

“Visions of Peace”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Edina Morningside Community Church; November 18, 2018

Isaiah 36:1-3,13-20; 37:1-7; 2:1-4

In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, King Sennacherib of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. The king of Assyria sent the Rabshakeh from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem, with a great army. He stood by the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller's Field. And there came out to him Eliakim son of Hilkiah, who was in charge of the palace, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph, the recorder.

...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! Thus says the king: ‘Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you. Do not let Hezekiah make you rely on the Lord by saying, The Lord will surely deliver us; 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 everyone of you will eat from your own vine and your own fig tree and drink water from your own cistern, 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. Do not let Hezekiah mislead you by saying, The Lord will save us. Has any of the gods of the nations saved their land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of these countries have saved their countries out of my hand, that the Lord should save Jerusalem out of my hand?’”

...When King Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the Lord. And he sent Eliakim, who was in charge of the palace, and Shebna the secretary, and the senior priests, covered with sackcloth, to the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz. They said to him, “Thus says Hezekiah, This day is a day of distress, of rebuke, and of disgrace; children have come to the birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth. It may be that the Lord your God heard 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.” When the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah, 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 servants of the king of Assyria have reviled me. I myself will put a spirit in him, so that he shall hear a rumor, and return to his own land; I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land.’”

...The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

Last Wednesday, Robert Bailey stood on a stage in Queens, New York and received a check for almost \$344 million. Robert Bailey is an African-American machine worker, now retired from the United States Postal Service. At age 67, he has [won the largest prize ever](#) in the history of the New York Lottery. With the money, he plans to get his mother a house and some land, to travel and invest the funds, and also to give something meaningful back to the city of Manhattan. This enormous jackpot came overnight, but the moment also took a lifetime to arrive. Bailey has been playing the same six numbers on lottery tickets

purchased every day for the past twenty-five years. The odds of him winning were around 1 in 115,000 but he knew it was possible, so on a rainy Saturday morning in October he bought the winning ticket. He kept trying for that win despite losses every day for decades, trusting in what he knew could be true despite all the odds against it. It's become a lifelong habit for him now. Even on his way to the award ceremony, he stopped for more tickets, telling a reporter, "I'm going to ride this out. I can't stop now." Robert Bailey is the latest example of people who believe in what appears to be impossible, who live their lives in pursuit of that goal, and who have the uncommon joy of seeing their faith vindicated.

It's that sort of faith in the unlikely but nevertheless possible future that guides the prophet Isaiah in our reading today. I don't know the odds of the massively outnumbered Hebrews surviving an attack by the far superior Assyrians, but it didn't look good at all. The Assyrians had invaded Judah and destroyed its cities one after another. They backed the Hebrew people and their puny army into the walls of Jerusalem, their last stand. It seems certain that Assyria will do to Judah what it has done to many others before, conquering them in battle and taking its leaders into exile as punishment. The Assyrian commander—standing in for pragmatic voices everywhere—calls the Hebrew people to reasonably consider the chances that their King Hezekiah's refusal to submit would lead to an eventual victory. He casts a chilling vision of the human consequences when Jerusalem is besieged, and suggests how much better it would be to consent to Assyria's rule. Against the idea that God would save the people, the commander points to all the ruined cities before who had claimed the saving power of their gods. Jerusalem would be just another example. King Hezekiah's fearful leaders bring reports of all this to the prophet Isaiah, but Isaiah tells them that the facts on the ground are not the only facts at play. There's also the fact that the God of the universe, the creator of the cosmos and guarantor of the Hebrew people, stands ready to assist. God desires peace rather than coercive, bullying violence like that of the Assyrians. Isaiah says that God will work—perhaps imperceptibly but also inexhaustibly—to bring about a lasting, permanent peace. This is the unlikely but still possible future that the prophet trusts in, despite the odds. History tells us that Assyria did indeed abandon its siege of Jerusalem, just as surely as Robert Bailey finally got his winning ticket.

I'm not going to compare being part of the church to buying a lottery ticket very often, but there *is* something parallel about this life of faith. Isaiah, the other prophets, and Jesus himself hold out a vision for our future that flies in the face of what we see every day. In days to come, Isaiah says, God's presence will be unmistakable. God will be in the center of all things, like the North Pole star around which everything else turns. God's light will be manifest throughout the earth, as a lighthouse shows the ways of safe passage. God's justice will settle every dispute, so there will be no more need of war. Deadly weapons will become instruments of life instead. Swords will be beaten into plowshares; spears into pruning hooks. "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." These are the visions of peace which we hear about from Scripture, and I know they still sound as far-fetched as they did to the Hebrews long ago. Nevertheless, people have been inspired for generations by these possibilities that they do everyday actions over years that help carry this vision along. In other words, we buy our tickets because we believe that another world is possible. We believe in a God of faith, hope, love and peace even though the world is often anything BUT those things. This church—alongside every other church, synagogue, mosque, temple, and place where people of good conscience gather—keeps that vision alive. We inherit such faith from our ancestors and baptize the next generation into it so they too can await the coming of God's holy realm. And because of that vision for what's possible, people do the everyday small actions of love and compassion that make peace more likely in the long run.

For what does your heart yearn today, beloveds of God? For a healing of relationships that have been torn by the trials of life? For family gatherings that bring harmony instead of division? For work that is meaningful and lifegiving, rather than frenzied and life-draining? For an end to climate change, with its disastrous fires, storms and diseases? For children to live in the safe embrace of nurturing adults

with time to nurture their growing? For wars to cease, and for a peaceful home around every refugee? For racism to end, as well as every bias against the differences among us? For love that knows no limits, and proclaims goodwill to all? What vision feels far off and yet so necessary, so real, that we will take everyday action to see it come to pass? This is the far-off but very real vision that we collectively call the reign of God, and that we commit ourselves to every time we pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as in heaven”.

The odds are that we won’t see the kingdom of God realized in our lifetimes, but it *will* come to pass at some point, just as people win the lottery every week. That which is unlikely is still very much possible, and I want to be part of a community inspired by that vision. I want to stand with a people who take great and small steps in the direction of God’s realm, who do our part to show up together—in this congregation and in the broader community—to do the things that make for peace. That’s why we show up here week by week. That’s why we give of our time and talent throughout the week. That’s why we pledge and give, to support the vision of God’s realm on earth as in heaven, even though we may never live to see it *fully* realized in our time.

Because after all, who’s to say what’s possible and what’s not? God’s own prophets, and the people who bear God’s vision in the world, have seen the kingdom of God coming for millennia, even to the present moment. We believe with them that the peace that Isaiah speaks about is not only possible, it’s inevitable. It’s just a matter of time, and of simple, trusting communities that show up and buy our tickets on the peace train. This is our time to do our part, and this is God’s time to keep the vision alive in us and others. I’m not normally a betting man, but I will wager everything I have on that. Amen.