

I don't know about you, but when I first read the scripture text for this morning, my mind got bogged down in all the unfamiliar names of people and places like Sennacherib, Hilkiyah, Hamath, and Sepharvaim. They distracted me from the plot of the story. Did anyone else get a little lost in what was going on?

Here's a quick recap: It's the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE and for the past 2 decades, the Assyrian Empire has swept through the countryside conquering city after city. They have won every battle, taken every city, and killed many people and sent others into exile. Leading up to this time, the kingdom of Israel had split into two - the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. The Assyrian army has laid waste to the northern kingdom. Everyone in Jerusalem knows what has happened to their neighboring towns, and now the Assyrian army has them surrounded.

Now the Assyrian army has arrived at Jerusalem in the southern kingdom of Judah. The King's commander speaks in their own language, reminding them of the death and destruction of the past 20 years. He gives them the option to simply surrender and make things easy for themselves. The commander's words pierce their hearts: do not believe what your king tells you...look at the power and destruction my king has already done. Do not believe what your god tells you...the gods of other lands were no match for the power of my king and his army. The great king of Assyria will conquer you, no matter what little stories you tell yourself. But if you just surrender, we'll be nice, you can be free of this siege and have your own fig trees and everything.

Even the king of Judah, King Hezekiah is fraught with fear and begins to grieve what seems like the only possible outcome – the end of the kingdom of Judah. He tears his clothes in distress and puts on clothes worn for grieving.

This is not an experience that many of us can relate to on a literal level. I think we do a disservice to the wisdom of scripture and the Still-speaking voice of God if we try to take literal meaning from most of scripture. Most of us haven't been faced with an invading army and the potential loss of our country. But we do experience, on pretty much a daily basis, an influx of voices that try to convince us to give up our trust in God. There are countless ideologies that compete for our attention and promise us a false

peace rather than a lasting salvation. It is this lasting salvation that Isaiah points to at the beginning of the book, in chapter 2 with the image of turning swords into plowshares. Taking instruments of death and violence and recreating them into tools that give life. That word salvation can carry a lot of baggage. It has been claimed by the dominant Christian voices to mean being saved from hell once a person claims Jesus Christ as their lord and savior. But that particular concept of hell is not one that I or many progressive Christians accept. There is very little support in scripture for it and I don't believe that a good and loving God is interested in eternal punishment.

In the story of the Exodus for example, the Hebrews are saved from Egyptian slavery and saved for freedom in the Promised Land. They celebrate God as their savior who delivers them from their tormentors. Salvation is a two-fold concept: saved from something bad (like slavery) and saved for something good (like freedom). This is the vision that Isaiah is calling on for the people of Judah and for us. To have the bold imagination that God seeks to save us from the ways of death and destruction and save us for bringing about new life and creation. But to have the imagination, to believe in the vision that God lays out for Isaiah, we have to have the audacity to believe that a better world is possible; the courage to proclaim that the suffering and violence of a present experience does not always have to be the reality.

Clifford Beers is a name you may not know. I recently learned that Clifford Beers was the founder of an organization called Mental Health America. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while working for an interior designer, Beers had a mental health crisis and engaged in suicidal behavior. He suffered from hallucinations and delusions and manic-depressive episodes. From August 1900 to September 1903 he was hospitalized in three different institutions. Once he was released, he wrote the book *A Mind That Found Itself* which was published in 1908 and described his experiences. An excerpt from his book reads "Acting on order of the doctor in charge, one of them stripped me of my outer garments; and clad in nothing but underclothes, I was thrust into a cell. Few, if any, prisons in this country contain worse holes than this cell proved to be. It was one of five, situated in a short corridor adjoining the main ward. It was about six feet wide by ten feet long and of a good height. A heavily screened and barred window admitted light

and a negligible quality of air, for the ventilation scarcely deserved the name. A patient confined here must lie on the floor with no substitute for a bed but one or two felt [blankets].”<sup>1</sup>

During the early days of mental health treatment, asylums often restrained people who had mental illnesses with iron chains and shackles around their ankles and wrists. With better understanding and treatments, this cruel practice eventually stopped. In the early 1950s, Mental Health America issued a call to asylums across the country for their discarded chains and shackles. On April 13, 1953, at the McShane Bell Foundry in Baltimore, Md., Mental Health America melted down these inhumane bindings and recast them into a sign of hope: The Mental Health Bell.

While the stigma of mental health has improved in the last few decades, it still persists in a destructive way. The 300-pound Bell serves as a powerful reminder that the invisible chains of misunderstanding and discrimination continue to bind people with mental illnesses. The Mental Health Bell still rings out hope for improving mental health and achieving victory over mental illnesses.

The inscription on Mental Health Bell reads, “Cast from shackles which bound them, this bell shall ring out hope for the mentally ill and victory over mental illness.” Our WISE team is meeting for the first time today after church to envision the process of our congregation becoming Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, and Engaged around the topic of mental health. In the midst of powerful lies that say people with mental illness and mental health challenges are dangerous or scary, we are working to proclaim God’s truth – that all people are beloved children of God and deserve to live lives of wholeness and dignity.

God’s promise is that tools once used to bring pain, destruction, and death, will now be used to plant, to grow, to nurture and create life. The promises of culture and the promises of Isaiah shine a light on our deepest longings. We long for harmony, for love, for peace. We deeply want life to be free of violence and conflict not only in our

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<sup>1</sup> <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/programs/mental-health/beers-clifford-whittingham/>

world but in our personal relationships. Is it possible for these yearnings to become true?

I want to say “Yes! Of course!” But I know I’m not alone when I read this text with some skepticism. I wonder why that is. Why don’t I read these words from Isaiah with complete confidence that the promises made in them will become true? Maybe it’s because the promises made by our consumer culture and our culture of war rarely come true. Maybe it’s because of the way we understand how God works. If God isn’t a puppet master in the sky controlling human actions, what hope is there that God’s vision of peace will come true? The hope is in us. In each of us, to dare to imagine a better way.

Isaiah extends an invitation to the house of Jacob and to us. “Come,” he says, “let us walk in the light of the Lord.” In the midst of our skepticism and disbelief that such a vision of peace is possible, we are invited to live toward that day. We are invited to walk in the light of God now. How different would the world be if everyone lived as if Isaiah’s vision were indeed possible in our time? How different would our lives be if we decided to be refused to be cynical and instead chose to live with the assumption that God’s vision of shalom – of harmony, wholeness, true peace – was not only possible, but in process?

Do we dare to proclaim that the darkness of the world will not have the last word? Do we dare to denounce the pessimism that nothing will ever change? Do we dare to believe that peace is possible? Our faith demands nothing less. May it be so. Amen.