

3 May 2020

Time: The Sin of Hezekiah
Isaiah 39:1-8

I'd like to start with some introduction to what we're going to be doing in messages for the next few weeks. Since Easter I have been presenting what is a core element of my own understanding of God and faith: that God loves transformation and growth for their own sake and that God designed life with that in mind. The natural world was made in such a way that living things begin as seeds, and from that insignificant beginning each creature then develops toward the being it was designed to become. We human beings are the most complex of all living things inasmuch as we have been granted the freedom to participate in our own creation. We were made to become the Image of God – showing the same kindness, compassion, justice, and love that are the essence of our Creator – and we are invited to be a willing part of that becoming.

In earlier sermons, I suggested that this helps us to understand why there is pain and suffering in the world. God created a world that would encourage us to grow and that would teach us the importance of kindness and love. In a world without pain, kindness is unnecessary and even love feels irrelevant. Moreover, God's gift of free will to us has opened the door to still greater suffering, because of course the freedom to follow in God's loving footsteps is also the freedom to set off on one's own path if one so chooses. But paths that lead away from God, tend toward selfishness, greed, cowardice, and cruelty. The evil and suffering of this world can seem so overwhelming as to make one wonder if freedom is such a good deal, but there really isn't any way back. We can try to shut ourselves in safe boxes of legalism or tradition – and many do – but that's not who we were made to be. Our only way to fight against the darkness is to set our steps daily on the path toward God, to seek each day to become a little bit more the image of God we were made to be.

In short, I believe that humans were created with the capacity to grow toward this purpose. In this life we walk through what the Church Father Irenaeus called a "Vale of Soul-Making." Action by action, decision by decision, we choose whether we are going to partake more fully of the mind of God, or turn away from it. So, as we continue through this unusual period in the life of our faith, a time of worshiping together while remaining isolated in separate bubbles, I want to spend the next few weeks looking inward, at some of the differences between the human mind and the mind of God, and some of the choices we can make that will lead us forward on our journey toward becoming the Image of God.

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We're about to read a passage from Old Testament history, and such readings usually make more sense in context. The kingdom period of Jewish history ended with a double whammy of invading empires. First, about seven centuries before Christ, there was the Assyrian empire, which destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel but allowed the southern kingdom of Judah to survive. Then, a century or so later, the Empire of Babylon conquered the Assyrians, and they came down and destroyed the kingdom of Judah. The Babylonians leveled Jerusalem and its temple and took everything of value, and much of the population, to Babylon. Our story concerns Hezekiah, who was king in Judah during the time of the first invasion, by the Assyrians.

Now, Hezekiah was one of the good guys. There aren't many Israelite kings that the Bible approves of, but he's one of that three or four. He put a stop to worshipping foreign gods, did a massive temple renovation, and most impressive of all turned to God for help when the Assyrian armies invaded, and as I said earlier, Judah was spared. Shortly after that, Hezekiah became ill, so ill that God sent the prophet Isaiah to tell him to put his affairs in order. But then Hezekiah prayed to the Lord for healing, and God sent Isaiah back to tell him that his prayer had been heard and he would live for another fifteen years. (I always thought that was a bit of a mixed blessing. Would *you* want to know exactly how long you have left?) Anyway, today's reading picks up immediately after that healing. The story is told in both 2 Kings 20 and Isaiah 39. We read from Isaiah 39, all eight verses of the chapter.

39 At that time King Merodach-baladan son of Baladan of Babylon sent envoys with letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that he had been sick and had recovered. ²Hezekiah welcomed them; he showed them his treasure-house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, his whole armory, all that was found in his storehouses. There was nothing in his house or in all his realm that Hezekiah did not show them. ³Then the prophet Isaiah came to King Hezekiah and said to him, 'What did these men say? From where did they come to you?' Hezekiah answered, 'They have come to me from a far country, from Babylon.' ⁴He said, 'What have they seen in your house?' Hezekiah answered, 'They have seen all that is in my house; there is nothing in my storehouses that I did not show them.'

⁵ Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, 'Hear the word of the Lord of hosts: ⁶Days 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. ⁷Some 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.' ⁸Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, 'The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good.' For he thought, 'There will be peace and security in my days.'

This is the last story we get about Hezekiah. Kind of leaves a bad taste in your mouth, doesn't it? The great Hezekiah, on top of the world after having survived both an invasion by the greatest power in the Ancient Near East *and* a terminal illness, hears that his nation and his descendants would all be taken from Jerusalem to serve the pleasure of the king of Babylon, and his response is: "But I won't be here, right? That's okay, then. May the Lord's will be done."

As we consider how to conform our minds to the mind of God, one of the areas to think about is how we look at time. Hezekiah hears Isaiah's prophecy of doom and basically congratulates himself that he'll miss it, putting the fate of his children and grandchildren in the back of his mind. Nothing to do with me. Fairly selfish and callous, you're probably thinking, but that is how we normally think. As a species and perhaps particularly as a culture, we demonstrate the same cavalier attitude toward our children's future. The obvious example, which most of you have already thought of, is our attitude toward climate change. I'm going to assume that the 99% of scientists who say that this is real and we are the cause are correct, and if they are, then the time for us to act is about thirty years ago. Failing that, though, we could still act now and perhaps make a difference, but we aren't doing that either. Too many of our own jobs and creature comforts make it inconvenient for us to make the sort of changes as a nation that

would make a difference for the future. Besides, you know, most of the worst stuff they're talking won't be coming along for decades. I'll be gone, right? It's the sin of Hezekiah.

Now this sermon isn't primarily intended as a call for environmental activism, although anyone who would like to take it that way is welcome to do so. For the moment, I'm just using this issue as an obvious and important example of our tendency to think of our own time, without considering effects on future generations. That's how the human mind usually works. But it's not how God thinks. God thinks beyond our limited horizons. The Bible reminds us of this repeatedly – God's thoughts are not as our thoughts, God is the one who makes promises to Abraham that won't be fulfilled for centuries, God is the ancient of days, the everlasting one to whom a thousand years are like a day – but even without the testimony of scripture this should be obvious. If God is who we claim – the eternal Creator of all – then it would be ridiculous to imagine that God is as focused on our immediate future as we are. So if we are to grow into the mind of God, we need to train our minds to think beyond our own circumstances – to choose our actions based not just on what will meet our needs now, or even over the next five or ten or twenty years, but also on what will make a difference generations from now. The law of the Iroquois nations called for leaders to make decisions based on their impact for seven generations. To God, seven generations is still short-sighted, but that would be a good start.

Yeah, but how do we do that? How are we supposed to know what sorts of things will make a difference generations from now? Well, one thing we could do – just a thought here – is look at what sorts of actions God chose when God was on earth. It's revealing. Yes, Jesus went around feeding and healing people, but not everyone and not all the time. Mostly, what Jesus focused his time on was his disciples. He invested his life in transforming a few (relatively unpromising) individuals. When he had opportunities to make a bigger splash with larger crowds, he passed them up – dismissing the crowds who wanted to make him king, for instance. The example of Christ is clear: if you want to change the world for generations, plant seeds.

Let me illustrate this in practice by comparing two different types of churches. For the past forty years or so, we Christians in the Western world have been infatuated with the promise of the "mega-church": churches with massive programs that bring tens of thousands of people together to worship every Sunday. They have seemed to us the one bright spot amid a larger decline in our faith. When mega-church pastor Rick Warren wrote out his process in *The Purpose-Driven Church*, we pastors *all* read it and tried to do what Pastor Rick had done. Why wouldn't we? If the larger church is a forest, these are the redwoods. But here's the thing about redwoods: there's a reason they only grow along the foggy northern California coast. They take most of their moisture from that fog. If they had to survive on water from their roots, they'd never reach those heights. And in any other environment, they'd die. Well, these mega-churches are like that. They thrive in wealthy suburbs of major cities and can do great work there, but as the thousands of us who tried can testify, they don't transplant well.

Now another sort of church. In a one or two hour radius around every seminary, there are churches – mostly tiny country churches – who serve as weekend pastorates for seminary students. Many of these churches have done that for generations and see that as their mission. They patiently endure terrible sermons featuring the Greek word or theological concept their pastor learned that week and guide those newbies through the intricacies of working with committees and forgive them when they screw up and hint them toward forgotten duties, and

thank God they are there. Those students who have had those weekend postings all say that's where they learned to be pastors. So here's my question: a hundred years from now, which do you think will have had the greatest impact on the most lives? A mega-church or one of these little churches training people to go out and minister? I don't know, but it could go either way. I do know one thing, though: I know which looks more like the ministry of Christ.

One more example, moving from the church to the individual. This congregation at Lake Street in Eau Claire has had quite a few distinguished pastors in its history. (Those were the days, huh?) But do you know which of your previous pastors I have heard people speak of more than any other? Which one is remembered as having made the biggest difference in people's own lives, who shaped how people see God and ministry more than any other? One of your associate pastors: Janet Ellinger. I've heard some form of, "Janet's the reason I decided to give God another chance," from at least three different people. And how did Janet do all this? Well, it wasn't by what she said in the pulpit – that may be the least enduring thing we pastors do. It was by her loving involvement in people's lives. That's how you plant seeds to make a difference for the next generation, and the one after that. [I'm not just saying this because Janet sometimes drops in on this online service, but just in case: Blessings on you, Janet, from a congregation that loves you.]

So as we make our way through our own Vale of Soul-Making, my challenge is for us to train ourselves to look not just for ways to make a difference now, but also for opportunities to change the world of our great-grandchildren. These will primarily take the form of planting seeds of faith in other individual lives. Let this also inform our church decision. As we deal with emergencies (as we must) and as we make plans for the next year or two (as we should) let us also look for ways that we can influence the world long after we are gone, by investing in children, by intentionally representing Christ to strangers we meet once, and by investing in the lives of others whom we may never meet at all. Let us do ministry, but more importantly, let us plant seeds.

Let us pray:

God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.

You have planted within us seeds of beauty,

of mercy and compassion,

of courage and integrity.

You have made us to love,

to love the delights of this world, and to care for them,

to love the creatures we share this world with, and to respect them,

to love each other, and serve each other freely.

All this you instilled in us from our birth,

and though we forget . . . often . . .

We remember when we see the signs of your love in the compassion in others

the signs of your justice in the courage of others

and we remember who we were always supposed to become.

God, set us free from all those things that are holding us back,

from truly become yours. Amen.