

MIGHTY FORTRESS

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Isaiah 36:1-10

Vacation Bible School begins tomorrow. I hope you will take a moment to tour the church and enjoy the transformation that has taken place.

Our Vacation Bible School theme this year is *Mighty Fortress*. It plays on the metaphor of a medieval stronghold. As the committee considered different themes I believe they were drawn to this one because, well, have you looked at the exterior of our building lately? We are a castle! We have a tower with battlements. When the invading Visigoths march in from Watertown, we'll be ready. We'll lock the doors. We'll station our archers on the parapets. We'll have vats of boiling baby oil to pour over anyone who gets too close. We don't have a moat (that would be nice), but we do have a really good sprinkler system. That should hold them off. When the committee was evaluating themes, this one seemed like a natural fit.

This particular Vacation Bible School package is published by the Lutheran Church. Martin Luther, of course, wrote the great hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, which we will sing at the close of the service today. On top of that, this is Martin Luther's year. On October 31st, we will recognize the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther starting the Protestant Reformation when he posted his 95 Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany

Just so you know, in preparation of this anniversary, I plan to preach a series of sermons in October focusing on the various creeds which were written during the Reformation—creeds which are represented by these banners hanging around us.

This them for Vacation Bible School—Mighty Fortress—explores God's power and strength to protect us. A mighty fortress is our God. During the week, we will look at three accounts from scripture when God's strength was most evident—the fall of Jericho, the defeat of the Assyrians under Hezekiah, and the resurrection of Christ. You are probably familiar with the accounts of Jericho as well as of the Resurrection, but probably less familiar with the person of Hezekiah. That is the story I would like to look at now.

Hezekiah was the king of Judah in the early 700s BC. King David, as you recall, was the first king of Israel taking the throne about 1000 BC. His son was Solomon. Solomon's son was Rehoboam. After Rehoboam's reign the kingdom split into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judea. Hezekiah was king of the southern kingdom taking the throne in 715 BC.

As king, Hezekiah is highly regarded for the reforms that he brought to the faith. Worship of God had become sloppy. Shrines and temples and altars had sprung up across the countryside—many were dedicated to pagan gods. The clergy had become lax and even corrupt. Hezekiah tore down these unauthorized worship

sites and centralized worship at the temple in Jerusalem. He reformed the clergy. He instituted repairs on the temple. And more.

During Hezekiah's reign as king of the southern kingdom, Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, attacked and defeated the northern kingdom. Several years later, attacked and captured the southern kingdom as well. Hezekiah was allowed to remain as king of his people but he was forced to hand over most of the nation's treasury to Assyria. He even had to peel some of the gold plating off of the temple to pay this debt.

The next part of the story is a bit fuzzy. In some way that is not entirely clear to us, King Hezekiah rebelled against the king of Assyria. We believe that he formed an alliance with the king of Egypt to rebel against Sennacherib.

The result was that Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, sent a command of soldiers to Jerusalem under the command of the Rabshakeh, one of the most high ranking officials in the kingdom. This title Rabshakeh designates him as the chief of the cup-bearers. But we don't know exactly what that meant.

This Rabshakeh was well-educated and very eloquent and clearly knew several languages, including Hebrew. He approached Jerusalem and addressed the people from outside the gates, speaking to them in Hebrew. People gathered at the gates and the wall to listen. King Hezekiah sent some of his officials to listen. The Rabshakeh delivered a powerful speech employing propaganda and psychological attacks. In this speech, he challenged Hezekiah's rebellion on several fronts. He questioned the wisdom of the alliance with Egypt. Was Egypt strong enough to protect Judea? Could Egypt even be trusted?

Next, the Rabshakeh ridiculed the power of the Judean army against the army of the Assyrians. He mocked the Judeans and offered a wager. He would give them 2000 horses if they could find 2000 men to ride them and fight against the Assyrians. The Rabshakeh taunted the Judeans and said that it was a safe bet that they couldn't find those horsemen.

Then he addressed Judea's God and Judea's religion. He says that God himself told Sennacherib to capture Judea. He then goes on to say that neither their God nor any other god had been able to stop Sennacherib so far. In fact, by defeating the northern kingdom, Sennacherib had already defeated God. Weren't those God's people as well? Why couldn't God protect them? As I said, this was all propaganda and psychological attacks. The Rabshakeh was skillfully attempting to sow doubt in the minds of the Jews, to undermine the war effort.

No one responded to the Rabshakeh. They had been ordered by Hezekiah to do nothing. The official representatives returned to the king with their report. In response, King Hezekiah tore his clothes. He put on sackcloth as a sign of repentance and went to the temple to pray to God. He sent his representatives to the prophet Isaiah asking that Isaiah would also pray for the people of Judea.

Isaiah did so and returned with a prophesy that God would cause Sennacherib to return to his own land in defeat.

King Sennacherib also wrote a letter to Hezekiah stating the same things that the Rabshakeh had said in his speech, especially that no god had been able to stop him so far. Hezekiah took this letter to the temple and spread it out so God could read it, and prayed again that God would help him and his people.

Then God responds through Isaiah that the Assyrians would be gone within three years.

Meanwhile, in Egypt, Sennacherib runs into trouble when the Ethiopians rise up against him. He had left an army surrounding Jerusalem, so he rejoined them. But something happened. It seems that a plague hit the troops and in one night, as scripture tells us, 185,000 troops died. Sennacherib took his remaining troops back to his capitol of Nineveh. A few years after that, he was murdered by two of his sons while he was worshipping his god in his temple.

This story of Hezekiah takes place at a dark time in Judea's history. The northern kingdom had fallen. Hezekiah's kingdom was about to fall. No one could help them. In response, King Hezekiah calls upon God in prayer. This was not a hail-mary-pass—a last-ditch effort to save his country when all other options had been exhausted. No, this was who Hezekiah was—a man of God. He had a history of having a deep relationship with God. He called upon God for strength and salvation in this difficult time.

This is one of the lessons of this story—that God is our strength and God cares for us. As one hymn puts it so beautifully, God is “our shield and defender.” In that same hymn was sing these words,

Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail,
in you do we trust, nor find you to fail.
Your mercies, how tender, how firm to the end,
our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend!

Faith is the understanding that we are not alone, that we are not wandering aimlessly through this life unprotected and unloved. Story after story in scripture attests to the fact that God is with us—especially in difficult times. God cares for us, watches over us, protects us. God is like a fortress where we may find refuge from the slings and arrows of life.

This week at Vacation Bible School, we will look at how God was with Joshua at Jericho, and how God was with Hezekiah. We will finish with the greatest story of all—God’s defeat of death itself. Last week, I talked about how God is extravagant. Well, this is the most extravagant act of all—completely over the top and beyond all expectations. God showed that there is nothing that God will not do for us, even reverse death. As Martin Luther wrote in his hymn, “The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him.”

That is a story to get excited about.