rituals of mourning. Perhaps he is afraid. Or perhaps he knows how convincing this message of fear can be. The story that King Sennacherib’s general is selling tells you that there’s no way to maintain your identity, no way to stand firm. It crushes you. And then it makes promises: after you’ve given up, we’ll go easy on you. You can have...stuff. You can find happiness under the king’s boot. It’s safer this way, and you’re not really giving up all that much. Roll over. Resistance is futile. Fighting is folly.

Boy, oh boy, I really wish the general hadn’t started with “thus says the king,” and then kept saying that. He was poking the bear, and we realize that when Hezekiah’s servants go check in with Isaiah. “Thus says” is the catchphrase of the prophets. Except they don’t follow it with “the king.” “Thus says *the LORD*”³ is how they deliver their messages. Isaiah is not impressed with the Rabshekah or his message: “Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard.” Isaiah reports that God will lead King Sennacherib home, and there he will die.

¹ Star Trek: First Contact

² Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows - Part 2

³ Several brilliant folks have pointed out the “Thus says...” pattern. I heard it first from Kathryn Shifferdecker - “I Love to Tell the Story” - Podcast, episode 334 “Swords into Plowshares”

And Sennacherib did die back home, at the hand of one of his sons.

The story of non-resistance says to look out for your own skin and that the power of violence is decisive and normal. Its main concern is who has more horses or swords or guns or missiles. It's a pretty cynical worldview. It doesn't have much space for hope or goodness or beauty, and it mocks the story that the people of God tell.

Our story begins with "Let there be light" and "God saw that it was good." It's a story of looking out for others, and putting trust in something bigger than ourselves. And when things go awry, the refrain from God's messengers — from angels and prophets and from God's own son — is "Do not be afraid." It's what Isaiah says to Hezekiah. From Isaiah we also get those other words, the words about how God's story ends: "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."

The Assyrians do not take Jerusalem. But the Babylonians do, just over a century later. And so we might think that it took awhile, but Sennacherib was right and Isaiah was wrong. But I think Isaiah would disagree. We talk nearly every week here about how the world has a whole lot of problems and that the life of faith does not excuse us from suffering and that our scripture and tradition are very honest about that.

If we are leaning toward fear we might come to Isaiah and say, "Look around — I don't think this 'swords into plowshares' thing is happening any time soon."

And he would respond, "Yeah, I know. It's folly. But that's the prophetic vision. Thus says the LORD: 'They shall!' I know that's hard to imagine, but that's kind of the point. It's a vision beyond. It's supposed to make you uncomfortable — not because the vision is ridiculous and too big, but because you see a world ridiculously determined to stay too small.⁴ Don't be resigned to a shorter, sadder, more two-dimensional story. Don't shrug your shoulders at the inevitability of kings-doing-king-things. Don't let this be a world where fear is the driving force. Imagine a world of flourishing, instead of just getting by. Imagine a world where you're not just tamping down your own fear, but casting out fear for everyone."

And that is why Hezekiah sent his servants to talk to Isaiah. Direct contact with those prophets will make you do things. It'll stiffen your resolve and make you feel a little squeamish and lead to unintended tremendous acts of unexpected grace and courage.

This year we have had a series of what we have called "Stewardship Moments" — because we're Presbyterian and the word "testimony" makes us twitch — from Elders currently serving on the church Session. We'll have another in just a few minutes, and we're going to keep them coming.

But I want my chance to very briefly tell you why I pledge and give to this congregation.

I support this congregation financially because I have been blessed beyond my wildest dreams by being called to be your pastor. I am the luckiest boy in the world — I get to do fulfilling work with wonderful people and I get to belly-laugh every single day. You let me act like a not-quite-grown-up and yet trust me to lead in the most serious of moments. You are the most supportive, caring, and affirming congregation in the Presbyterian Church (USA). You are okay with me being silly with your kids, and your parents, and yourselves. Whether it's prayer

⁴ Thanks to Craig Koester, for leading in this direction — "I Love to Tell the Story" - Podcast, episode 334 "Swords into Plowshares"

beside a hospital bed or standing up publicly to denounce fear or laughing with you at an embarrassing volume at a coffee shop, you let me be your pastor in a way few of my colleagues are invited to be for their congregations

Even more important than that, I support this congregation financially because you choose to tell the prophetic story of “Let there be light” and “it is good” and “do not be afraid” and “this is my beloved” and “He is risen” and “peace be with you.”

The temptation is strong in Alabama. You could so easily decide that resistance is futile and find a church where the bills are easily paid and the welcome is...for most. You could trade in a bit of your inclusiveness for a gymnasium and a multi-staff youth program and a much bigger parking lot.

It is folly, a Rabshekah might say, to keep on truckin’ as a smaller church heaven-bent on radical hospitality. It is futile, a king might laugh, to support a church that casts such a ridiculous vision of what God wants for this world.

Thus says the LORD: Do not fear. I am with you. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God.

Amen.