

Our passage tonight is a war of words.

Whose word carries weight?

The Rabshakeh says,

Thus says the Great King!

Thus says the King of Assyria!

But then Eliakim and Shebna say, “Thus says Hezekiah...please pray”

And finally Isaiah says, “Thus says the LORD”

This passage teaches us *not* to boast in empty words.

If you know the word of the LORD, by all means *say it!*

But if you don't know what God is up to?

What should you say?

I like Hezekiah's approach: please pray!

For the last eight chapters we have heard Isaiah's prophetic warnings about the treaty with Egypt.

Six woes were proclaimed against those who trusted in Egypt rather than Yahweh.

There was the woe of the proud crown of Ephraim

warning against entering a covenant with death (ch 28);

the woe of Ariel, the altar hearth –

as the fire of judgment is about to fall (ch 29);

the woe of those who hide their counsel from the LORD (ch 29);

the woe of the stubborn children, (ch 30)

the woe to those who go down to Egypt,

where God declares that he will deliver his city,

that a king will reign in righteousness,

and that his Spirit will be poured out from on high (ch 31-32).

And finally in the woe to the destroyer,

Isaiah warned that God's judgment is coming upon the whole earth.

Blending images of present deliverance with future Messianic glory,

Isaiah speaks of the coming of the kingdom of God

when “the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing;

everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;

they shall obtain gladness and joy,

and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” (Ch 33-35)

Having all of Isaiah's preaching in view,

now we hear of what God did in history to fulfill the word that Isaiah had preached.

In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah—in the year 701 B. C.—
Sennacherib of Assyria captured all the fortified cities of Judah.

All the fortified cities.
Only Jerusalem was left standing!

Like a great tide rising against sand castles,
so was the Assyrian army flooding throughout the land.

The last fortified city to fall was Lachish – about 25 miles southwest of Jerusalem.
And with the fall of Lachish, Jerusalem has no defenses left.

Sennacherib now sends his commander-in-chief, the Rabshakeh,
from Lachish to Jerusalem with a great army demanding surrender.
And he stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer’s Field.

Introduction: The Invasion of Sennacherib (36:1-2)

36 In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them. ² And the king of Assyria sent the Rabshakeh^[a] from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem, with a great army. And he stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer's Field.

We’ve been here before.

This was where Isaiah met King Ahaz back in chapter 7.
Twenty-five years before, Isaiah had come with Shear-Jashub, his son,
to meet Ahaz, and promised that “shear-jashub”—a remnant shall return.
It was here, at the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer’s Field,
that God had given Ahaz the sign of Immanuel.
It was here that God had promised
that Assyria would remove the threat of Damascus and Samaria.
But God had also warned that because Ahaz had trusted in Assyria,
someday Assyria would come for them.
And now, a quarter of a century later,
Ahaz’s son faces the same Assyrians.

Ahaz had surrendered the sovereignty of Judah in exchange for Assyrian protection.
Jerusalem was the vassal of Assyria,
paying protection money to the Assyrians in order to avoid invasion.
But Hezekiah has now rebelled.

And so now it is not the king of Jerusalem who stands
at the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Washer’s field,
but the Rabshakeh—the commander of the Assyrian army.

And it is not a prophet that meets him, but the lackeys of the king:
Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah.

1. The Word of Sennacherib (36:3-22)

³ *And there came out to him Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder.*

We've met Eliakim and Shebna before as well.

In chapter 22 we heard that Shebna was over the king's household,
but that he was proud and haughty,
and that his office would be handed over to Eliakim, the son of Hilkiyah.

Here in chapter 36 Eliakim is identified as the one who is "over the household."
Shebna has been demoted to "secretary,"
Eliakim is now the secure peg that Isaiah had said he would be.
He is the trusted envoy of the king.

And the Rabshakeh said to the envoys: (36:4-7)

a. "Thus Says the Great King" – the Prophet of Assyria Speaks (v4-10)

⁴ *And the Rabshakeh said to them, "Say to Hezekiah, 'Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria: On what do you rest this trust of yours? ⁵ Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? In whom do you now trust, that you have rebelled against me? ⁶ Behold, you are trusting in Egypt, that broken reed of a staff, which will pierce the hand of any man who leans on it. Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who trust in him. ⁷ But if you say to me, "We trust in 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"?"*

At first it may seem odd that the Rabshakeh says all this.

But remember that Hezekiah was a reformer who had destroyed the high places,
insisting that Yahweh be worshiped only in the temple.

No doubt many people were deeply offended by this.

For centuries the people of Judah had worshiped Yahweh in their own way,
but Hezekiah was insisting that Yahweh be worshiped only God's way.

And so the Rabshakeh mocks Hezekiah:

⁸ *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.*

Judea is hilly terrain and rather dry –
not ideal for pasturing thousands of horses!

⁹ *How then can you repulse a single captain among the least of my master's servants, when you trust in Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? ¹⁰ Moreover, is it without the LORD that I have*

come up against this land to destroy it? The LORD said to me, “Go up against this land and destroy it.””

The Rabshakeh has been in Judah for many months now,
and seems to have learned much of Judah’s religion.
In fact, he even seems to be aware of Isaiah’s prophecies,
since he declared that Yahweh is with him.
“Yahweh said to me, Go up against this land and destroy it.”

Hadn’t Isaiah been preaching for 25 years that Assyria would come to destroy the land?!
The Rabshakeh was a clever diplomat.

Within hearing of the walls, he spoke all this in Hebrew,
so that his words might work their poison throughout the city.

Eliakim, Shebna and Joah requested that he speak only in Aramaic,
the language of diplomacy,
so that they could take his message only to the king.

b. “Thus Says the King” – the Promised Peace of Assyria (v11-22)

¹¹ Then Eliakim, Shebna, and Joah said to the Rabshakeh, “Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, 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.” ¹² But the Rabshakeh said, “Has my master sent me to speak these words to your master and to you, and not to the men sitting on the wall, who are doomed with you to eat their own dung and drink their own urine?”

But the Rabshakeh refused, insisting that his words were not only for Hezekiah,
but for “the men sitting on the wall, who are doomed with you
to eat their own dung and drink their own urine.”

And so the Rabshakeh says *don’t trust in the LORD – trust in the King of Assyria!*
Read 36:13-20

¹³ Then the Rabshakeh stood and called out in a loud voice in the language of Judah: “Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria! ¹⁴ Thus says the king: ‘Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you. ¹⁵ Do not let Hezekiah make you trust in the LORD by saying, “The LORD will surely deliver us. This city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.” ¹⁶ Do not listen to Hezekiah. For thus says the king of Assyria: Make your peace with me^[b] and come out to me. Then each one of you will eat of his own vine, and each one of his own fig tree, and each one of you will drink the water of his own cistern, ¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ Beware lest Hezekiah mislead you by saying, “The LORD will deliver us.” Has any of the gods of the nations delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? ¹⁹ Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? ²⁰ Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that

the LORD should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?’”

Assyria has issued a challenge—not merely to Jerusalem,
and not merely to the Lord’s anointed king, Hezekiah,
but he has issued a challenge to the City of God, and to God himself.
He has declared that Yahweh cannot deliver his city.
No god has ever withstood the armies of Assyria.

And now Judah has fallen.
Every fortified city has been captured.
The Assyrian flood is lapping against the very gates of Jerusalem,
and the city of God is the last island in the midst of this ocean,
the last glimmer of light in the growing darkness.

In our day we hear the clamor of the city of man,
again insisting that our God is never going to make things right.
We hear the Rabshakeh calling us to trust in the word of Assyria!

²¹ But they were silent and answered him not a word, for the king's command was, “Do not answer him.” ²² Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah the son of Asaph, the recorder, came to Hezekiah with their clothes torn, and told him the words of the Rabshakeh.

So the three messengers return to Hezekiah, bringing him the word of the great King.

2. Hezekiah’s Humility and the Word of the LORD (37:1-7)

a. “Thus Says Hezekiah” – Pray for the Remnant (v1-4)

37 As soon as King Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes and covered himself with sackcloth and went into the house of the LORD. ² And he sent Eliakim, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and the senior priests, covered with sackcloth, to the prophet Isaiah the son of Amoz.

Having exhausted every means of earthly support,
Hezekiah finally flees to Yahweh.
He goes to the temple and sends Eliakim and Shebna, together with the senior priests
to Isaiah begging him to intercede on behalf of the remnant of Judah.
(37:3-4)

³ They said to him, “Thus says Hezekiah, ‘This day is a day of distress, of rebuke, and of disgrace; children have come to the point of birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth. ⁴ It may be that the LORD your God will hear the words of the Rabshakeh, whom his master the king of Assyria has sent to mock the living God, and will rebuke the words that the LORD your God has heard; therefore lift up your prayer for the remnant that is left.’”

The contrast with Sennacherib is crucial!
Sennacherib says ‘trust me!’
Hezekiah says ‘please pray!’

When you don’t know what God is doing –
and when you *do know* that the powers of this age are coming after you! –
don’t take matters into your own hands.

Instead, pray – and *ask others* to pray for you!
James says that the prayers of a righteous man avail much.
So ask the righteous to pray for you!

b. “Thus Says the LORD” – I Will Make Sennacherib Fall (v5-7)

⁵ *When the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah, ⁶ Isaiah said to them, “Say to your master, ‘Thus says the LORD: Do not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the young men of the king of Assyria have reviled me. ⁷ Behold, I will put a spirit in him, so that he shall hear a rumor and return to his own land, and I will make him fall by the sword in his own land.’”*

And when Isaiah hears this – Isaiah responds by calling Hezekiah to *hear* the word of the LORD.

Isaiah promises that the threat will be lifted (verses 5-7),
and sure enough the Rabshakeh discovers that Cush is rebelling as well,
so he hurries off to crush that rebellion.

3. Whose Word Will Stand: The Rabshakeh or the LORD? (37:8-35)

a. The Rabshakeh Defies the LORD (v8-13)

⁸ *The Rabshakeh returned, and found the king of Assyria fighting against Libnah, for he had heard that the king had left Lachish. ⁹ Now the king heard concerning Tirhakah king of Cush,^[c] “He has set out to fight against you.” And when he heard it, he sent messengers to Hezekiah, saying,*

To Sennacherib, Jerusalem is no threat.

It is so weak and helpless that he can come back and deal with it later.

But he leaves a warning behind (10-13)

¹⁰ *“Thus shall you speak to Hezekiah king of Judah: ‘Do not let your God in whom you trust deceive you by promising that Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.*

¹¹ *Behold, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, devoting them to destruction. And shall you be delivered? ¹² Have the gods of the nations delivered them, the nations that my fathers destroyed, Gozan, Haran, Rezeph, and the people of Eden who were in Telassar? ¹³ Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, the king of Hena, or the king of Ivvah?’”*

It is one thing for the Rabshakeh to say “don’t trust in Egypt” or even “don’t trust in Yahweh,” but to declare that Yahweh is no better than the gods of the nations is very dangerous.

To mock Yahweh is to awaken a curse that no man—no army—can withstand.

b. Hezekiah’s Prayer for Deliverance (v14-20)

¹⁴ *Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers, and read it; and Hezekiah went up to the house of the LORD, and spread it before the LORD.*

Hezekiah takes this letter to the temple and spreads it out before Yahweh.

“Read this, O Lord!” See what they are saying about you.

They are saying that you are just another village deity.

And for the first time in Isaiah’s prophecy we get to see a positive view of Hezekiah.

(37:16-20)

¹⁵ *And Hezekiah prayed to the LORD: ¹⁶ “O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. ¹⁷ Incline your ear, O LORD, and hear; open your eyes, O LORD, and see; and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. ¹⁸ Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands, ¹⁹ and have cast their gods into the fire. For they were no gods, but the work of men’s hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed. ²⁰ So now, O LORD our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the LORD.”*

Hezekiah now sees that Jerusalem’s only hope is the LORD.

It took him long enough!

But in spite of his dalliances with foreign alliances,

Hezekiah proves himself to be a true son of David.

He remembered the Lord his God and turned to him in his darkest hour.

The gods of the nations are but idols—the work of men’s hands, wood and stone.

You are different.

You are the creator of all things.

Hezekiah’s prayer is properly centered on the glory of God.

Even in the midst of his troubles,

he does not become self-centered.

Let this be a warning and example to you!

When face your darkest hour,

do not become self-centered in your prayers.

I doubt you will ever face anything as horrific as Hezekiah faced:

A prolonged siege with no hope of victory;

Humiliation and degradation at the hands of the Assyrian army;

Exile and the destruction of the whole nation.

And yet in the face of this,
Hezekiah remembered to keep his prayer centered on the glory of God.
He prays that God's name would be exalted through the salvation of his people.

All of his political schemes came to nothing.

The alliance with Egypt failed.

His attempt to buy peace was a disaster.

2 Kings 18 tells of how Hezekiah gave all the silver and gold in his treasuries
to Assyria to try to keep them from invading in 701.

But here they are anyway.

Prayer is the only refuge of the believer in times of trouble.

c. "Thus Says the LORD...Because You Have Prayed" (v21-35)

And God answers his prayer through Isaiah the prophet.

Verses 21-35 are framed by an opening reference

to the word the Lord has spoken concerning Sennacherib,
in the context of Zion (22);

and by a closing reference which summarizes what Yahweh says about
"The king of Assyria" in the context of "this city." (33-35)

i. Zion Mocks Sennacherib (v21-29)

²¹ Then Isaiah the son of Amoz sent to Hezekiah, saying, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel:
Because you have prayed to me concerning Sennacherib king of Assyria, ²² this is the word that
the LORD has spoken concerning him:

Speaking to Assyria, Isaiah declares,

*"She despises you, she scorns you—
the virgin daughter of Zion;
she wags her head behind you—
the daughter of Jerusalem.*

This is pretty brazen.

Jerusalem sits alone, with only a wall and a few soldiers to defend it
against the mightiest army of its day.

All the Assyrians have to do is sit tight for a few weeks,
and Jerusalem will run out of food and surrender.

And yet Zion is mocking the Assyrians,

because the Assyrians were so foolish as to mock the Holy One of Israel.

(23-29)

²³ "Whom have you mocked and reviled?
Against whom have you raised your voice

*and lifted your eyes to the heights?
 Against the Holy One of Israel!*
²⁴ *By your servants you have mocked the Lord,
 and you have said, With my many chariots
 I have gone up the heights of the mountains,
 to the far recesses of Lebanon,
 to cut down its tallest cedars,
 its choicest cypresses,
 to come to its remotest height,
 its most fruitful forest.*
²⁵ *I dug wells
 and drank waters,
 to dry up with the sole of my foot
 all the streams of Egypt.*
²⁶ *“Have you not heard
 that I determined it long ago?
 I planned from days of old
 what now I bring to pass,
 that you should make fortified cities
 crash into heaps of ruins,
²⁷ while their inhabitants, shorn of strength,
 are dismayed and confounded,
 and have become like plants of the field
 and like tender grass,
 like grass on the housetops,
 blighted^d before it is grown.*
²⁸ *“I know your sitting down
 and your going out and coming in,
 and your raging against me.*
²⁹ *Because you have raged against me
 and your complacency has come to my ears,
 I will put my hook in your nose
 and my bit in your mouth,
 and I will turn you back on the way
 by which you came.’*

The sovereignty of God is plainly stated.

God determined long ago that Assyria would be the agent of his common wrath
 in casting down the cities of the nations.

“I planned from days of old what now I bring to pass.”

And what God has established, God will also cast down.

Assyria’s downfall was its failure to acknowledge God.

Instead of thanking God for his providential governance,

whereby they had become the most exalted nation on the earth,

they raged against Yahweh and now sought to overthrow his city.
And so God will put his hook into Sennacherib's nose,
and his bit into his mouth,
and will turn him back "on the way by which you came."

Now Sennacherib will be sent packing.

And the Lord gives a sign to Jerusalem in verses 30-32.

ii. The Sign: the Land Will Provide for the Remnant (v30-32)

³⁰ "And this shall be the sign for you: this year you shall eat what grows of itself, and in the second year what springs from that. Then in the third year sow and reap, and plant vineyards, and eat their fruit. ³¹ And the surviving remnant of the house of Judah shall again take root downward and bear fruit upward. ³² For out of Jerusalem shall go a remnant, and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

The harvest has been disrupted by war,
but you will have enough to eat both this year and next.
God promises that their fields will produce sufficient food for them to eat
both this year and next—while they are rebuilding their homes and cities.
And the remnant shall return—Shear-jashub,
because Immanuel—God with us.
The LORD of hosts will do this.

(read 33-35)

iii. The LORD will Defend His City (v33-35)

³³ "Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the king of Assyria: He shall not come into this city or shoot an arrow there or come before it with a shield or cast up a siege mound against it. ³⁴ By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, declares the LORD. ³⁵ For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David."

It is not because of the faithfulness of the people.
They have rebelled against him time after time.
But for his own sake,
and for the sake of David,
He will defend his city and save it.

Conclusion: The Defeat and Death of Sennacherib (v36-38)

³⁶ And the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. ³⁷ Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned home and lived at Nineveh. ³⁸ And as he was worshiping in the house of Nisroch his god, Adrammelech and Sharezer, his sons, struck him down with the sword. And after they escaped into the land of Ararat, Esarhaddon his son reigned

in his place.

The conclusion of the story is anticlimactic.

The angel of the LORD strikes down 185,000 Assyrians.

The Assyrian records do not tell this story.

According to their chronicles nothing bad *ever* happened to their armies!

But upon returning home to Nineveh,

Sennacherib commemorated his great victory over the city of Lachish
with a carving in relief on the wall of his palace in Nineveh.

There are sixteen panels depicting the siege, victory, and looting –

with an inscription declaring, “Sennacherib King of the Universe, King of Assyria,
sits on a throne and the spoils of Lachish are paraded before him.”

While Lachish was an important city –

it was not anywhere near as important as Jerusalem.

And yet, Sennacherib wrote in his annals that he had humbled Jerusalem
and then returned home!

Historians have been puzzled by the failure of Sennacherib to take Jerusalem –

and by his rather ostentatious display of his victory over Lachish
(hardly the most important city that he defeated).

Herodotus tells us that a multitude of field mice descended on the Assyrian camp,
devouring all the bow strings and forcing the army to flee.

But, if you think about it, it’s not surprising that kings don’t want to admit their failures...
after all, neither do we!

We like to think that we are in control – that we can manage things.

But twenty years after the siege of Jerusalem,

we hear about the assassination of Sennacherib in 681 B.C.

Ironically, he is assassinated in the house of his god, Nisroch.

Yahweh protected his king and his city,
but Nisroch did nothing for Sennacherib!

Assyrian sources tell us that Sennacherib had passed over his two older sons,
in favor of Esarhaddon.

The older sons, Adrammelech and Sharezer,
sought to overturn this by assassinating their father,
but the nobles of Assyria did not approve of their actions,
and so Esarhaddon became king anyway.

Six woes covering eight chapters prepare us for the historical account in chapters 36-37.
57 verses describe the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem.
3 verses tersely tell of the salvation of Zion.

We have come to the conclusion of the first part of Isaiah's prophecy.
The Book of the King is now ended.
The first part focused on the Assyrian threat.
The Assyrians have come and gone,
and the Son of David is still sitting on his throne in the city of God.
God has protected his city.
He has delivered his people.

But the warnings of Isaiah 1-37 still ring in our ears:
"This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips,
while their hearts are far from me." (29:13)
Even though God has delivered Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib,
the people's hearts are still hard—their eyes are blind.
They cannot see the wonders of God.
They cannot hear his word.

God has tested his people—he has tested his king—with the Assyrian threat,
and they have failed the test.
They fled to Egypt for refuge,
and as we will hear next week—they also fled to Babylon.
As Ahaz had bargained with Assyria in order to counter the northern alliance
of Samaria and Damascus,
so now his son Hezekiah bargains with Babylon against the Assyrian threat.

Is God enough for you?
Is it sufficient that he be with you?
When trouble comes will you cling to him?
Or will you go running after someone else to save you?