

## FACE TO THE WALL Isaiah 38:1-8

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on March 8, 2020, the Second Sunday in Lent,  
at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

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*In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz came to him, and said to him, “Thus says the Lord: Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover.” Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall, and prayed to the Lord: “Remember now, O Lord, I implore you, how I have walked before you in faithfulness with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly. Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah: “Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the Lord, the God of your ancestor David: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria, and defend this city. “This is the sign to you from the Lord, that the Lord will do this thing that he has promised: See, I will make the shadow cast by the declining sun on the dial of Ahaz turn back ten steps.” So the sun turned back on the dial the ten steps by which it had declined.*

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In 1707, when he was 22 years old, Johann Sebastian Bach composed a cantata for the funeral of the mayor of the city in which he was living and studying music at the time. Its English title is “God’s Time is the Very Best Time.” During the first four Sundays of Lent, I am preaching sermons which are drawn from different Biblical phrases Bach used in his composition, and today at 11:00 a.m. our choir is presenting the work in its entirety.

- In last week’s sermon, I shared a dark view of human history expressed by a contemporary writer and drew parallels with certain bleak passages from Psalm 90. I also pointed out that the psalm turns to hope, as the psalmist prays: “Lord, teach us to [understand] that we must die, *so that* we might become wise.”<sup>1</sup>
- Today’s sermon comes from the story we just read from Isaiah. During an illness, King Hezekiah, one of the three vaulted kings of Israel,<sup>2</sup> is told by the prophet Isaiah, “Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover.” In this sermon, we will see how Hezekiah faces news of his impending death.<sup>3</sup>
- In the upcoming two weeks, I will preach on two passages also drawn from the cantata that contain two of the seven last words Christ spoke from the cross: “Into your hands I commit my spirit,”<sup>4</sup> and “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”<sup>5</sup> These passages affirm the central teaching of the Christian faith: the resurrection of Christ and the promise of eternal life for us.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 90:12,

<sup>2</sup> Both Hezekiah in II Kings 22:20-21 and Josiah in II Kings 23:21-28 receive positive reviews concerning their accomplishments, unlike any other king except David.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 23:46.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 23:46.

Let us pray: *Oh God, during this season of Lent, may the words we read, hear, sing, say, pray and recite, so become a part of our hearts and minds that as individuals and as a community we may live fully with the precious gift of life – for whatever length of days our lives shall number. We pray this trusting that your time is the best of all times. In the name Jesus Christ. Amen.*

## I.

As a pastor, it has fallen my privileged lot to sit with people who face death within a few months or weeks or hours.

I have seen people receive such news with *dread* – marked by worry about their children or spouse or both, about unfinished business of their lives, about sins unforgiven and relationships unreconciled. As death approaches, some move to acceptance of the inevitable and begin to trust that they shall soon see God, but others remain philosophical or agnostic about any form of life to come. Their poet of choice is Shakespeare:

Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.<sup>6</sup>

As a pastor and believer, it is hard for me to see people face death in this direction of mood, and I never give up my own trust in God's power and willingness to draw unto himself all whom he chooses. So even at funerals of those whose belief is uncertain or unknown, I am able to sing, perhaps even on their *behalf*:

Heaven's morning breaks,  
And earth's vain shadows flee;  
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.<sup>7</sup>

I have also seen people receive word of their impending death and react with *calm and courage*. They comfort those around them. They offer Biblical-like blessings and charges to those who will follow them. They ask for and grant forgiveness in broken relationships. Their quiet calm is “a balm in Gilead” giving much needed strength and comfort for “the sin-sick souls” left behind.<sup>8</sup> They go to sleep with the words of Emily Dickinson:

Because I could not stop for Death –  
He kindly stopped for me –  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –  
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste  
And I had put away  
My labor and my leisure too,

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<sup>6</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 5.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Davis Lyte, “Abide With Me,” 1847.

<sup>8</sup> “There Is A Balm In Gilead.” This song is an African American spiritual of unknown authorship and dating.

For His Civility –

...

We paused before a House that seemed  
A Swelling of the Ground –  
The Roof was scarcely visible –  
The Cornice – in the Ground –  
Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet  
Feels shorter than the Day  
I first surmised the Horses' Heads  
Were toward Eternity –

In addition, I have seen people who, having been advised to put their affairs in order and who, steadfastly *refuse to give into death*, even if they have heeded that advice in their own affairs, business and financial. They do everything within their power to fight or stave off death: for the sake of the family members they love, the children they want to rear to adulthood, the unfinished work in their public or private service, the remaining sermons they want to write, songs they want to compose, research they want to complete, books they want to publish. I admire the strength of their love for and commitment to life. Dylan Thomas is their poet:

Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

## II.

In the Biblical story we read today, when King Hezekiah receives news of his impending death, he responds by turning his face to the wall. There is no other human being present in the king's chamber. The prophet Isaiah, who has born the news to Hezekiah, has left the room. It is only Hezekiah and the sound of silence.

In the few feet between Hezekiah's face and the wall next to his bed, Hezekiah is solely in the presence of himself and God. No other human being sees Hezekiah's face, his demeanor, the color of his eyes.

Unlike Noah,<sup>9</sup> but like Abraham and Moses, Jonah and Job,<sup>10</sup> Hezekiah dares to pray to God and express the fullness of his feelings.

He does not ask for an extension of his life. Rather, he dares to remind God of *the person* he, Hezekiah, has always sought to be and *what* he has always sought to do:

Remember now, O Lord,  
I implore you,  
how I have walked before you in faithfulness  
with a *whole* heart,  
and have *done* what is good in your sight.'

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<sup>9</sup> In Genesis 6-9, Noah never questions God for his plans to flood the earth.

<sup>10</sup> Abraham intercedes with God on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18); Moses on behalf of the Israelites after the Golden Calf incident (Exodus 32); and Jonah and Job express their feelings to God throughout their respective books.

Hezekiah is not reading his resume, spiritual or secular. He is simply saying, with utmost clarity: “I have walked before you...I have done what is good in your sight. Here I am Lord; Here I am.” Then, weakened from illness and exhausted from pouring himself out to God, Hezekiah weeps – even “bitterly.” Hezekiah has been completely honest in the presence of God.

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In response, God does what God sometimes does in Scripture: God changes his intended course of action and extends Hezekiah’s life by fifteen years.

- Why this happens to Hezekiah when it doesn’t happen to others is not something the Biblical narrator raises or explains, in the same way that no Biblical narrator explains why Cain is given a mark of protection after killing his brother Abel,<sup>11</sup> why God spares most of the Israelites who dance before the Golden Calf,<sup>12</sup> why Jonah is rescued from the sea and given a second chance to go to Nineveh.<sup>13</sup>
- To the frustration of our rational minds, scripture merely *describes* the mysterious ways of God, rarely *speculating* or *explaining* such matters as why some are spared and some not. But in this instance Hezekiah is spared.

### III.

I believe this story teaches us two things about facing death, our own or that of another.

First, I believe the story teaches us that we can hope – and even trust – that those who have gone before us may have at some point, unknown to us, presented themselves completely, fully, honestly before God. Like Hezekiah, they may have turned their face to the wall and been honest in the presence of God.

Perhaps they experienced a movement between their spirit and God’s spirit. Perhaps in that space between face and wall they *saw* of God what they needed to see, *heard* from God what they needed to hear, *were invited into* that carriage pointed to eternity.

Second, I believe this story can also teach us as Christians that whether we face death with *dread*, with *calm*, or with a *fighting spirit*, we live under a promise that “deep in the human heart is an unquenchable trust that life does not end with death; that the Father, who made us, will care for us beyond the bounds of vision, even as He has cared for us in this earthly world.”<sup>14</sup>

Many years ago, I conducted the funeral of a business leader in the town in which I lived at the time whose reputation was mixed but whose contributions to the community were significant enough for the church to full at his funeral.

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<sup>11</sup> Genesis 4.

<sup>12</sup> Exodus 32:1-14.

<sup>13</sup> Jonah 3.

<sup>14</sup> *The Book of Common Worship*, (Philadelphia: 1946), 211.

I began the sermon by saying: “It is questionable whether or not Charles Rohde believed in God.” Then, like at nearly all the funeral services I preach, I recounted what the person being remembered had meant to his family and his family to him, what he had meant to the community and the community to him. I never claimed to know whether or not Charles was now in the arms of God, but I expressed my hope, my trust, my unproven belief that in the mystery of who God is, God remembered Charles and found a place for him in that chariot.

I do believe – deep in my heart – that we can face our death – and the death of those we admire, trusting that “God’s Time is the Best Time *of All*” and “The Best Time *for all*.”

Amen.

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