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November 5th: 2 Kings 19 & Acts 10:24-48

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The Lord delivers Hezekiah from the hand of Sennacherib. The Apostle Peter declares the gospel to Cornelius' household.

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

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Transcript

2 Kings 19. As soon as King Hezekiah heard it, he tore his clothes and covered himself with sackcloth and went into the house of the Lord. And he sent Eliakim, who was over the household, and Shebna the secretary, and the senior priests, covered with sackcloth, to the prophet Isaiah the son of Amoz.

They said to him, Thus says Hezekiah, This day is a day of distress, of rebuke, and of disgrace. Children have come to the point of birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth. It may be that the Lord your God heard all the words of the Rabshakeh, whom his master the king of Assyria has sent to mock the living God, and will rebuke the words that the Lord your God has heard.

Therefore lift up your prayer for the remnant that is left. When the servants of King Hezekiah came to Isaiah, Isaiah said to them, Say to your master, Thus says the Lord, Do

not be afraid because of the words that you have heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have reviled me. Behold, I will put a spirit in him, so that he shall hear a rumor and return to his own land, and I will make him fall by the sword in his own land.

The Rabshakeh returned and found the king of Assyria fighting against Libna, for he heard that the king had left Lachish. Now the king heard concerning Tirhaker king of Cush. Behold, he has set out to fight against you.

So he sent messengers again to Hezekiah, saying, Thus you shall speak to Hezekiah king of Judah. Do not let your God, in whom you trust, deceive you by promising that Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. Behold, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, devoting them to destruction.

And shall you be delivered? Have the gods of the nations delivered them, the nations that my fathers destroyed, Gozen, Haran, Rezeph, and the people of Eden, who were at Telassar. Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of the Sepharvaim, the king of Hena, or the king of Ivar? Hezekiah received the letter from the hand of the messengers and read it, and Hezekiah went up to the house of the Lord and spread it before the Lord. And Hezekiah prayed before the Lord and said, O Lord, the God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth, you have made heaven and earth.

Incline your ear, O Lord, and hear, open your eyes, O Lord, and see, and hear the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. Truly, O Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste the nations and their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire, for they were not gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed.

So now, O Lord, our God, save us, please, from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O Lord, are God alone. Then Isaiah, the son of Amoz, sent to Hezekiah, saying, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, your prayer to me about Sennacherib, king of Assyria, I have heard. This is the word that the Lord has spoken concerning him.

She despises you, she scorns you, the virgin daughter of Zion. She wags her head before you, the daughter of Jerusalem. Whom have you mocked and reviled? Against whom have you raised your voice and lifted your eyes to the heights? Against the Holy One of Israel.

By your messengers you have mocked the Lord, and you have said, With my many chariots I have gone up the heights of the mountains, to the far recesses of Lebanon. I felled its tallest cedars, its choicest cypresses. I entered its farthest lodging place, its most fruitful forest.

I dug wells and drank foreign waters, and I dried up with the sole of my foot all the streams of Egypt. Have you not heard that I determined it long ago? I planned from days of old, what now I bring to pass, that you should turn fortified cities into heaps of ruins, while their inhabitants, shorn of strength, are dismayed and confounded, and have become like plants of the field, and like tender grass, like grass on the housetops, blighted before it has grown. But I know you are sitting down, and you are going out and coming in, and you are raging against me, because you have raged against me, and your complacency has come into my ears.

I will put my hook in your nose, and my bit in your mouth, and I will turn you back on the way by which you came. And this shall be the sign for you. This year eat what grows of itself, and in the second year what springs of the same.

Then in the third year sow and reap and plant vineyards and eat their fruit. And the surviving remnant of the house of Judah shall again take root downward, and bear fruit upward. For out of Jerusalem shall go a remnant, and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors.

The zeal of the Lord will do this. Therefore thus says the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into this city, or shoot an arrow there, or come before it with a shield, or cast up a siege mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, declares the Lord.

For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake, and for the sake of my servant David. And that night the angel of the Lord went out and struck down one hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold these were all dead bodies.

Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and went home, and lived at Nineveh. And as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, Adramalek and Shaariza his sons, struck him down with the sword, and escaped into the land of Ararat. And Esau hadon his son reigned in his place.

In 2nd Kings chapter 18, the king of Assyria Sennacherib had sent an envoy to Jerusalem to speak to Hezekiah and his men. The Rapshache, accompanied by the Rapsarus and the Tartan, delivered a message for Hezekiah to his officials in Jerusalem. By this point most of the fortified cities of Judah had already fallen to the Assyrian forces.

Judah cannot muster a large military force. Egypt does not promise to be an effective or reliable ally. The Assyrians are seemingly not satisfied with the payment of tribute, and it seems most likely that Judah and Jerusalem will suffer the same fate as the northern kingdom and its capital Samaria.

In 2nd Kings chapter 19, the message delivered by the Rapshache is brought to king

Hezekiah by his officials. Hezekiah is quite understandably deeply dismayed, but his response here, in contrast to his earlier response of taking treasures from the temple to pay his tribute, is to turn to the Lord. He tears his clothes, goes to the temple of the Lord, and then sends messengers to Isaiah the prophet of the Lord.

This is one of the very few occasions, Jonah being another example back in chapter 14, of one of the prophets of the canon appearing in the historical narrative. The prophet Isaiah will be a key player within the narrative of these chapters, in events that are also recorded in the book of his prophecies. 2nd Kings chapter 19 is paralleled in the book of Isaiah chapter 37.

When reading the histories of the books of the kings and the chronicles, it is important to remember that this period is one in which many of the prophets that we have later on in the biblical text are actively engaged in their mission. Hezekiah describes the situation to the prophet Isaiah as akin to the situation of a woman in labour who's trying to bring herself to birth, but lacks the strength to do so. He reports the claims of the Rabshakeh and his master the king of Assyria to Isaiah, presenting them not only as a challenge to his own reign as the king of Judah, but also as a challenge to the Lord's own honour.

The king of Assyria has mocked the living God, he's claimed that the Lord is not able to deliver his people, and indeed that the king of Assyria was sent by the Lord to attack the people of Judah. He requests the prayers of Isaiah on their behalf. The Lord responds to king Hezekiah through Isaiah in a message paralleled and contrasted with the message of the Rabshakeh.

The servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed the Lord. Hezekiah should not be afraid of the Rabshakeh's words, as the Lord will act against Assyria and on behalf of his people. The Lord promises Hezekiah deliverance, a deliverance that would have required considerable faith to believe under the circumstances.

All of the signs seem to be pointing against them. When the Rabshakeh returns, he finds that the king of Assyria has left Lachish and is fighting against Libna. Then Sennacherib the king of Assyria hears a rumour concerning the king of Cush, who has set out to fight him.

Once again he sends messengers to Hezekiah in Jerusalem. He directs Hezekiah's attention to the many lands that he has subdued. He has defeated their peoples and their gods were not able to save them.

The Lord, the God of Judah, he argues, will be no different. Hezekiah's response once again is to turn to the Lord. He takes the letter, spreads it out before the Lord and seeks the Lord in prayer.

For all the bluster and pride of Sennacherib, the Lord is still the God of all the earth. He is

the one who created all. He is the one who is sovereign over all nations.

He has not been brought down from his throne. He is still enthroned above the cherubim. The empty words of Sennacherib are directed not just against the people of Judah, they're directed against the Lord and he calls the Lord to pay attention to them.

The kings of Assyria have indeed laid waste all these other lands, but they served idols, false gods, gods that are no god. By contrast, the God of Judah is the true God and he can act against Assyria. He can deliver his people.

The Lord responds to Hezekiah's prayer by the words of Isaiah, the son of Amoz, the prophet. In Isaiah's prophecy, the virgin daughter of Zion, Jerusalem, is described as wagging her head, scorning the reviling and the mocking of the king of Assyria, not taking them seriously. The king of Assyria boasts in his power and his might and the many great deeds that he has done.

He has felled great nations like Cedars and Cypresses on the mountains. He has caused his might to spread to all parts of the world, even up to Egypt. Yet the Lord is the one who determined all of this long ago.

It is the Lord who oversees and directs the affairs of men according to his purposes. The king of Assyria thinks that it is by his power that fortified cities have been brought down, but that would never have taken place had it not been the Lord's will and determination that it should. The king of Assyria rages against the Lord, proud in his own power, but the Lord can bring him down.

The Lord can put his hook in his nose and his bit in his mouth, and against all of the odds, the Lord will turn him back the way that he came. The Lord will give Hezekiah a sign to confirm all of this to him. Using agricultural imagery, the Lord describes a situation where after complete devastation of the land, within three years of such devastation, Judah will have placed roots down into the land again.

The Lord is going to restore them. This will be accomplished by the zeal of the Lord. He is zealous for his great name.

He will not allow his people to be snatched from him. He will not allow his name to be blasphemed. The king of Assyria will not be successful in his attempts to take the city of Jerusalem.

There will not even be an arrow shot there, or he will not come against it with a shield or a siege mound. He will be sent back, tail between his legs, the way that he came. God defends the city for the sake of his own name and for the sake of his servant David, to whom he had made promises and given a covenant.

That night, the angel of the Lord goes and strikes down 185,000 of the Assyrians. Just as

the Lord had delivered his people from Egypt and the destroying angel had struck down the firstborn of the Egyptians, so the destroying angel strikes down the Assyrians. Sennacherib returns to Assyria, lives at Nineveh, and there he is killed by two of his sons, ironically in the house of Nisroch his god.

He mocked the Lord who was able to deliver his people in the most miraculous of ways, and yet his own god cannot defend him in his very own house. In Sennacherib, another enemy of the Lord is humiliated. A question to consider, what might we learn from the example of Hezekiah about appropriate responses to political and national crisis? Acts chapter 10 verse 24 to 48.

And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshipped him.

But Peter lifted him up, saying, Stand up, I too am a man. And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. And he said to them, You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation.

But God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me? And Cornelius said, Four days ago about this hour I was praying in my house at the ninth hour.

And behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing and said, Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon at Tanna by the sea.

So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord. So Peter opened his mouth and said, Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ, he is Lord of all. You yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

And we are witnesses of all that he did, both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him up on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people, but to us who have been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by

God to be the judge of the living and the dead.

To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles, for they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God.

Then Peter declared, Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days. In the first half of Acts chapter 10 two men had received visions.

Cornelius had received a vision while he was praying, a vision that told him to summon Peter who was staying with Simon the Tanner. The apostle Peter had received a vision of his own. Three times a sheet containing various unclean animals had descended from heaven and he was told to rise, kill and eat.

Each time he had resisted and been told that what God had cleansed he should not call common. The explanation of the vision began to become apparent to him as he was instructed by the Spirit to go with the three men who were to bring him to Cornelius. Now in the second half of Acts chapter 10 these two men with their two separate visions are brought together, the Lord demonstrating in bringing them both together that the visions were ultimately from him and that his purpose was to bring them together in an act of mutual recognition.

Neither of them fully knows the information of the other yet. Peter does not fully understand why he has been summoned and Cornelius does not yet know the message that Peter has to give to him. Much of Acts chapter 10 and 11 is concerned with the relaying of information from one party to another, communicating to other parties what we the reader already know.

Cornelius's story is told first of all by Luke, then it's conveyed by the messengers to Peter, then it's related by Cornelius to Peter and then later by Peter to the people in Jerusalem. The point of all of this is not merely that Cornelius and the people in his household receive the Holy Spirit but that they and the Jewish Christians be joined together as one body by the Spirit. The act of mutual recognition for which the conveying of the story again and again to different parties is so important is at the very heart of what the chapters are about.

When he arrives at the house of Cornelius, Cornelius responds by falling at his feet and This is clearly an inappropriate response to Peter and Peter makes very clear that he is just immortal. He is not divine, he's not worthy of worship, he's a human being like Cornelius himself. In a couple of chapters time we'll see a contrast between Peter and

another man who accepts such worship.

Herod at the end of chapter 12 receives the worship of the people and as a result he is struck down by the Lord. Cornelius in anticipation of Peter's arrival has clearly summoned a great number of people, his relatives, his close friends and all of his household are gathered together. There is clearly going to be a sense of great anticipation.

What is Peter, this man who has been sent by God, going to say to him? Peter begins by explaining how remarkable it is that he's coming into a house to socialise with a Gentile. This is not something that a typical observant Jew would do. Rather they would scrupulously maintain a distance that would enable them to remain clean.

Yet Peter sees in his vision a message concerning this, that the Lord has taught him not to call anyone common or unclean. God is going to form his holy people from people of all nations, not just people of the Jews. The very fact that Peter has come into a Gentile's house to socialise with him is already a sign that God has spoken to him, that his former opinions have been changed.

Having related something of the vision that he has received, he asks why Cornelius was sent for him. Cornelius proceeds to relate his own vision. Cornelius' story begins four days previously.

Presumably he had received the vision that day, the next day he had sent out the messengers, the day afterward, the third day they had arrived in Joppa, and then on the fourth day they arrived back in Caesarea with Peter. Cornelius describes being visited by an angel in bright clothing, described here as a man. The angel tells him that his arms have been remembered by the Lord.

The Lord has seen Cornelius' acts of love and faith and in response to those acts he is going to bless Cornelius. He instructs Cornelius to send to Joppa to ask for Simon Peter, who is lodging at the house of Simon Atanna by the sea. The location of Simon Atanna's house might be interesting to us.

Both of these places, Joppa and Caesarea, are towns by the sea. Within Luke's gospel he does not really talk about the sea in the same way as the other gospels do. Each of the other gospels talk about the sea of Galilee or the sea of Tiberias, whereas Luke talks about the lake of Gennesaret.

In the book of Acts, however, he talks about the sea as the gospel goes out to the Gentiles and to the people who are farther off. Symbolically the sea represents the realm of the Gentiles and as the gospel moves out to these seaside towns and cities there is a sort of symbolic setting of the scene for the gospel going out from the land to other lands farther off. Cornelius tells Peter that all the people have gathered together to hear

the message that he has from the Lord and Peter goes on to relate the gospel account.

He begins by talking about the lesson that he has just been learning. God shows no partiality but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. The message of the kingdom is not just for Jews, it's for Gentiles also.

While God might formally have focused his work and his message upon the people of Israel, this was always towards the end that one day it would spread out the entire world. Peter, as he goes on to relate the gospel message, does not at all disguise the fact that it is centered upon the Jewish people and their land. He talks about what has happened in Judea, in Galilee, talks about Jesus of Nazareth and of the country of the Jews in Jerusalem.

While the word of Christ can be delivered to people of other nations, Jesus never ceases to be the king of the Jews. Peter's message begins with God. Jesus is the word that he sent to Israel.

God declares his good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of all. The testimony of the apostles began with the ministry of John the Baptist and moved on to the resurrection of Christ and Peter here tells the story in such a way. He begins with the ministry of John the Baptist, the baptism that John proclaimed and then how Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit and with power at the baptism of John.

Then he goes about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil. Jesus is a man of the spirit who acts in the power of the spirit to deliver and to save people. In so doing he manifests the power of the kingdom that has been promised by the Lord.

He also achieves the victory of God against the devil, the one who oppresses, binds and accuses, keeping people of all nations under his sway. Jesus was put to death by his people who hung him on a tree but God raised him on the third day and made him appear to people who had been chosen by God as witnesses of him. These people ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

We often downplay the significance of the post-resurrection meals with Christ. These served as a demonstration of Christ's embodied existence following the resurrection. They also served as a joyful manifestation of the meaning of Christ's victory, performing the actions associated with the Last Supper in the context of the meal at Emmaus.

Jesus gives that action a new meaning. It is not just seen in the anticipation of his forthcoming death, it also serves as a joyful celebration of the victory looking back. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper it has both of these aspects to it.

In one respect it might take us back to that evening that Christ was betrayed, to the evening of the Last Supper, the sorrow of Gethsemane and the great shadow of the forthcoming death hanging over it all. However it should also take us back to the joy of

the post-resurrection feasts, to Christ eating with the two travellers at Emmaus or to Christ eating with his disciples on the shores of the Sea of Tiberias. Christ commanded the apostles to preach to the people, to testify that he was appointed as the one to be the judge of all.

Christ is the king of the Jews, he's the Messiah but he is also the Lord of all, the judge of all. The message of Christ's universal lordship and the fact that he will judge all persons is very much central to the message of the apostles to the Gentiles in the book of Acts. Although we can often speak about the gospel as if it were a sort of salvation system, the gospel at its very heart is the proclamation that Jesus is Lord, it's the proclamation that God's kingdom has been established in him, that God has brought about salvation, deliverance and forgiveness for his people and that everyone should go down on their knees to pay homage to him and every mouth should confess his authority and rule.

As such it is not just a message of personal salvation, it's a message of cosmic rule, it is a message about a public fact, a great fact in light of which everyone must live their lives differently. The truth of Christ as the judge of the living and the dead is something that all the prophets have borne witness to. Everyone who believes in this one also receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

Jesus' name comes with authority and power. As people receive the summons that comes in Jesus' name and with his authority, their sins can be forgiven, their lives can be changed, they can be delivered from death to life and released from the clutches of the evil one. Even as Peter is still saying these things, the spirit comes down upon those who hear the word, presumably they have received it and as a result they receive the blessing of the Holy Spirit.

The spirit's descent is a sort of second Pentecost. It's like the event of Pentecost received in Acts chapter 2 when the spirit descended upon the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem but here it's happening to Gentiles. This serves as the spirit's imprimatur of the Gentiles, a sealing of them as true members of the people of God.

They've not been circumcised, they've not even been baptised and yet they receive the spirit. Both Peter and Cornelius had received visions from God, visions from God that when brought together brought a degree of illumination. They began to understand why the Lord had brought them together.

But now in the descent of the spirit upon the Gentiles, there is a powerful confirmation that the spirit's hand has been directing all of these events. By the spirit Christ is forming his church and by giving the spirit to Jews and Gentiles alike, he desires that they recognise each other as brothers and sisters, as those who truly belong to Christ on the same level ground. In Christ there will be no Jew nor Gentile.

At this point baptism is pretty much a formality. It's a recognition of what God has

already done within these people. They have received the Holy Spirit, they've been received by God and so to withhold baptism would be going against God.

It would be refusing to recognise and receive and welcome those who had been welcomed by Christ. The act of mutual recognition, reception and welcome is confirmed by the fact that Peter remains with them for a number of days. In accepting the hospitality of Gentiles and living with them and eating with them, Peter is treating them as full brothers and sisters.

A question to consider, what lessons might we learn for our presentation of the gospel to people from Peter's condensed gospel message within this passage?