

There's a siege on. The Assyrians, the superpower to the North, have sacked and conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and they are poised to conquer Judah, too. They've made it to Jerusalem. A fierce army surrounds the city gates, and stretches beyond the horizon. King Hezekiah, and all his people, are holed up. And it feels hopeless. Not only does it feel like the Assyrians are going to win this conflict, but they are also going to do so by use of this agonizingly slow siege – no food, then no water, then no hope, then no will to fight. Drip. Drip. Drip. And then not even a drip, drip, drip.

I've never experienced anything remotely close to a siege, but even so, if I had to guess if there was anything worse than a siege in the daytime, it would be a siege in the nighttime. In daylight, you see all this imminent destruction in front of you, but perhaps there's enough activity within the gates to distract you. But when night falls, it's pitch black. You can't see what's around you. All you can do are two things: 1) imagine what's coming tomorrow and 2) wait for the worst.

This is where we meet the prophet Isaiah today. Tired. Dirty. Hungry. Thirsty. Waiting in darkness. Surrounded by his enemies. And the prophet seeks a word from the Lord.

Guess what? It's a word of hope, a vision actually. This mountainous city, Jerusalem, will sit on a perch once again. Yes, this morning, you may look out and see a mountain of armies hovering over you. But one day soon, this city, this fertile and sacred ground, this Jerusalem, and its temple, shall sit on a lofty plane. The world is gonna look up to this place. The world is gonna come to this place, in search of truth, in search of something better, in search of light for a better future, in search of God's goodness.

But that's not all. God's wisdom, God's truth, God's way, God's umph are gonna emanate from this place – Jerusalem will be the center of instruction for channeling the goodness of God; for living with the goodness of God; for sharing the goodness of God; for making God's world a reality in the present.

And this instruction will be SO profound, this God SO powerful and SO creative, that it won't need military force. People are going to trade in their swords for

Under Siege
Bob Stillerman
First Sunday of Advent, 11/27/2022
Isaiah 2:1-5



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

plowshares and pruning hooks; conflict will be arbitrated with justice, and dialogue, and the measured wisdom of God. The day is coming when rulers will no longer seek to war peoples into submission, but rather, people will seek the goodness of God that can love them into freedom.

God's people, that's you and me, and everybody, are gonna walk in God's light.

There you have it. That's a synopsis of today's text. And I am intrigued by a few things.

Let's start with King Hezekiah. He's stuck being a client king. Be it Egypt or Assyria, he's gonna have to pay his tribute. He'll play the one against the other; he'll switch sides as much as you and I would switch wireless carriers – anything to pay a little less. But Hezekiah's the one being played. Because no matter what he does, his power is rooted in dependence upon not-so-dependable sources. He doesn't have hope for a more prosperous Judah; he's not all that interested in the wellbeing of his people. Hope for Hezekiah is getting out of this siege so that he can simply live another year, and seek to outsmart the next warlord hungry for this territory. His is not a hope that breaks the cycle. His is a hope that simply extends the cycle.

And then there's Isaiah. It's one thing to have visions of hope. It's another thing to faith in them, to share them, to shed light on them. I have to tell you, if I was looking out an army of Assyrians, I would be hard pressed to believe that something other than sharp steel, and lots of it, would save me. Somehow, someway, Isaiah can work past the anxiety, the fear, the discomfort, the complexity, the nearly-everything, and make space for hope. And not just make space for it, but proclaim it, earnestly. Demand it even!

When I think about Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and some of the other prophets, it seems like we always kind of pity them. They got to catch a glimpse of the future that will be, but they didn't really get to experience it. But I'm not sure that's the way to look at it. They lived with expectant hope. It wasn't that God's world might come about, but instead, that it was coming about. They stopped counting on predictable systems to break the cycle; they started trusting in God to transform.

Under Siege
Bob Stillerman
First Sunday of Advent, 11/27/2022
Isaiah 2:1-5



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

Not only that, but they lived with God’s wisdom, love, and justice, and they shared that wisdom, love and justice with all they encountered.

We’re talking about bows this Advent season – those ribbons we wrap on special presents. I think about the few times I’ve been able to find that perfect, meaningful gift for someone special, and actually keep it a secret. Not very many. But when we identify a good gift, we live with this knowledge that it’s going to have an impact. We put it in a box, and wrap it with a bow, and wait expectantly for the day it can be shared with others. And yes, there’s nothing like seeing someone receive that gift in person. But even before that point, we live with a sense of satisfaction – expectant hope is realized joy. I believe that Isaiah lived with that same sense of satisfaction.

It's also worth noting that while this prophecy took a little time to manifest, it did manifest. The Assyrians, for no real reason, just up and leave one day. And one morning in Jerusalem, many, many years later, the Spirit arrived with fire, and wind, and earthquake, and a thousand tongues from across the globe spoke God’s truth, and a whole community of believers provided for the needs of one another. And there wasn’t a sword in sight.

Friends, today is 27 November, 2022, and we are under siege. I don’t mean to suggest that there are Assyrians at our gate. And no, we’re not living in a Steven Seagal movie – I am pretty sure we’re not solely dependent on a cook/retired Navy Seal to save us from a deranged Tommy Lee Jones. Netflix didn’t buy the streaming rights, so we’re pretty safe for now. But we all feel a weightiness. Maybe it’s stress. Maybe it’s grief. Maybe it’s anxiety about how to fit all the pieces of our lives together. Maybe it’s an urgency to find a place where rest, and security, and contentedness can all coexist, and to find it all before the walls of our everyday demands close in on us.

The scriptures tell us that God is coming into the world again this season, whether we’re ready or not, whether it’s in a form or expression we expect or not. They also tell us that God is going to make space for us – God is going to break down those walls that are closing in on us; God is going to make room for us to breathe; God is going to be a light that shines on us, even in darkness.

Under Siege
Bob Stillerman
First Sunday of Advent, 11/27/2022
Isaiah 2:1-5



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

And I wonder, as we hear this good news today, what space do we occupy? Are we like Hezekiah? Do we imagine a transformation that doesn't so much transform us as it transposes us? We're not all that concerned about sieges, so long as we're not the ones being sieged. Are we like Isaiah? Perhaps we dare to hope in such a way as to be able to see life beyond lifelessness, and indeed, live life beyond lifelessness.

My sense is that we're somewhere in between. Desirous of transformation, but not yet fully ready to believe in it. Maybe we are raw; maybe we've been burned one too many times; maybe it still seems to be too good to be true; maybe we've just been too busy to pay attention. Whatever the reason, I don't think it's a bad space to occupy. I think it's actually just right. This is, after all, the season of Advent, that time where we make room, and prepare our hearts for something new. Isaiah reminds us that we'll soon walk in God's light. And pretty soon, we'll meet the One who can show us the way. In the days and weeks ahead, may we prepare our hearts to both greet and follow Him along the way.

May it be so! Amen.