

Hezekiah Kicks The Can

We begin with a short clip from Mel Gibson's 1981 dystopian classic, "The Road Warrior." Set in the Australian wasteland, post-nuclear apocalypse, a band of peaceable survivors is hunkered down inside a makeshift compound. They have one asset: a cache of gasoline. Now, bad guys are at the gate, come to take it. Folks line the ramparts, beholding the approach of the Humungous, announced thusly:

Toadie: Greetings from the Humungous! The Lord Humungus! The Warrior of the Wasteland. The Ayatollah of Rock and Rolla.

Humongous: "I am gravely disappointed. Again you have made me unleash my dogs of war."

Just walk away, he says; leave the gasoline, and I'll let you live. Just walk away. But even if the people are to believe him, where are they to go?

Such a scene presents itself in the 19th chapter of the 2nd Book of Kings. The walled city of Jerusalem is under siege, laid by a humongous invading army, come south from Assyria.

The modern-era tourist can walk the circumference of the old city via the ramparts. In 2nd Kings, these ramparts offered ringside viewing of events as they unfolded.

If Mel Gibson was putting 2nd Kings 19 on film (and I'll be borrowing from another of his Mad Max movies), it might sound like this:

Greetings from Sennacherib. The lord Sennacherib. The Nemesis of the north. The Assassin from Assyria. The hysteria of Samaria. Come to your town to bring you down!

Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, dyin' time in here.

Let us review how God's country had come to this. In the glory days of King David, the Hebrew nation had been a lean, mean fighting machine. But the excesses of his son and successor, Solomon, created deep fissures in the social fabric. Solomon was big into tax and spend: building great palaces, accumulating such wealth as to impress the Queen of Sheba; the funds coming out of the pockets of the people, via an ever increasing burden of taxation.

Short digression: Disparity of wealth and income inequality are not new to our generations. History tells us that when the gap gets too wide, bad things usually follow. So it is in 2nd Kings.

When the Hebrews first came to Canaan, in the generation of Joshua, they had operated as a tribal confederacy: 12 tribes, descended from the 12 sons of Jacob, each with their own turf and system of governance. This whole Kingdom-thing was a very recent development.

American history is written in States rights vs. Federalism. So it was in the Hebrew experience: a built in tension between tribal identity and centralized government--taxation being a particular flash point. When Solomon passed, a delegation from the northern tribes approached the new king, Rehoboam, prepared to pledge their loyalty in exchange for tax relief.

No one would accuse Solomon's boy of having the wisdom of his daddy. Said the punk to the petitioners from the north:

"My little finger is thicker than my father's loins. Now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions."

This was not well-received. Under the leadership of a warrior/politician named Jeroboam, the northern states seceded from the union. No one was going to confuse Rehoboam with Abraham Lincoln,

either. The secessionists in fact won their independence, with the effect that there were now two Hebrew nations: a northern confederation called Israel; the rump state to the south, Judah.

In his generation, Lincoln had declared, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." Father Abraham was, of course, quoting Jesus—words to consider in our polarized times.

Divided, the Hebrew people would in fact fall.

First to go: Israel. In 2nd Kings 17, we read of the Assyrians coming south across the Euphrates, laying siege to Israel's ruling city, Samaria. When the King of the North, Hoshea, finally said *No Mas*, he and his people were carried away to captivity, their nation effectively ceasing to exist.

Bringing us full circle back to Chapter 18, the Assyrians at the gates of Jerusalem. The King of the South, Hezekiah, seemed to have two choices: Surrender or die.

As Hebrew rulers went, Hezekiah was way better than most-- certainly an improvement over his daddy, Ahaz. We're told Ahaz had been involved in all sorts of "abominable practices," including worship of pagan gods and child sacrifice.

Ahaz' foreign policy had contributed to the current predicament. In his Farewell Address, George Washington famously warned against foreign entanglements. Ahaz had gotten himself and his nation all tangled up.

An Arab proverb: "Do not allow a camel to put its nose under the edge of your tent, for you will soon have a camel in your tent." Threatened by Egypt from the south, Ahaz had appealed to Assyria for assistance. Invited to put nose in Hebrew affairs, the Assyrians pretty much claimed the entire tent, obliging Ahaz to serve them.

Short digression: I've seen folks get entangled with all sorts of unhealthy stuff, usually starting with sin of some sort being allowed to get its nose under the edge of our tent, into our lives, only to have it eventually take over and consume us, so that we become servants of the sin. My advice: Don't let sin get its nose under the edge of your tent in the first place.

When Ahaz went the way of all flesh, the throne went to his son, Hezekiah, then 25-years old. The Bible gives Hezekiah high marks: "*He did what was right in the sight of the Lord just as his ancestor David had done*"-- David being the standard by which all Hebrew kings would be measured. Of Hezekiah we are told:

For he held fast to the Lord; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that the Lord had commanded Moses. The Lord was with him; wherever he went, he prospered.

Then a key passage, 2 Kings 18:7: "He rebelled against the king of Assyria and would not serve him." This was swell with the Bible guys: *You go, Hezekiah; Resist!* Not so much with Sennacherib:

Humongous: "I am gravely disappointed. Again you have made me unleash my dogs of war."

With the Assyrians at the gates, Hezekiah sends an envoy to negotiate. The Assyrian ambassador: "What's to negotiate?"

"Say to Hezekiah: Thus says the great king, 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?"

You say to me, 'We rely on the Lord our God...'

Ask your fellow worshippers up north how that worked out for them.

As noted, all this was being followed by the people on the ramparts. To this point, the negotiations, such as they were, had been in the common tongue. With folks freaking out, Hezekiah's negotiator asked his Assyrian counterpart to talk softer and switch to another language, one unknown to the people. Whereupon the Assyrian spoke all the louder, still in the Hebrew vernacular, so that all could hear:

"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 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?"

Hezekiah himself was freaked out now. We're told, "he tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth (goats hair) and went into the house of the Lord"—sending word to Israel's primo prophet, Isaiah: HELP.

In the prophetic hierarchy of the Hebrew Bible, no figure towers higher than Isaiah. It is Isaiah who gives us beloved images of a newborn savior, per chapter 9:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.... For unto us a child is born...and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Likewise, it is Isaiah who presents the Messiah, not as a conquering hero, but a suffering servant--this from chapter 53:

Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? ... He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with grief... He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole...

Throughout the 66 chapters of the book that bears his name, Isaiah pulls no punches regarding the faithlessness of his generations, Jerusalem held in particular contempt:

How the faithful city has become a harlot! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her—but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your wine is mixed with water. Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them."

Which is to say, Isaiah could hardly be accused of being a shill for the nation-state. He'd survived three kings before Hezekiah, including the wretched Ahaz. Given his earlier pronouncements of coming judgement, one might have expected Isaiah to receive Hezekiah's cry for help with contempt: The chickens have come home to roost! *Au contraire...*

The prophet is impressed that Hezekiah has humbled himself, the king confessing, "This day is a day of distress, of rebuke, and of disgrace." Hearing the confession, Isaiah offers this encouragement:

"Therefore, thus says the Lord concerning the king of Assyria: He shall not come into this city, shoot an arrow there, come before it with a shield, or cast up a siege ramp against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return; he shall not come into this city, says the Lord. For I will defend this city to save it..."

It's thought perhaps a plague swept through the Assyrian camp. Whatever the cause, a whole lot of Assyrians seem to have died in one fell swoop. Bottom line, Sennacherib limped home, the Assyrian Humongous subsequently assassinated by his own sons.

The immediate crisis having passed, Isaiah cautioned Hezekiah that this was only a temporary reprieve; judgement would again come out of the north, this time from Babylon:

“Hear the word of the Lord: Days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the Lord. Some of your own sons who are born to you shall be taken away; they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.”

Bringing us to 2nd Kings 20, verses 19 & 20:

Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, “The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good.” For he thought, ‘Why not, if there will be peace and security in my days.’

Hezekiah would seem to be thinking, *Judgement’s coming in future generations? Swell by me, so long as I don’t have to deal with it.*

I am reminded of Louis XV of France, whose daddy, #14 had been a Solomon-type. It was 14 who ran up the bills for Versailles. 15 figured he could hold things together in his generation, but pitied the one to follow, as expressed in the *bon mot*: *Apres Moi, Le Deluge*: ‘After me, the flood.’ The sins of the past were in fact visited on poor Louis XVI, at the cost of his head. XV wasn’t around to see it, of course, having died in his sleep at Versailles. Hezekiah would take that deal...

Look, I get it. Hezekiah had been under a lot of stress, no doubt contributing to what’s reported as a life-threatening illness in chapter 20. That said, my sense of leadership responsibility wants to hear him at least asking, “Is there anything I can be doing now to make for a better future, one where my sons don not wind up as eunuchs in Babylon?”

Instead, Hezekiah seems to have been content to kick this can down the road. Let somebody else deal with it....

At the end of June, I made public what had hardly been a secret, anyway: I’d be retiring in “One Year More”—nine months now. With my watch at St. Andrew’s winding down, I’ve identified with Hezekiah’s experience.

When my co-pastor bride and I first met the congregation, a dozen years ago, we found some pretty humongous challenges had been kicked down to us. I don’t mind telling you I was intimidated. Not knowing what else to do, I confessed to the Lord that I was over my head, calling upon the Lord for help; and, in fact, experienced Lord fighting for St. Andrew’s. I count many of you among His Angels.

By God’s grace, we’ve won many victories since, but with time running off my clock, I’ve seen issues that were going to have to be dealt with by somebody, sometime. I kicked some of this around with church leadership. If we wanted to kick these cans down the road, such would have been okay with me. But such was not the consensus. Out of those discussions came PROJECT ZERO. Come to tell us where we stand, folks from The Follow up Team. Welcome Janelle Baber and Laura Croom:

The Big Reveal - Project Zero Update

We are here to celebrate! As your Follow Thru committee, we are here to provide a status update on Project Zero and share some exciting information with you. First some history.

Project Zero Goals

- Retire St. Andrew’s remaining debt
- Raise funds to upgrade our Children’s Ministry

In 2015, many of you participated in a congregational survey. Based on your input, the highest priorities were 1) invest in the ministry to our children and 2) get out of debt and stay out of debt. We heard you loud and clear, and Project Zero was designed to do exactly that.

Mission Statement of the Children’s Ministry

To build young disciples excited to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

- We need to facilitate our children coming to Jesus, to share, educate and inspire on an age appropriate level

St. Andrew's is fashioning a welcoming Christ-centered, safe and loving environment for families of all types, we need to offer a mixture of Christian educational opportunities and wholesome fun.

Using the mission statement to guide every decision made, teams of hardworking talented people have been designing, researching and getting out the bids which are due back by the end of September. The trustees will now be making recommendations and selections. Remodeling is expected to begin in January 2018 with completion in time for Vacation Bible School. In future communications with you, we will be sharing pictures of the work in progress and/or completed toward this exciting end.

We needed to have an Early Childhood Education Director in place this fall to build and launch our new faith-based pre-school program scheduled to begin next fall. We are excited that Sheila Coleman will be our Director as she brings much experience and expertise to this role as well as a huge heart for Christ.

Total amount pledged - \$1,010,975 Over a three-year plan.

\$1,000,000 was our goal for Project Zero and we met it and surpassed it! The \$1,000,000 was to cover renovation and building improvement costs estimated at \$600,000 and pay-off off existing debt of \$385,000 (now down to \$341,000). After these two goals have been met, any additional funds will be used to renovate parts of the Family Life Center. FLC is used for youth worship, Upward Basketball, Scouts and other youth related activities.

The Big Reveal

We can't wait to share the progress so far! Many of you have begun your contributions to Project Zero and the funds have been flowing in at a steady rate. Thanks to your support – we are well on our way to reaching our 1 million dollar goal!

The Big Reveal

Currently we are at \$331,420 which is 33% towards our goal.

Follow Thru Team

- Our promise to you is to share our progress every step of the way. You will find this globe all around SAUMC as we add to our collected funds. We will share major milestones.

Project Zero Prayer

- Thank you for St. Andrew's United Methodist Church! Thank you for all the wonderful things you have done. Thank you for your countless gifts of love. Thank you for providing us everything we need, for we know all we have comes from you. Fill us with your goodness and love. Open our hearts and let us share your bounty with our church family and the community. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

It is right and good that we Share Holy Communion today. This next passage at St. Andrew's is going to be a very important time in life of this congregation. I ask you to join me in prayer for someone we don't know yet: That being whoever is appointed to come in here after me. I am personally committed to doing anything and everything on my watch to clear the way for your new pastor. In the meantime, I'm praying every night—and perhaps you'll want to, also: *Lord, lift up the person of your own choosing to give leadership to St. Andrew's.*

We've talked a lot about the "process," involving the bishop (who's going to preaching here the last weekend in October), and the District Superintendent, and the Staff-Parish Committee. My prayer is that it's the Lord will do the choosing, work through these to raise up the right man or woman to lead St. Andrew's into what should be a glorious future.

In the meantime, will you work with me to make sure that whoever that may be comes into a congregation absent fret, fuss and fear; that is instead all about Living, Laughing, Loving—God and each other. Nothing could please me more.