

What Makes a People Strong?
First Reading: Galatians 5:13-15; Matthew 7:13-14
Second Reading: Isaiah 25:1-9

“Then came the TikTok. A nine-second video in which a woman and two children — clearly scared — were being held on the back of a pickup truck. It was being widely shared [last] Saturday afternoon.” (Washington Post)

In an era and market where apocalyptic, dystopian horror movies so heavily populate your favored streaming services, they are classified as entertainment, the viewer trading the stress of daily life with the anxiety of impending nightmarish gore and doom, a pleasure preference I’ve never quite understood. I don’t want to know what Freddy Krueger did the first time around, much less in the eight sequels.

What I do understand is the all too real gore and death enveloping the perennially hostile land tour guides and Bible sales forces call Holy. If you live in Israel or Gaza right now, you are an extra in an actual, true to life and death, horror movie brought to you by TikTok, a medium that was initially a way to broadcast your attempt to be Olivia Rodrigo from the privacy of your bathroom. But now, parents and spouses tune in to see their

loved ones being massacred in their own homes or handcuffed, beaten, and dragged away into captivity.

“Then came the TikTok,” according to the Washington Post, “a nine-second video in which a woman and two children — clearly scared — were being held on the back of a pickup truck.” “I recognized them immediately,” [the husband and father] said. “That’s when I knew for sure that they were captives.” Earlier, “Around 10:30 a.m. on [that horrific] Saturday, Doron Asher Katz called her husband. The 34-year-old was visiting her mother in the Nir Oz kibbutz, a communal settlement in the south of Israel, along with her two daughters, 2-year-old Aviv and 5-year-old Raz. ‘I got a phone call in which she was saying that they were locked down in the security room,’ her husband, Yoni Asher, said, ... Hamas militants had entered the family’s house.” Asher disconnected the phone, not wanting the noise to alert the invaders. That afternoon, seeing Doron and their children on the back of the pickup via TikTok is the last Asher has seen or heard of them.

Meanwhile, across the fence in Gaza, eleven-year-old Yasim said, “I was sleeping, and then everything started falling on us,” her face and mouth bloodied as she sat on a hospital floor overrun with parents and children

waiting to be treated amidst the bombing campaign in the densely populated Gaza Strip. Yasim said, “Someone came and helped me out. They took me straight to the hospital, but I don’t know what happened to all my sisters.”^(Washington Post) On the floor nearby, an infant with a ring of bandage around his head sleeps in his father’s lap, and a young boy with a similar bandage dozes against his father’s shoulder. Of the 2 million vastly civilian Palestinians in Gaza, a million of them are children, but even smart bombs are indiscriminate.

It has been said that the brutal and sadistic siege by Hamas represents Israel’s 9/11 and Pearl Harbor combined, and statistically, the loss of life is probably greater. Anger and the thirst for retribution are not atypical in such moments. Perspective and reason, on the other hand, are scarce. The visceral emotions unleashed as we watch the on the ground events graphically unfold on our phones, tablets, and TVs under the warning of “disturbing images,” represent a relatively new phenomenon unavailable to prior pre-digital generations. So many images, so instantaneously — it is overwhelming and traumatic. It is also so confusing, made even more so, because of the immediate flood of punditry, political posturing, premature analysis, and misinformed blame. There ought to be an app that yells the

iconic words of Keith Jackson whenever the media gets ahead of itself — “Whoa, Nelly!” Reason rises from a simmer, not an explosion. Technology has allowed us to skip reason and go straight to react.

A prerequisite for wisdom is the capacity to pause long enough to reflect on who we are, whose we are, and whose purpose and ends we are seeking, before we launch into action. Though we have not always been disciplined about it, this is the reason Presbyterians are called to pray before all meetings. Too often, I have heard myself say, “Let’s go ahead and open with a little prayer because we have a big agenda.” Little prayer. What is that, anyway? What I should probably say is, “Let us have a long prayer so that we may have a short agenda.” For when we actually remember who we serve, and whose purposes we intend to seek, we spend far less time refereeing personal agendas and looking to placate individual preferences. “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Otherwise, our efforts will inevitably arc toward conflict and even conflagration.

The horror movie that is Israel right now is raw, unprocessed, and terrifying. Yet, with the horrors so quickly piling up, we lose the perspective that the pause for listening and prayer provides. Despite intelligence

failures, we cannot say we did not see this coming. We know the status quo in the Holy Land was untenable, a tinder box just needing a match. And we also know full well that tensions of this magnitude are not new to the region.

Isaiah was certainly aware of that. His prophecy, set in a particular place and time, speaks powerfully to our own particular place and time. In the chapter before today's reading, the prophet says, "The city of chaos is broken down, every house is shut up so that no one can enter. There is an outcry in the streets for lack of wine; all joy has reached its eventide; the gladness of the earth is banished. Desolation is left in the city, the gates are battered into ruins." In a brilliant way, the prophet here addresses over 100 years of history, and three inflection points of political/military change, with one stark image, the collapse of a city and the power structure behind it.

That image provides the vehicle for interpretation, reflection, guidance, and warning. So, stick with me a moment as we reconstruct a timeline. Israel would look to the reign of King David, a thousand years before Christ, as its glory days. The nation was united behind a charismatic leader, a strong army, and a rising prosperous city called Jerusalem, Mount

Zion, home of the ark of the covenant and the tablets of the law of God given to Moses at Sinai. Most folks at least recognize the names of King David and his son Solomon, who during his reign built the Temple.

However, our familiarity with the line of kings who followed them shrinks precipitously, and there is a reason for that. For the most part, they weren't very good, and the power struggles that marked their reigns took on the appearance of a trashy reality show. The prophets offered their warnings. Isaiah proclaimed, "Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away? To whom will you flee for help?"

But the prophets' warnings went unheeded for the most part, and Israel's neighbors set their minds on conquest. In 587 BCE, Jerusalem was destroyed as Babylon's Nebuchadnezzar invaded. Isaiah has that image in his mind when he says, "Desolation is left in the city, the gates are battered into ruins." And yet, at the same time Isaiah knows that image also speaks

to a future event. “The city of chaos is broken down.” Isaiah knows that the same fate that befell Jerusalem lies in wait for Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon. The same power struggles, the same inattention to the common good, the same obsession with political power and short term gain, that so weakened Israel, will make Babylon’s conquest short lived. And in 539, Persia, seeing Babylon’s vulnerabilities will do to Babylon what Babylon did to Israel.

So, as the exiles in Babylon returned to Jerusalem, reclaiming a city in ruins, they had the same choice before them that Joshua had put before their wilderness weary ancestors when they first entered that troubled strip of land across the Jordan: “Choose this day whom you will serve.” It is the same choice Moses set before the people: “See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil ... therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days...”

Joshua, Moses, and Isaiah are not calling for a theocracy but for faithfulness; faithfulness to a loving God whose chief desire is that we love God and love our neighbor. Later in the New Testament, this is stated even more directly. In 1 John it says, Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their

brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

What Isaiah sees in the fall of both Jerusalem and Babylon is that strength is more trustworthy than might when that strength is the Lord’s strength. “Strong peoples,” he says, “will glorify you.” Meanwhile, “The fortified cities,” trusting in weapons will always eventually fail — “For you have made ... the fortified city a ruin.” As the psalmist declares, “God is our refuge and strength.”

This is the standard by which we must judge **all** our intentions and actions; **all** our plans and interactions. And yet, this is what we quickly lose sight of in the fog of admittedly, justifiable rage when confronted by incomprehensible evil. What transpired at a music festival and in the kibbutz was unmitigated, reprehensible evil that must be confronted. Yet, we must count the cost of revenge vs. reform, might vs. right, and the kingdoms of the earth vs. the kingdom of God. Rage is a poor guide and a worse governor. If the commandments of God hold water, then faithfulness

demands attention to the noncombatants, to the welfare of families, to a repentance from the hate that divides and a turn toward the love that reconciles.

Unfortunately, a primary obstacle to the peace God desires is religious fundamentalism. Its strength and resurgence have brought to fruition the prophecy of Ezekiel: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” Across the globe tensions are spiking as groups and nations confuse their agendas for God’s will. We see it in the Russian invasion of Ukraine; we see it in the treatment of women in Iran and Saudi Arabia; we see it in India in the persecution of minorities; we see it in China with the persecution of Uyghers and dissidents incited by the fundamentalism of the Party, which is a religion of a sort; we see it in Israel in the power struggles in the Knesset and courts; we see it in our own land in the disarray in D.C., the erosion of women’s rights, the persecution of difference, and the attacks on libraries and teachers. And certainly, we see it in the heinous acts of terrorists, domestic and foreign, who show complete disregard for human life and claim it is the will of God. Whenever we confuse or equate our preferences, prejudices, and lust for power with the

will and intention of God, we only further distance ourselves from the will of the God we claim.

In the early 1920s, on the heels of profound scientific advances, an explosion of knowledge, and a wide expansion in educational opportunity, there was a reactionary movement of religious fundamentalism that resisted any questioning of old, possibly moss-covered interpretations of scripture, science, and sociology. Many pursuits that benefitted the common good were labeled as anti-God. In response, a bold and thoughtful preacher in New York City rose to the pulpit and preached a sermon titled, “Will the fundamentalists win?” Harry Emerson Fosdick understood that such fundamentalism contradicted the notion that faith seeks understanding; that new ideas and discoveries, or an openness to ecumenical understanding in no way threatens the sovereignty of God, and may actually deepen our understanding of both God and neighbor.

Since then, the answer to Fosdick’s question (Will the Fundamentalists win?) has obviously been yes, they do often manage to win on a merely human level, winning elections, institutionalizing prejudice, pursuing power, building megachurches (I mean, there’s nothing mega about the

Presbyterian Church). Ironically, across the globe and across religions, fundamentalists have deftly navigated the path to power, using the most earthly means to gain power without regard to the common good of the earth they inhabit and culturally despise.

However, God's intention and Christ's cross are not about winning and certainly not about earthly power, but about God's selfless love for all that God has made. Our goal is not earthly power and dominance, but stewardship of the world we inhabit and care for both the neighbors we know and neighbors we will never meet, paying particular attention to the vulnerable and those who are suffering.

So, this is not so much a flag waving moment as it is a cross bearing moment, seeking the welfare, safety, and provision of the vulnerable on all sides, never giving up the work toward a common peace and a common good, supporting humanitarian aid efforts, doctors without borders, diplomats, and neighbors setting personal welfare aside to act with compassion and alleviate suffering. It is time to pause, to pray, to reflect, and then to act, loving God and loving neighbor according to the selfless love of Jesus Christ and not the hatred or will to power of this world.

Though written several centuries before Christ, that is the vision Isaiah holds before us. Earthly power is temporary. God's kingdom is eternal. Our love for God and our concern for the welfare of all our neighbors is our work in these days, always looking to the promise of God's kingdom. That's what Isaiah sees, the lust for power eclipsed by the vision of God's kingdom. "Strong peoples will glorify you ... For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat."

In these perilous days, let us look to the helpers, the kingdom workers seeking courageously to give refuge, sustenance, and strength "to the needy in their distress," always remembering, governments will fail and dictators will die, for earthly power is fleeting, but God's grace is forever. Let us go with Joshua who declared, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Amen.