

I am going to attempt something a little different this morning. It's not often that I get two Sundays back to back, so for the next couple of weeks I want to talk about the relationship between the church and culture and I want particularly to look at the ways that language plays a part in how we go about engaging the culture. This morning we're going to look at the story of the Assyrian assault on Jerusalem as described in 2 Kings 18-19 as a model for the church to emulate as it seeks to live out the claims of the gospel as a particular community amidst an indifferent world. Because the story is a bit long, I'm going to read parts of it as recorded in 2 Kings, and summarize other parts to fill in the gaps. Before we get into it, I want to give you a little of the historical background. After the reign of King Solomon, the Son of David, Israel divided into two separate kingdoms: the Northern, called Samaria and the Southern called Judea – the setting of this story is in the Southern kingdom, Judea, around 700 BC. I'm going to suggest that you treat the next few minutes like story-time from elementary school and rather than try to follow along in your pew bibles, just listen to the story.

In the third year of King Hoshea son of Elah of Israel, Hezekiah son of King Ahaz of Judah began to reign. He was twenty-five years old when he began to reign; he reigned for twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Abi daughter of Zechariah. He did what was right in the sight of the Lord just as his ancestor David had done. He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan (Neshushtan, incidentally means the old snake, so apparently they had a sense of humor). Hezekiah trusted in the Lord the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him. For he held fast to the Lord; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that 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 fourth year of King Hezekiah, King Shalmaneser of Assyria came up against Samaria, besieged it, and at the end of three years took it. In the sixth year of Hezekiah, Samaria was taken. The king of Assyria carried the Israelites away to Assyria, because they did not obey the voice of the Lord their God but transgressed his covenant—all that Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded; they neither listened nor obeyed.

In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, King Sennacherib of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. King Hezekiah of Judah sent for a treaty to the king of Assyria saying, 'I have done wrong; withdraw from me; whatever you impose on me I will bear.' The king of Assyria demanded of King Hezekiah of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasuries

of the king's house. At that time Hezekiah stripped the gold from the doors of the temple of the Lord, and from the doorposts that King Hezekiah of Judah had overlaid, and gave it to the king of Assyria.

The king of Assyria sent his officials: his chief military officer, the Tartan, his head of staff, the Rabsaris, and his spokesman, the Rabshakeh with a great army from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem. When they arrived, they came and stood by the conduit of the upper pool. When they called for the king, there came out to them, King Hezekiah's diplomats: Eliakim son of Hilkiyah, who was in charge of the palace, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph, the recorder.

The Rabshakeh said to them, 'Say to Hezekiah: Thus says the great king Sennacherib, 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, that you have rebelled against me? See, you are relying now on Egypt, that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of anyone who leans on it. Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who rely on him. But if you say to me, "We rely on the Lord our God", is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed, saying to Judah and to Jerusalem, "You shall worship before this altar in Jerusalem"? Come now, make a wager with my master the king of Assyria: I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them. How then can you repulse a single captain among the least of my master's servants, when you rely on Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? Moreover, is it without the Lord that I have come up against this place to destroy it? The Lord said to me, Go up against this land, and destroy it.'

Then Eliakim son of Hilkiyah, and Shebna, and Joah said to the Rabshakeh, 'Please speak to your servants in the Aramaic language, for we understand it; do not speak to us in the language of Judah within the hearing of the people who are on the wall.'

But the Rabshakeh said to them, 'Has my master sent me to speak these words to your master and to you, and not to the people sitting on the wall, who are doomed with you to eat their own dung and to drink their own urine?'

Then the Rabshakeh stood and called out in a loud voice in the language of Judah, 'Hear the word of the great king, 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 wells, until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive oil and honey, 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? Where are the gods of the surrounding peoples that we have conquered? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena, and Ivvah? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of the countries have

delivered their countries out of my hand, that your God, the LORD should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?”’

But the people were silent and answered him not a word, for the king’s command was, ‘Do not answer him.’ Then Eliakim son of Hilkiah, who was in charge of the palace, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph, the recorder, came to Hezekiah with their clothes torn and told him the words of the Rabshakeh.

This is the Word of the Lord:

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In every sense, this is a dramatic encounter. Jerusalem is under siege. The Assyrians are at the city gate of Jerusalem with a large army ready to negotiate the terms of surrender so that a forceful invasion is not necessary. But I want to suggest that there are really two stories going on here at the same time.

The first is the story that is going on *at the wall of the city*. The Assyrian official is standing at the wall shouting the terms of surrender, but mostly he’s doing the 700 BC version of what you’d recognize in a game of pick-up basketball. He’s talking trash before the game even starts. Talking trash about Judah’s army, about her chances of defense, but mostly about her God. “Come on Judah, all the other people fell to Assyria praying to their god’s – your God is no different. This is the ‘92 Dream Team vs. Angola, you can pray all you want, but it’s not going to matter.”

Against these taunts the agents of King Hezekiah form an interesting strategy. They ask the Assyrians to speak in Aramaic, the language of the Empire, and to avoid speaking in Hebrew while they are conducting their negotiations. Because if the Assyrians speak Hebrew, the common people will hear their taunts and they will become afraid. Catching on, the Assyrian official continues his taunts in Hebrew and negotiations break down.

But there is also a conversation that goes on *behind the city wall*. Behind the wall, in the city there is a different language spoken by a different group of people who have a different set of assumptions about the world. This is where the Judean people speak to each other in Hebrew – they don’t know Aramaic and are baffled by what is going on at the wall. Following the king’s instructions, they do not answer the Assyrians directly. Within their own community, the people of Judah are given the freedom to speak and lament openly in Hebrew, the intimate language of worship and prayer. And in that freedom they also remember the stories of God’s faithfulness and it’s those stories that allow them to envision a future quite different from the one the Assyrians tell them is coming.

Then, behind the wall, out of the sight of the Assyrians, the King grieves and goes up to the temple. The leaders summon no less a figure than the prophet Isaiah to come and pray for the king and for the city. Yahweh has been mocked. Surely the one who led Israel away from the Egyptians will deliver them again. Unlike the conversation that took place on the wall, behind the wall no one doubts the power of Yahweh – even in the face of the threat from the Empire. The God whom the Assyrians liken to every other god of the

peoples whom they have conquered is singled out as “the living God” the one who is completely other.

Behind the wall, Isaiah delivers a word to king: “Do not be afraid of the Assyrians, God will indeed deliver us,” a pretty remarkable thing to say given the circumstances – the sort of thing that wouldn’t have any credibility on the wall. Sure enough, this scene behind the wall is followed by more taunts from the Assyrian officials on the wall. Following a long prayer of intercession by Hezekiah, God reassures the king again through Isaiah again, “By the way he came, by the same he shall return; he shall not come into the city...for I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.” And the whole scene comes to a two or three sentence resolution. “An angel of the lord struck the Assyrian army in their sleep, and in the morning, Sennacherib left and went home to Ninevah.”

The biblical scene presents us with two completely different understandings of reality that are represented in these two simultaneous but very different conversations – the one on the wall in the language of the empire, and the one behind the wall in the language of the community of faith. In one of these conversations, the God of Israel is dismissed with contempt; while in the other Yahweh is appealed to the “living God”. This distinction turns out to make all the difference.

I think this narrative offers us a couple of key insights about our role as a community of faith within the broader culture – the first of which is that people of faith must become bilingual. God calls his people both to be able to speak fluently behind the wall, using the Christian community’s distinctive language, perceptions, and assumptions about how the world works, and to take part in the conversation on the wall, which requires us to be able to understand and interpret the logic by which our broader culture operates.

The second thing that we can learn from this story is that the determinative conversation is the one that takes place behind the wall. If the church were to lose the ability to recognize and understand her story and its attendant claims about reality, than the only thing to do is to concede that the Assyrian story about God is the true one – the one where God simply doesn’t matter. Without the language of faith, the language of the culture is the only alternative. But when we do speak the language of faith, our identity as God’s people is reinforced and we are given the confidence to critique the dominant culture’s view of reality and be reminded that we don’t need to capitulate to its demands or be who it tells us to be.

The distinction comes up more often than we think. It came into clear relief for me this summer during a discussion about consumerism in my small group at the Montreat Youth Conference. One of our participants suggested that maybe Christians could present an alternative to the general cultural assumption that we always need to upgrade as soon as something newer and better comes along. Perhaps we could reroute some of our resources to meet some of the world’s needs if we just didn’t get that new cell-phone or iPod the moment our old one had a scratch. Natalie’s heartfelt suggestion went over like a lead balloon. One participant, a young man said, “I don’t see anything wrong with the fact that I like stuff. There’s no reason I should have to deprive myself.”

What struck me was precisely how deep the cultural logic had shaped this particular adolescent's perception – to use a word like deprivation in the discussion about whether or not to buy a new iPod when one already has a fully functional one, seems to me a category mistake. The truth of the matter is, our faith commits in certain directions. In that particular discussion we were prompted to ask of ourselves the question, “Do I love justice more than I love acquiring stuff”? It's a deep and a real question – one that perhaps the church has not been asking enough. And if the resources of our faith are not explored – if we do not recognize the language of our faith, then the voice of the culture is the only one we might hear. When that voice is so loud, that it drowns out all others – when we find ourselves speaking so consistently in the language of the empire, we forget that another conversation is possible.

But the primary reason we are called to learn the language of the culture is not so that we can learn what to avoid. The final thing that we learn from this story is that God's people are called to learn another language so that we can negotiate on the wall. If we only have conversations behind cathedral walls, we run the risk of being unable to engage anyone but ourselves. We begin to think that ours is the only conversation around and that everyone else must join it or be excluded. The conversation on the wall with the broader culture of which we are a part gives us the necessary distance to see whether we really are living up to our calling as the Church.

I have only recently realized what a remarkable thing it is that we do when we baptize our children. We are saying that we recognize that this child is part of a community that knows it belongs to God and we promise to immerse that child in a language that is quite different from the one he or she will grow up hearing in school and on sports teams and at work. I suspect that we know all too well the language of our culture. In order to live up to those promises, we have to know the language of faith. Jesus tells his disciples to abide in him and in his words not so we can remove ourselves from the world, but so that we can become effective translators of the truth we hold, outside of the walls, so that those who do not understand our language or our stories might begin to understand. After all, we worship a bilingual God: a God who translated the Word of God into the frail form of a baby in Bethlehem. The fact that God revealed his self-giving love in a human form tells us that the conversation behind the wall makes no sense apart from a community of people who thoughtfully and faithfully follow Jesus. May we continue to grow into our identity as such a community.

Amen.