

Isaiah 36:1-3, 13-20; 37:1-7; then 2:1-4  
Don't Be Afraid

Isaiah is the first of the Major Prophets. The book identifies itself as the words of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE prophet Isaiah, ben Amoz. It was composed during the Babylonian captivity and later, as there are three separate collections of oracles by three different authors.

This complicated set of readings from Isaiah follows last week's passage from the Book of Micah which included the famous verse on doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

The narrative impetus since September has been a powerful one: 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 their god.

The year is 701 BCE. For the past twenty years, the Assyrian empire has been growing, having taken over the many small nations around the areas that are now Iraq, Syria, Israel/Palestine, and Jordan. The northern kingdom of Israel, the ten tribes that settled north of Jerusalem, had already been swallowed up, and the people, like those of other kingdoms, had been scattered around the empire, relocated so they couldn't gather themselves to rebel.

Everyone in Jerusalem knew what had happened to their neighbours. At the

start of today's story, the Assyrian army has the city surrounded and under siege and now stands at the door of Jerusalem, threatening the same fate. King Hezekiah was a faithful king, one of the few success stories to be found in the annals of the Kings of Israel and Judah.

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 (like Hamath and Arpad) plus all their own cities he destroyed. If their gods couldn't save them, what evidence is left that YHWH will save the Judeans?

This is a classic set-up between a ruthless bully and God's faithful servant. Hezekiah doesn't cower, or bluster. Rather, he turns to Isaiah the prophet of discernment about God's desires in this conflict.

When Isaiah wrote his prophecies, the iron age was in full bloom, having begun in about 1200 BCE, and the Hebrew people were enjoying the benefits that iron plows brought to farming. They now had an excess of food from the countryside, Jerusalem was prosperous and they had built a great Temple under Solomon. But iron was a double edged sword because it made warfare more destructive and costly. Once the iron age came, you could no longer send an army of farmers out with their homemade weapons, you needed a serious industrial production of iron weapons, which meant having

iron mines and forges and taxes for a military-industrial complex.

Israel was not a great power like Assyria or Egypt, but they were significantly advanced for that era and had a nice piece of the arms trade, selling chariots and horses to all sides. (Solomon did not get all that wealth to build the Temple out of nowhere.) Much like the United States, Sweden and a few others today, they were major arms dealers for other peoples' conflicts. So Isaiah's prophecies are not just poetic language, hoping for peace in the face of Assyrian threats, it was also prophecy speaking for the majority of people who were farmers, versus the wealthy minority who made money from iron and war.

Isaiah proclaims God's desire that the Assyrians not prevail. And at the end of the narrative, we hear again God's desire for the house of Jacob to "teach his ways" and "walk in his paths," a place of peace and life for all nations.

There are many voices in the world eager to convince, "Be afraid! Be very afraid!" Fear-mongering is an extremely profitable business. Fear can motivate people to spend money on things they don't need, to get out and vote, or to lash out at faceless "others" called immigrants or Muslims or LGBTQIA+ persons, or ... *(fill in the blank)*. Fear can cause adults to overwork and kids to over-perform. Fear can create bonds of unity that feel really great: "us" against "them."

Tyrants have known for millennia that if you want to control people, make them afraid. Fear is the strongest motivation humans know, except for love.

Moreover, once fear-mongering colonizes our consciousness, we do the fear-mongers' work for them, internalizing the voice that repeats, "Be very afraid!" Fear about public schools or different races or money or jobs or marriage or kids or church. Internalized fear makes us believe that our security lies somewhere other than God – we lose our faith and trust in God. A great example in recent times has been fear-mongering based on false information, and conspiracy theories. One political party tries to create fear in the supporters of the opposing party by painting scenarios of doom.

"The world is going to hell in a handbasket" is not a Christian view of the world. It is not a witness of faith in the God who has delivered us from bondage; demonstrated Divine Love in the word made flesh; and decreed the renewal of all things. Living unexamined lives of internalized fear, as Sennacherib so hopes the Judeans will do, is not a Christian witness. As John wrote in his first letter; the world hungers for us to witness to the "love that casts out all fear."

We can learn from this story some basic dynamics of fear and trust. The Assyrian king's messenger speaks in the language of the Hebrew people, rather than Assyrian, a strategy to intimidate people on their own terms. Such voices try to "get into our heads," using the things or people we care about most to provoke fear.

The loudest voice gets our attention. In Isaiah's story, all the people line the city wall to listen to the impressive Assyrian delegation pronounce threats. We, too, are riveted by voices crying, "be afraid!" 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.

We are formed by these loud voices. Just as Hezekiah and his retinue tore their clothes and put on sackcloth as a symbol of their grief and mourning, we also react. The daily barrage from social media to cable news is loud. That voice becomes “the way things are,” and defines reality, denying the deep, true reality of God’s life within and among us.

In the midst of anxiety, a leader whose gaze is clearly focused on God can make a difference. Hezekiah warned the people not to listen to the threats, to keep their gaze focused on the God who had delivered them rather than on these bullies, no matter how impressive their uniforms were. And he turns to Isaiah to help him keep his eye on God. We too need leaders who draw our eyes back to the One who made us, who knows us, who keeps us and saves us. This One has the final word, defines reality, and steep us in love that casts out fear.

God’s first words are: “Don’t be afraid.” While telling people not to be afraid does not banish all fear, it is the first step to interrupting the false narrative of intimidation. “Be not afraid” is the word of truth in the midst of lies. We must proclaim this word to one another again and again.

God’s mission for the world is in contrast to fear, a different frame of reference altogether. In this frame of reference, God is at the centre. Isaiah draws attention away from the gaze on military might and toward the reign

of God. Jerusalem is not the beleaguered people under threat, but the centre of life-giving teaching, the flourishing of life, and a source of light for all people. When our gaze shifts from a horizon of fear to a horizon of hope, trust in God grows deep roots that sustain life.

It seems that among the many influences on what we do and how we relate to others, our state of mind plays a very powerful role. There is a great deal of truth to the religious traditions that advocate serenity as a spiritual discipline. They call it many things – being “centred,” staying mindful, getting peaceful. But it all boils down to recognizing that no matter what happens “out there” we can choose who we are “in here.” Regardless of our external circumstances, we can choose how we feel, what our attitude will be, and our state of mind. And that determines how we act and how we relate to others.

As we envision something better, are we the kind of people who take things in stride, who bring peace to a room, who spread kindness and compassion to those we meet? Or are we the kind of people who get angry at every little thing, complaining constantly, the kind of people whose company others prefer to avoid, who enter a room and the mood turns instantly tense, or anxious, or hostile? We need to remember that we are the ones who are responsible for being light in our world. If our world is one where injustice and violence and oppression and suffering thrive, when we envision something better, we have to ask ourselves whether we are contributing to that suffering, or whether we are contributing to the peace that God is bringing into the world.

That is what Isaiah was trying to say to the people of Israel and Judah. Isaiah saw God's justice and peace as light that brings life to the (pagan) nations. But he did not just see that light as something for an indefinite time in "days yet to come." He believed that the extent to which the Jewish people themselves became living light, the nations would be attracted to that light and come streaming to learn the ways of God and to hear the word of God. God's teachings is new for them, and will soon replace the knowledge of war. Nations will bring to Jerusalem their desire and hunger, need and hurt, greed and grievance, and submit them to the authority of the One who is able to make peace, bridge division, and resolve conflict.

An important detail emerges here: the house of God is traditionally a place of mediation. But typically it is a place of mediation through worship, bridging the divide between people and God. In Isaiah's vision it is still a site of mediation. But the mediator is not priest, prophet, judge, or king; nor is it Israel, the chosen people. The mediator is God. The divide God bridges is between nations. When God judges between them, they can no longer justify war. When Zion is lifted, the sword will be lifted no more. Nations will hammer their weapons into pieces.

The vision might stop there. It might stop with weapons shattered to bits, robbed of the power to destroy. But it doesn't. The vision does not affirm destruction of any kind, nor does it reject power. It is a vision of transformed and transforming capacity. Like swords and spears, plowshares and pruning hooks are tools made with human craft from the minerals of the earth and the growth of trees. The ingenuity and skill that devised weapons of war also

devised tools and technologies to cultivate rocky soil, to build terraces, and coax forth from the land the nourishment of olive, fig, grain, and grape. Isaiah sees in this same creativity the capacity to transform the machinery of warfare into a technology whose sole purpose is to sustain the life of families in God's good land.

There is a Proverb that says, "Without a vision the people perish." It is saying that we need to keep some future hope alive in order that we can live in our difficulties now. The vision of a world without war mandated by the great God of Zion, is far more than a fanciful dream of a few foolish overly optimistic peaceniks. When Martin Luther King, Jr. helped us envision a world without racism, he was doing more than dreaming. He was casting a vision, another way of seeing the world. If we can see the vision, we can live into it, and need not wait for some long-expected future to do so.

We simply must see the visions that God has for us and live always into them and toward them.

And that is the home to which Isaiah points Israel and us. And Isaiah concludes with a burst of prophetic hope that the vision can become reality. "O house of Jacob, let us finally or truly or really walk in the light of YHWH, urging the people of Israel and Judah to "walk in the light of the Lord." That had as much to do with the kind of people they chose to be – their frame of mind, their quality of spirit, the attitude of their heart – as it did with the way they acted.



Isaiah wrote words of encouragement for a king and a people in a spiritual funk. “Look up to see what will happen,” Isaiah seemed to say. “See what the Lord will do. Walk with him and he will bring you glory.”

It is helpful to be reminded that one of the important aspects of looking forward to something better is to look at ourselves – not just what we do, but who we are, which determines the quality of our lives. That may sound discouraging to some - as if we’re left solely to our own resources, but the good news is that the light of God – God’s gracious presence – is available to us all. That means we can choose to be the kind of people who are essentially living light, living out a spirit of kindness and generosity and compassion.

“A Chance for Peace” was a speech written by the Great American General and President, Dwight Eisenhower. His family felt that his most important legacy was this speech.

On his tomb are words from that speech:

*Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.*

In the details of the speech he noted:

*This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its labourers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than thirty cities. It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000. It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals. It is some fifty miles of*

*concrete highway. We pay for a single fighter with a half million bushels of wheat. We pay for a single destroyer with new homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people.*

Today we celebrate Christ the King or Reign of Christ Sunday. While the teaching of Jesus as the one, true king (King of Kings) is ancient, this holy day is relatively recent. It was established in 1925 by Pope Pius XI as a means to remind the faithful to trust in Jesus as their true ruler, and not in the fascist leaders and movements that were growing during that time - a time that saw people who were afraid - afraid of what the future would hold - afraid of their neighbours - the fear-mongering spread by leaders, politicians, and social media of the day - radio and newspapers.

So on this festival day, we are reminded - Do not be afraid - trust in Jesus above all else just like the Israelites were reminded by Isaiah to trust YHWH. But we are also reminded to trust in the people who in their lives exhibit God's love and point them toward the grace and justice of God's ways. Because the light of God's presence is available to us all, we can be people who shine the light of God in what we do and say, we can become living light for those around us. May God give you a strong faith and the wisdom to know who to follow.

Amen.

## PENTECOST 24 - REIGN OF CHRIST - NOVEMBER 20, 2022

God of life, we praise you for your abiding presence from generation to generation, blessing your people, strengthening us to lives of service, empowering us to witness. Hear the prayers we offer on behalf of your creation.

*A brief silence.*

For the earth, for the well-being of creation. Protect waterways and the air we breathe from pollution, and animal habitats from destruction. May your abundant life strengthen and renew all flora and fauna.

God of hope: **Show us your light.**

For the nations of the world. Instill in every leader's heart a desire for justice and peace. Support the work of the CLWR and all international collaborations that seek the goals of health and joy for all people, especially the people of Ukraine.

God of hope: **Show us your light.**

For those who are anxious and worried, may your peace, which surpasses all understanding, bring them to hope and wholeness of spirit.

God of hope: **Show us your light.**

For the church and its leaders, may we draw ever closer to one another in Christian love and unity. Embolden denominations and faith-based organizations in creative and collaborative ministries and increase our work for the sake of the Gospel.

God of hope: **Show us your light.**

For all who are undermined or oppressed. Amplify the voices of the unheard and break open stubborn systems of injustice. Bring about your righteousness and fill us all with your redeeming light.

God of hope: **Show us your light.**

For this assembly. Guide our pastors, deacon, lay leaders, and council members in discernment, and nurture new leaders with fresh ideas. Give this congregation a spirit of discipleship and service.

God of hope: **Show us your light.**

For all who suffer due to addictions, mental illness, depression, loneliness, may they find support, love and guidance in their families and communities.  
God of hope: **Show us your light.**

For those who are ill, recovering from surgery, hospitalized, or undergoing treatment. Sustain and support the doctors, nurses, and caregivers.  
God of hope: **Show us your light.**

For Gladys Thomas and the Orphanage in Haiti that they be kept safe from kidnapping and violence.  
God of hope: **Show us your light.**

We give thanks fro all who have died in the faith. Console us who mourn and comfort us with the beautiful promise of life in our kingdom.  
God of hope: **Show us your light.**

Accept these prayers, gracious God, and those known only to you through Jesus Christ, our Lord, **Amen.**