

Remembering a Different Kind of King
Isaiah 9: 1-4, 1 Cor. 1:10-18, Matthew 4:12 23
January 27, 2008

I begin this morning not with the words of the psalmist, but with these poetic lines from Lord George Byron. This poem not only illustrates 18th century Romantic poetry at its best, but re-tells the Hebrew legend of King Hezekiah's miraculous defeat of the Assyrian army outside the gates of Jerusalem. According the writer of the book of Chronicles, King Sennacherib had sacked forty-six cities within Judah, carrying away over 200,000 men, women and children in total destruction of Israel's countryside. Now, on the verge of invading Jerusalem, King Hezekiah, a righteous Judean King who had instituted much religious and foreign policy reform, drops to his knees to beg the God of Israel to intervene in the struggle to save God's chosen people. In the middle of the night, in the midst of the tents of the invading Assyrian army, God strikes dead 186,000 soldiers and Jerusalem is spared.

Here the words of Lord Byron:

*The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.*

*Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen:
Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.*

*For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and forever grew still!*

*And there lay the steed with his nostril all wide,
But through it there rolled not the breath of his pride;
And the foam of his gasping lay white on the turf,
And cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf.*

*And there lay the rider distorted and pale,
With the dew on his brow, and the rust on his mail:
And the tents were all silent, the banners alone,
The lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown.*

Biblical scholars have tried to find natural explanations to this mystery. Was it a disease, some sort of pestilence, even mice? The Assyrian account tells a different story:

Because Hezekiah, king of Judah, would not submit to my yoke, I came up against him, and by force of arms and by the might of my power I took 46 of his strong fenced cities; and of the smaller towns which were scattered about, I took and plundered a countless number. From these places I took and carried off 200,156 persons, old and young, male and female, together with horses and mules, asses and camels, oxen and sheep, a countless multitude; and Hezekiah himself I shut up in Jerusalem, his capital city, like a bird in a cage, building towers round the city to hem him in, and raising banks of earth against the gates, so as to prevent escape... Then upon Hezekiah there fell the fear of the power of my arms, and he sent out to me the chiefs and the elders of Jerusalem with 30 [talents of gold](#) and 800 talents of silver, and divers treasures, a rich and immense booty... All these things were brought to me at [Nineveh](#), the seat of my government.

So which was it – payoff or divine intervention? King Hezekiah was one of the “good” kings of Judah. He tore down the pagan symbols, reformed the Temple and returned the people to the ways of the Mosaic law. Although Judah was a tiny country

who still had to pay tribute to their powerful neighbors to survive he brought about justice to the poor and disenfranchised as well. He was a special king. This story and this king were important to know for the reading of our texts this morning. For the prophet Isaiah, who lived in the time of Hezekiah and supported his religious reforms, predicts a turn in Israel's future fortunes under Hezekiah. This text was thought to be like an invocation for the newly installed young king. It was kind of like a preacher doing an extended prayer at the swearing in of a new president. Isaiah remembers the times of the Judges, when Gideon frees the fledgling country from the main enemy of their times, the Midianites. What is the payoff? This wonderful counselor will bring peace, righteousness and justice forevermore, according to verse seven of Isaiah's scroll.

As Jesus prepares for his public ministry and to call his first disciples who he will lead, Matthew claims that Jesus remembers the words of the prophet. Jesus starts his ministry in Galilee, just as the prophet foretold, and it would be one that brings justice, righteousness and lasting peace. But will this be a different kind of king? Instead of a large, well-oiled army, he recruits a ragtag group of disciples. Instead of preaching destruction of perhaps paying tributes to buy off one's enemies, he preaches turning the other cheek and loving one's enemies. This is the messiahship, the mighty king that Jesus understands himself to be.

Paul witnesses to the Corinthians who start to split and splinter and follow at least four different leaders the simple, crazy truth of the gospel: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those of us who are experiencing salvation it is the very power of God." The most powerful symbol of our faith is not a hammer or sword; it is not a marching soldier; it is not a tattered flag over a conquered

land; it is not a symbol that emerges from a military conflict. Instead it is the means for execution of a person who resisted the dominant powers; it is a symbol of one who came to bring a new order that the status quo did not want and would do anything, even twisting the system of criminal justice to crush completely. That is the King that we worship.

The historical circumstances and questions surrounding the turning away of the Assyrian army raise a number of questions for us. But most of all, when we look at the prophecy of Isaiah, we ask ourselves “Is Isaiah describing a historical or a idealized king?” Whatever you conclude, what Isaiah is describing is a different kind of King. As we celebrated Martin Luther King, Jr. Day this past Monday, it has caused me to pause and ask what we can learn from this different modern-day kind of King who followed the teachings of Jesus Christ and Gandhi and others to demonstrate how non-violent resistant to evil systems can literally change the world. I want to lift up his six key principles about non-violent resistant resistance, which were very much the model that Jesus lifted up to us as well.

King made the following points about non-violent resistance:

1. **Nonviolent resistance is not for cowards.** It is not a quiet, passive acceptance of evil. One is passive and nonviolent physically, but very active spiritually, always seeking ways to persuade the opponent of advantages to the way of love, cooperation, and peace.
2. **The goal is not to defeat or humiliate the opponent** but *rather to win him or her* over to understanding new ways to create cooperation and community.
3. **The nonviolent resister attacks the forces of evil,** *not the people who are engaged in*

injustice. As King said in Montgomery at the public bus boycott, "We are out to defeat injustice and not white persons who may be unjust."

4. King's fourth principle may be the hardest to live: **The nonviolent resister accepts suffering without retaliating**; the resister accepts violence, but never commits it. Gandhi said, "Rivers of blood may have to flow before we gain our freedom, but it must be our blood." Gandhi and King both understood that suffering by activists had the mysterious power of converting opponents who would otherwise refuse to listen. Remember the images of fire hoses and attack dogs savagely sent into crowds of protesters who did not resist them? That is the power of this principle. It is the same principle that Jesus demonstrated as he was both scourged and crucified without resistance.

5. **In nonviolent resistance, one learns to avoid physical violence toward others and also learns to love the opponents with "agape" or unconditional love** - which is love given not for what one will receive in return, but for the sake of love alone. It is God flowing through the human heart. King said, "Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate."

6. **Nonviolent resistance is based on the belief that the universe is just**. There is God or a creative force that is moving us toward universal love and wholeness continually. Therefore, all our work for justice will bear fruit - the fruit of love, peace, and justice for all beings everywhere. King said, "Injustice experienced for one is injustice for all."

At our spiritual core, Bering is all about social justice. However our church organization only reflects that core in the establishment of the Reconciling Ministries Network. In recent weeks, Alan Richard has approached me about forming a structure within our church in which we can reflect on social justice issues and be a conduit for

social action. I commend his initiative and I have asked him to build forces within our congregation, to recruit people of passion for this cause. Also I have asked him to lead that group in a conversation to pick one, two or no more than three priority issues to address. If you feel called to this emerging ministry I ask you to be a part of this effort. There are so many issues for which God is calling us to take a stand – the environment, immigration, the war in Iraq – you can add many to this list.

I want to close with Lord Byron's final quatrain:

*And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,
And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;
And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!*

Where has the Lord's glance melted your heart like snowflakes in the rising sun? Find that place of melting conscience. And when you do channel that stream of warm waters toward the common pool of our collective efforts that can truly bring about God's coming kingdom. AMEN.