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November 4th: 2 Kings 18 & Acts 10:1-23

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Sennacherib threatens Judah. The Apostle Peter's vision of the sheet.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

2 Kings chapter 18. In the third year of Hoshea son of Elah, king of Israel, Hezekiah the son of Ahaz, king of Judah, began to reign. He was twenty-five years old when he began to reign, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem.

His mother's name was Abai, the daughter of Zechariah, and he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, according to all that David his father had done. He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah, and he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it. It was called Nehushtan.

He trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel, so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him. For he held fast to the Lord. He did not depart from following him, but kept the commandments that the Lord commanded Moses.

And the Lord was with him. Wherever he went out he prospered. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and would not serve him.

He struck down the Philistines as far as Gaza and its territory, from watchtower to fortified city. In the fourth year of king Hezekiah, which was the seventh year of Hoshea son of Elah, king of Israel, Shalmaneser, king of Assyria, came up against Samaria and besieged it, and at the end of three years he took it. In the sixth year of Hezekiah, which was the ninth year of Hoshea king of Israel, Samaria was taken.

The king of Assyria carried the Israelites away to Assyria and put them in Hallah and on the Hebor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes, because they did not obey the voice of the Lord their God, but transgressed his covenant, even all that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded. They neither listened nor obeyed. In the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah, Zennecharib king of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and took them, and Hezekiah king of Judah sent the king of Assyria at Lachish, saying, I have done wrong, withdraw from me.

Whatever you impose on me I will bear. And the king of Assyria required of Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold, and Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the Lord and in the treasuries of the king's house. At that time Hezekiah stripped the gold from the doors of the temple of the Lord and from the doorpost that Hezekiah king of Judah had overlaid, and gave it to the king of Assyria.

And the king of Assyria sent the Tartan, the Rabсарis, and the Rabshakeh, with a great army from Lachish to king Hezekiah at Jerusalem. And they went up and came to Jerusalem. When they arrived they came and stood by the conduit of the upper pool, which is on the highway to the washer's field.

And when they called for the king, there came out to them Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah the son of Esau the recorder. And the Rabshakeh said to them, Say to Hezekiah, thus says the great king, the king of Assyria, On what do you rest this trust of yours? Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? In whom do you now trust, that you have rebelled against me? Behold, you are trusting now in Egypt, that broken reed of Astaph, which will pierce the hand of any man who leans on it, such as Pharaoh king of Egypt, to all who trust in him. But if you say to me, We trust in the Lord our God, is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed, saying to Judah and to Jerusalem, You shall worship before this altar in Jerusalem? Come now, make a wager with my master the king of Assyria.

I will give you two thousand horses, if you are able on your part to set riders on them. How then can you repulse a single captain among the least of my master's servants, when you trust in Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? Moreover, is it without the Lord

that I have come up against this place to destroy it? The Lord said to me, Go up against this land and destroy it. Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, and Shebna and Joah said to the Rabshakeh, Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, for we understand it.

Do not speak to us in the language of Judah within the hearing of the people who are on the wall. But the Rabshakeh said to them, Has my master sent me to speak these words to your master and to you, and not to the men sitting on the wall, who are doomed with you to eat their own dung and to drink their own urine? Then the Rabshakeh stood and called out in a loud voice in the language of Judah, Hear the word of the great king, the king of Assyria. Thus says the king, Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you out of my hand.

Do not let Hezekiah make you trust in the Lord by saying, The Lord will surely deliver us, and this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. Do not listen to Hezekiah, for thus says the king of Assyria, Make your peace with me and come out to me. Then each one of you will eat of his own vine, and each one of his own fig tree, and each one of you will drink the water of his own cistern, until I come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey, that you may live and not die.

And do not listen to Hezekiah when he misleads you by saying, The Lord will deliver us. Has any of the gods of the nations ever delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of the Seth of Iom, Hina and Iva? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of the lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand? But the people were silent and answered him not a word, for the king's command was, Do not answer him. Then Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and Joah the son of Asaph the recorder, came to Hezekiah with their clothes torn, and told him the words of the Rabshakeh.

In 2nd Kings chapter 18, the northern kingdom of Israel falls to Assyria, and the southern kingdom is on the brink of joining them. The chapter begins with Hezekiah the son of Ahaz coming to the throne. The dates of the reign of Hezekiah present us with an immediate problem.

In verse 13 we read of events that we know occurred in 701 BC, but if this was in the 14th year of Hezekiah's reign, then he would have come to the throne in 715 BC, some years after the fall of the northern kingdom. However in verse 1 we are told that he came to the throne in the third year of Hoshea son of Elah. The numbers of the books of Kings and Chronicles are frequently confusing, not because they are impossible, but because they are greatly complicated by co-regencies and the like.

Various suggestions have been advanced for resolving the tensions at this particular point, including a co-regency with Ahaz, followed by a 29 year sole regency, Hezekiah

being designated king without yet having acceded to the throne. Others have suggested that the synchronizations are off by 12 years, others that there is an error in verse 13 which should read 24 instead of 14. Hezekiah is a faithful king, he is distinguished in his rooting out of idolatry.

In particular Hezekiah removes the high places and breaks down the pillars. A repeated accusation against the kings of Judah is their failure to remove these high places and now Hezekiah finally does this. The bronze serpent is also broken in pieces.

The bronze serpent was made during Israel's time in the wilderness in response to the fiery serpents that were released by the Lord among the people. Nehushtan is a play on the words for copper and serpent. In Numbers chapter 21 verses 8 to 9 we read of the event of the bronze serpent.

The fiery serpent had an appropriate use, indeed it had been made according to the Lord's own instruction, but it had clearly subsequently become an object of idolatry. Hezekiah was committed to the Lord, trusting in him, and the Lord strengthened him. He rebelled against the Assyrians at this time and also defeated the Philistines.

The defeat of the Philistines was probably designed to open up a path to Egypt in whom Hezekiah placed some trust as an ally against the Assyrians. The Lord warned against dependence upon the Egyptians through the prophet Isaiah and later on the Rabshakeh in his speech to the people in Jerusalem will make the same point. Egypt is not the power that it once was and it is not sufficient to fight against the military might of Assyria.

The northern kingdom of Israel falls in the fourth year of the reign of Hezekiah. This largely repeats the events recorded in the previous chapter but now it ties them to the reign of Hezekiah. It also has the effect of setting up a parallel because in verse 13 there is a close parallel with verses 9 to 10.

Verses 9 to 10 describe the downfall of the northern kingdom and now Israel's fate and Judah's fate are held side by side with each other. Israel has been destroyed by the Assyrians, will Judah suffer the same fate? There is of course a key difference in that Hezekiah is a righteous king unlike Hoshea and the Israelite kings that preceded him. Will this make any difference for Judah? And signs don't initially look good.

Sennacherib captures all of the fortified cities of Judah and Hezekiah has to ask for mercy from him. Hezekiah sends messengers to Sennacherib at Lachish, a heavily fortified city that is the second city of Judah to Jerusalem. At this point it might seem that Sennacherib is well underway to completely overrunning the nation.

However he has offered mercy in exchange for a grand tribute. Sennacherib's successful siege of Lachish and Hezekiah's payment of tribute are recorded in Assyrian annals from the time. Several of Hezekiah's predecessors had raided the treasuries of the house of

the lord to pay tribute to a foreign king.

Rehoboam had done it for Shishak king of Egypt. Asa had given money to Ben-Hadad of Syria to get him on his side against Beasha. Jehoash had given money to Hazeul of Syria.

During Amaziah's reign Jehoash of Israel had broken down the walls of Jerusalem and taken away much of the treasure of the temple. Ahaz, Hezekiah's father, had also raided the treasuries of the temple to give money to Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria. Hezekiah now does the same thing to Sennacherib.

He gives the silver of the house to the lord and all of the gold from the doorposts. Not only is Judas standing in the very greatest jeopardy, Hezekiah's action in response is a troubling one. He is taking tribute that had been given to the lord and he is handing it over to a foreign invader.

The hearer of the text might wonder where he is actually placing his hope. Hezekiah sends an envoy to Jerusalem. The Tartan, the highest official after the king, the Rabсарus, who is the chief eunuch, and the Rabshakeh, who is the chief cupbearer or the We should be wary of putting too much weight upon the literal interpretation of these roles.

The chief eunuch may not have been a eunuch at all, but rather a name for a high office within the administration. Likewise, the Rabshakeh, as the chief cupbearer or the butler, may have been primarily a man responsible for overseeing the affairs of the court of the king, whether back home in Assyria or out on some military campaign. Here the Rabshakeh acts as the mouthpiece of his master Sennacherib.

He is a high official with the ability to speak in the Judean tongue, which is helpful in this particular situation, as we will see. He and those who gave him his message also seem to have deep insight into the state of Judah and the nature of its religious beliefs, among other things. From what we learn from Assyrian annals, a great number of soldiers from Judah had either surrendered or defected at this point.

The Assyrians could have gained much intelligence about the internal affairs of the nation of Judah from such persons. The Rabshakeh's speech is perfectly designed to demoralise the people. Speaking to Eliakim, who is over the household, Shebna the secretary, and Joah the recorder, the Rabshakeh presents them with the big question, in whom do you trust? Given Hezekiah's actions in Philistia, it may seem that he is trusting in Egypt, yet Egypt is far from powerful enough to act as an effective ally, even if it were reliable, which it isn't.

Leaning on Egypt would actually hurt Judah rather than helping them. The Lord also warns Judah against such an alliance within the Book of Isaiah. As the Assyrians have conquered cities through Judah, they have probably noticed the signs of a recent

revolution in the religious life of the nation.

They've seen the ruins of former shrines. They've seen pillars that have been torn down. Recognising that something significant has occurred, they probably gained intelligence from Judean defectors.

Discovering that Hezekiah had broken down all of the high places and the pillars. This presents the Rabshakeh with a very effective demoralising argument that he can present to the people in Judah. They have clearly offended their God, the Lord, and He has now turned upon them.

He mocks them for their inability to assemble an effective military force. Even if He were to give them 2,000 horses, they would not be able to put riders upon them. Why then would they look to Egypt for horses and chariots, when they lack the men to use them? The Rabshakeh goes even further in his argument, only has the Lord abandoned his people Judah, turning against them because they have abandoned his proper worship.

The king of Assyria has been commissioned by the Lord himself against them. It is by his word that he has gone up to attack Jerusalem. The officials of Hezekiah are greatly dismayed by these words, even more so because they are spoken in the hearing of the regular soldiers on the wall, in a language that they can understand.

The Rabshakeh is speaking, presumably, in the Judean dialect. They request that he speak in Aramaic, but he refuses. The Rabshakeh's speech is not merely for Hezekiah and his officials.

It is also for the more general population and the soldiers on the wall. It is designed to demoralise them. The Rabshakeh moves on to develop further arguments.

They should not trust in Hezekiah, nor should they trust in the Lord, allowing Hezekiah to persuade them that the Lord would deliver them. Neither Hezekiah nor the Lord would deliver them from the hand of the king of Assyria. Along with this demoralising message, the Rabshakeh gives a different piece of propaganda, the message that there is hope if they would only surrender to the king of Assyria.

If they surrender, then each one of them will eat of his own vine and each of his own fig tree, and each one of them would drink the water of his own cistern. This language is usually associated with very positive visions of the Lord giving rest to the people in the land, so that they all enjoy their own property and have untroubled relations with their own wives. Here, however, in an almost satanic fashion, it is taken up by the mouthpiece of a foreign king.

He presents this promise, and he presents it with the promise of bringing them into a new land. I will come and take you away to a land like your own land, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey, that you may live

and not die. This parodies the sort of language that we find in Deuteronomy chapter 8 verses 7-9.

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs flowing out in the valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you can dig copper. The king of Assyria is the one that they should look to, not the Lord. Indeed, the gods of the other nations have not helped them, why should the God of Judah help it? Once again there is a parody here of the words of the Lord.

Who among all the gods of the lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand? This very closely mirrors the language of Deuteronomy chapter 4 verse 34. Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand, and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? In this very carefully targeted message, the king of Assyria is attacking the faith of Judah at its very base. He's sowing doubt and fear and demoralization.

Judah can't trust its king, Judah can't trust its god. The god of Judah is either on the side of Assyria or is a helpless bystander, unable to intervene to save his people. On the other hand, if the people do surrender, the king of Assyria will bring them into a glorious land.

He will be their savior and deliverer. They will look to him for aid. The king had commanded the people not to answer.

They must hold their nerve, they must resist this temptation, and they all obey him, being silent in response. But Eliakim, Shebna, and Joa go to the king, and they have their clothes torn as they deliver the message to Hezekiah. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which the Rabshakeh's speech might remind us of Satan's devices to deceive and demoralize the people of God? Acts chapter 10 verses 1 to 23.

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, Cornelius. And he stared at him in terror and said, What is it, Lord? And he said to him, Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.

And now send men to Joppa, and bring one Simon, who is called Peter. He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea. And when the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants, and a devout soldier from among those who

attended him, and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. And he became hungry, and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance, and saw the heavens opened, and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air.

And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter, kill and eat. But Peter said, By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean. And the voice came to him again a second time, What God has made clean, do not call common.

This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once into heaven. Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood at the gate, and called him out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was lodging there. And while Peter was pondering the vision, the spirit said to him, Behold, three men are looking for you.

Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them. And Peter went down to the men and said, I am the one you are looking for, what is the reason for your coming? And they said, Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house, and to hear what you have to say. So he invited them in to be his guests.

The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him. In Acts chapter 10 we arrive at the great transition in the book of Acts, as the gospel starts to move to the Gentiles. Although we've already had some intimation of this move, as the gospel is received by the Ethiopian eunuch back in chapter 8, here in Acts chapter 10 it is Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and his household that are the key converts marking this shift in the history of the people of God.

As a centurion, as part of a larger cohort, Cornelius would have been in charge of about 100 men, one of six within the cohort that would have been part of a legion of about 6,000. Caesarea was an important site of Roman administration within the land of Palestine, it was where the Roman prefect lived, and it was also an important harbour. The reader of the book of Acts who is familiar with Luke's gospel might recall at this point the centurion in chapter 7, who is commended for his great faith.

Here Cornelius is described as a devout God-fearer, he fears God with all of his household, he gives generously, and he is committed to prayer. It is worth bearing in mind at this point that conversions in the book of Acts are often not from unbelief to

faith, rather they are from an old covenant faith to a new covenant faith, from a situation of a God-fearer in this case to the situation of a Christian. A similar thing seems to occur in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch.

We might also recognise that with the three great conversions of the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul of Tarsus and now Cornelius of Caesarea, we have representatives of all three families of humanity, Ham, Shem and Japheth. The character of Cornelius might also remind us of someone like Naaman the Syrian, another foreign military commander who comes to believe in the God of Israel through the ministry of Elisha. Cornelius is praying around the ninth hour of the day.

This is the hour of prayer and the offering of incense in the temple, and the angel who appears to Cornelius at this point speaks of his arms and his prayers ascending as a memorial before God. There might be some suggestion here that his prayers and his arms are functioning as if they were sacrifices and offerings of incense. We see such a way of thinking about prayer in places like Psalm 141 verse 2, Also in the story of Daniel in chapter 9, when the angel Gabriel appears to him around the time of the evening sacrifice when he's been praying, even though the temple is not in operation at the time.

The angel who appears to Cornelius assures him that his prayers and his arms have been heard by the Lord, perhaps in a way that might remind us of the story of Zechariah back in Luke chapter 1, when the angel Gabriel appears to him. The angel instructs him to send men to Joppa to find Simon Peter who is staying with Simon at Tanna. Cornelius is not told why he should summon Peter, and this is a theme that goes throughout the story.

People have only part of the picture. Cornelius receives a vision, Peter receives a vision, and they need the two of them to come together to understand what the Lord is doing. The Lord is matchmaking two people, a Gentile and a Jew, and bringing them together in an act of mutual recognition.

They should both see the work that the Lord is doing. This might also help us to understand why the events are so often repeated within this story. We hear of the initial vision of Cornelius as it is narrated by Luke, then as it is shared by the messengers to Peter, then as Cornelius tells it to Peter, and then as Peter tells it to the people in Jerusalem.

Why all of this repetition? First of all, probably because it is emphasising the Lord's initiative in the action. The Lord has done something, and people are reporting and responding to that thing that the Lord has done. But also because the transmission of this information is very important.

It is important that mutual recognition occurs. God is bringing people together, and their appreciation that the Lord has worked on both of their sides to bring them together is

much of the point of the story. The Lord is matchmaking Jews and Gentiles in one new body of the church.

As the messengers of Cornelius approach Joppa to meet Peter, Peter has a vision of his own while he is in prayer in the middle of the day. A great sheet descends from heaven with all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air, and he is instructed to rise, kill and eat. This happens three times, and each time he resists it, insisting that he will not eat what is common or unclean.

As the vision ends, Peter is confused, he doesn't understand what it means. But then the messengers of Cornelius arrive, and he is instructed to rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation. Perhaps we should see some similarity between this rise, kill and eat, and this rise and go down and accompany them.

The meaning of Peter's vision is not easy to discern. What might be the connection between eating these unclean foods and accompanying these men to see a Gentile? I think that the answer is probably found in the recognition that animals represent persons. The dietary requirements in places like Deuteronomy chapter 14 are associated with the fact that Israel bears the name of the Lord.

They've been set apart as holy. The dietary requirements are designed to mark out Jews from Gentiles. Peter's vision then is among other things a sign that this division between Jews and Gentiles is no longer operative in the same way.

In Christ, the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles has been broken down. God has called the unclean animals clean. He has made them part of his household.

Like the domesticated and herbivore animals that Israel could eat, the wild beasts of the Gentiles will also be tamed by the gospel of Jesus Christ and will be included or consumed into the body of Christ. A number of commentators note the similarities between this story and the story of Ananias being sent to Saul. In both cases, two unlikely people are brought together in an important act of recognition.

In both cases, prayer and visions are very important. And in both cases, an important change of perspective has to occur. Peter has to change his perspective on Cornelius and other such Gentiles and Ananias has to change his mind towards Saul.

Both have initial reservations that have to be overcome. Peter has his reservations about associating with Gentiles and Ananias has reservations arising from Saul's reputation as a persecutor of the church. In both cases, we also see the power of the Holy Spirit in orchestrating these events.

The Holy Spirit is the one that is ultimately building the church and he is moving people around from place to place, bringing them in contact with each other and through these meetings and acts of mutual recognition, helping them to see that the hand of the Lord

is at work. James Bergeon, Peter Lighthouse and others have also noted the themes of this story that connect it with the story of Jonah. In both cases, something rises up to heaven from Gentiles, bringing them to the attention of the Lord.

In the case of the story of Jonah, it's the wickedness of the city of Nineveh. In this story, it's the alms and the prayers of Cornelius. In both cases, the prophet of the Lord is found in Joppa.

They are sent to Gentiles. There is hesitation in both cases. There is a repetition of the number three in both cases.

And then of course, there is the sheath that might remind us of a sail. Here, the fisherman Peter is sent to cities by the sea where he will start to fulfill his calling as a fisher of men, starting to bring in people for the Lord from the sea of the Gentiles. Where the prophet Jonah was a reluctant prophet, Peter will prove faithful and will welcome the mission that the Lord has given to him.

A question to consider, why is it that Gentiles as Gentiles could not be full members of the people of God in the Old Covenant, but now can? What accounts for the change?