

II Kings 20:1-11

“A Double Miracle”

It is my suspicion that Hezekiah and Sennacherib are not exactly household names here in 21st Century USA. Can you imagine holding up your cell phone and saying, “Oh, let me show you some pictures of my new little grandson, Sennacherib!” Therefore, before I read the Scripture this morning, I would like to give you a little background that I think will make the text more meaningful.

After King David and King Solomon died, the Israelites faced division among themselves and eventually split into two separate kingdoms – the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah. Ultimately, because of their lack of faith in God and their refusal to be loyal to the covenants that God had made with them, God used the powerful nation of Assyria to destroy the Northern kingdom, killing most of her people and deporting the rest.

Around 715 BC, Hezekiah became the king of Judah. He was a good king, faithful to God and obedient to the words of God through the prophet Isaiah. Hezekiah purified the Temple and reinstated worship there. He abolished worship of idols and began to observe the celebration of the Passover, inviting the few Israelites that remained alive in the fallen Northern Kingdom to participate with them.

Hezekiah is probably most well-known for his refusal to give in to King Sennacherib of Assyria. When Sennacherib tried to increase his territory and include Jerusalem, he appealed to the fear of her people. He advised them to trust in HIM for security, land and life. After consulting Isaiah, Hezekiah held strong to his belief that ONLY GOD could provide the things that Sennacherib had promised. He remained steadfast in his faith. God told him that He would restrain Sennacherib and send him back to his own land.

In one of the most dramatic stories of the Old Testament, just as Sennacherib and his armies were advancing on Jerusalem, the Scriptures tell us that God sent an angel to kill 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in their sleep! Sennacherib fled in horror and fear, back to Nineveh, where he was ultimately murdered by his OWN sons and Assyria fell from power. I think Netflix could do something with that story!

Our Scripture picks up with the faithful Hezekiah, who has survived such calamity, only to find out that he is going to die. Listen to his prayer of faithfulness to God and the amazing actions of the Lord toward his servant.

READ II KINGS 20:1-11

As we continue with our summer series on miracles, I chose this story because Hezekiah is one of my favorite characters. He is even listed in the genealogy of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of Matthew. And as the title of the sermon implies, THIS story involves a double miracle. The first one takes place as a result of Hezekiah's prayer, when God heals him.

Now before I go any further, I would like to clarify what this passage is NOT teaching us. By choosing to highlight this prayer experience of Hezekiah, I do **not** think the writer of Kings is implying that if we pray, and don't get such an immediate response OR the one that we had prayed for, there must be something wrong with us, our faith, or our prayers. Prayer is part of the mystery of faith. When we turn to God, we do so with complete trust that God hears and answers our prayers according to God's perfect will.

Many of us have faithfully prayed to God for our healing or the healing of a loved one and did not receive the response that Hezekiah did. Many of us have prayed for a cure or vaccine for COVID 19 – IMMEDIATELY! Many of us have sought comfort after the loss of a

loved one, an ability, or a relationship and **not** felt comfort when we needed it. Does that mean that we did not pray the right way or that our faith was not strong enough? No, it does not.

I think that when we feel as if our prayers have not been answered, we have to remember the sovereignty of God and know that God's answer is the best answer God could give us in that situation. If we had the time to study the entire divided Kingdoms, which you all know I would love to do, we would remember that God promised David that someone from his line would always sit on the throne in Israel. And as I mentioned before, if you are really bored one day, read the first chapter of Matthew and see exactly how God kept this promise, carrying on the line of David – right through Hezekiah – to Jesus.

So, although the answer to his prayer was to heal him, God did not heal Hezekiah for the sake of Hezekiah or as a reward for his faithful leadership. God healed Hezekiah for the sake of Israel and the sake of David. This is important because the original hearers of this story were the Exiles in Babylon. Having been deported to a foreign land after seeing their homes, their city and their Temple crumble into ruins, think about how hopeful this would have made them.

As the Chosen ones lived in a foreign land, with no authority, no political representation and no place to worship their God, we can imagine that they had lost all hope. AND all belief that God lived up to his promises to always be with them. Yet, this story is a call to trust God even in the face of inevitable disaster. Even when all evidence and logic point the other way.

As we deal with grief, anxiety and just plain weariness over COVID 19 and other hardships, this passage can call us to find comfort in the realization that God's people have felt this way before. Yet, God did NOT abandon them. God provided a way for them to come home to Israel and rebuild the Temple, IN GOD'S TIME.

Friends, this story reminds us firmly that God's power cannot be undermined by human agency, political systems, military force, disease, suffering or sinfulness. God will always be the victor. We know this because as Christians today, we have hope in the risen Lord, our savior Jesus Christ. Knowing that our God can defy the powers of death and give us all resurrection is our hope in these seemingly endless days of turmoil and trouble.

But I would like to take a little side trip for a moment and talk about HOW Hezekiah prayed. Isaiah's message was clear. He said, "Thus says the LORD, 'Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover.'" Yet, Hezekiah was not ready to accept this word, even from his trusted companion. So the writer of Kings tells us that Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed.

This piece of wisdom really caught my attention when I thought of my own prayer life. Most Americans live pretty busy lifestyles. Perhaps this is why COVID keeps hanging around. We literally don't know how to slow down, how to be by ourselves, what to do with our socially distanced lives and we have not followed the rules long enough to make a difference.

But because of the pace of life, I find that I use every available minute that I can grab to have conversation with God. I pray while I am walking, while I'm in the shower, while I am washing dishes. Because I live in Greenville and work here in Moore, I do a lot of my praying in the car – though I promise I keep my eyes open during those prayers! I don't think there is anything wrong with praying during those times. God's loves to hear from his children any time they come to him.

But Hezekiah made me realize that it is ALSO important to spend time with God when I am completely focused on GOD AND GOD ALONE. When I block out the busyness of life and the traffic along the way and EVEN the beauty of GOD'S OWN CREATION so that there is

nothing in my view but God. When we turn our face to the wall in prayer, there is nothing to focus on other than God's greatness, God's will and God's love. Hezekiah teaches us that this kind of communion with our Heavenly Father is necessary if we want to have an intimate relationship with God.

The second miracle takes place AFTER God answers Hezekiah's prayer. And I love this part of the story because we can see that, despite his greatness and position in fulfilling God's plan, Hezekiah is just like us! When Hezekiah reminds God of the ways that he has followed God's will, God says, "You know, you have a point there. And after all, I need you to continue to lead my people until a new ruler comes along so - you will not die after all. I will not only give you healing but I will add 15 years to your life!" And to that Hezekiah says, "Really, well how will I know?" What a classic, NORMAL human response!! While Hezekiah trusts God enough to go to him in prayer, when he answers it, he is *not quite sure* it is true.

His reaction reminds me of a story told by the great preacher, Fred Craddock. He tells about a pastor he knew who went to visit one of his parishioners in the hospital. The woman was suffering from a terminal disease, and the pastor went to visit her knowing that, at the end of that visit, he would pray one of those prayers that acknowledges the desperation of the situation. A prayer that puts it out there on the table that not much is going to change. A prayer to help the woman and her family move towards acceptance.

As a minister, I knew what kind of prayer he was speaking of, as I have prayed them often. They are honest and pastorally sensitive, and often they are the only appropriate kinds of prayers to pray. They go something like this. "Oh God, we thank you that you are with us in every circumstance, even this one. And so we simply ask that you give us the courage to accept

your will for our future, whatever that will is. Now we place ourselves, with trust, in your all-knowing hands.”

The pastor went there prepared to pray that kind of prayer, as Craddock tells the story. But the woman prevailed upon him to beg God to heal her. And so, against his better judgment, he prayed a different kind of prayer altogether. He prayed fervently, even while he understood what a longshot that prayer was. And then when that prayer was over, he left that room.

But a few days later he was back for another visit. The woman was sitting up in the bed. The tubes had been removed, and the curtains were open. She said to him, “You won't believe what has happened. The doctors noticed some changes the other day, and called for more x-rays, and they have told me that they can no longer see any sign of a tumor! I'm going home tomorrow.” The pastor said later, “When I got out to the parking lot, I looked up into the skies and said, 'Don't ever do that to me again'!”

Well, Hezekiah wasn't going to wait on any test results or opinions from healers. He wanted a sign right then and there that God was true to his word. And while needing a sign seems contrary to trusting in the Lord, for whatever reason, God decided to give him one. Not only this, but the story leads us to believe that Hezekiah even got to dictate what kind of sign he would receive.

Yet the truth is that God is God, which is actually the point of this story in its entirety. And so, God does the miraculous, the seemingly impossible. In those days, people told time by a sundial. This helped people see and record the sun's movement by the shadows. So on the sundial built by Hezekiah's grandfather, Ahaz, God caused the shadow of the sun to move in reverse by ten intervals. In other words, God turned back time ten hours!

How did this happen? Did the sun move? Did the earth rotate in reverse? We will never know. But we DO know that the God of all creation once again commanded His own creation and it obeyed.

So, the next time you pray for healing, and healing does not come, remember that our God is a God of mystery and we may not be able to see the healing. Sometimes, healing does **not** take place so that others may be strengthened or so that families can be reunited or so relationships can be mended. Sometimes healing takes place in the form of that perfect healing that delivers our loved one into the arms of God. And many times, healing does not take place AT ALL, that we can see. Having our face to the wall and living in complete dependency on God will help us know in our hearts that Gods ways are better than ours, even when we do not understand them. God answers prayers perfectly.

And next time you see a shadow, remember the faith of our God. Remember that God not only says to Hezekiah, “I will heal you or defend the city for YOUR” sake but he says that he will answer the prayer “for the sake of his servant David.” This reminds Hezekiah and each of us that God had not forgotten his covenant with David and that he will be faithful to his word. Indeed, God has a master plan!

When I think about the relationship between Hezekiah and the Lord, I realize that if there is ever a time that I am feeling separated from God, it is because I am the one who has moved. I have forgotten to seek God in prayer or to read His word or to listen to His counsel. And this story assures me that when I return to God, He will be waiting with open arms. Our God of miracles is a God who keeps his promises. Even today, when we may not be able to see them.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf, Nazareth Presbyterian Church, Aug. 9, 2020